That felling, I lived through that felling—our patriotic war. That was a nightmarish time. I need to tell you that the sun was always crimson, the whole time, [...] as if it were washed in blood.

—interviewee

For this generation, war was the dark beginning against which their radiant future shone. The early 1990s reminded middle-aged Muscovites of the war. History was no longer progressive; their sacrifices were in vain. They remembered those sacrifices and also a lost sense of collectivity that made sacrifices worthwhile. The seeds of neededness, order, space, and the mortality crisis of the early 1990s are all found in the war.

WAR AS BACKDROP

On June 22, 1941, the Germans mounted the largest ever wartime land invasion, Operation Barbarossa. The aim of this three-pronged attack was to take over the portion of Russia lying west of the Ural Mountains, including most of Russian industry and the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. The front was eighteen hundred miles long; it comprised more than four million soldiers. They marched through the Baltics to Leningrad, through Belarus toward Moscow, taking Smolensk, and through the Ukraine to the Volga,
taking Kiev. The Red Army was unprepared; in a little more than five months it lost seven million soldiers. In total, twenty-seven million Soviets perished in the war from 1941 to 1945; nineteen million of those were civilians. Almost 15 percent of the entire Soviet population died during a four-year period. Absolutely and relatively, the war cost Russia more in lives than any other country. In comparison, Germany counted seven to nine million war dead, representing 8 to 10 percent of the population.¹ Compared to the early 1990s, when excess deaths represented perhaps 1 percent of the population in a four-year period, the war was a demographic disaster of another order.

Eventually the Red Army was able to repel the Germans, and Russia played an important part in ending World War II. The significance of the war in Russian history, in present-day culture, and in Russian collective memory is crucial to any understanding of the country. Although Tumarkin (1994) has written about the fall of “the cult of World War II,” under President Vladimir Putin the cult enjoyed a rebirth. Victory Day, May 9, is a national holiday complete with military parade on Red Square, fireworks throughout the city, and old war movies on television.² The holiday is perhaps second only to New Year’s Day in its cultural importance to Muscovites (Forest and Johnson 2002), although this will undeniably change with more time. Most of the men and women who served are now over eighty-five years old, but the generations after them have not forgotten the cost their parents and grandparents paid, often with their own lives.

The generation we interviewed was too young to have served in World War II, or the Great Patriotic War as it is called in Russia, but the war and its aftermath are this generation’s earliest memories. The oldest men and women interviewed remembered their fathers’ departures to the front and their returns, if they did return. Sometimes they remembered their mother’s departures to the front. Many remembered their mothers’ hard work, at home or digging trenches. The war served as the backdrop to their lives. It was their starting point—the ashes from which they arose. Their earliest memories are punctuated by war; their biographies begin with war: “And my father was missing in action in the Great Patriotic War. They called him up on the twenty-second of June, when I was still in my mother’s womb. The only thing he said—if a boy is born call him Tolik, which she [my mother] did. That is all, and I was born the second of October, 1941.” A woman went to collect her seventh-grade diploma around June 25, 1941: “We were all young, and we, we didn’t know what a war was. You think, we’re graduating—a
noise, a yell, and they took them to the front. They killed, by the way, our teacher, God bless him.” One explained, “We had just begun school and the war started,” while another said, “I finished one school year before the war.” One of the women we interviewed was born in June 1942 in the town where her family had been evacuated. Another began his life a few months after Germany surrendered. “I was born the fifteenth of July 1945 at nine in the morning. . . . The war had ended. The year 1945 the war ended.”

After the war things did not immediately improve. A drought led to the famine of 1946–1947. Interviewees reported eating weeds, acorns, and the bran of grain. One man, who would have been five at the time, remembered the day his mother brought home a bag of dried fish. “Eat as much as you want,” she told him. One woman remembered waiting all night with her grandmother for bread with their ration coupon. She spoke of the crush of desperate bodies and stolen coupons. In December 1947 the ruble was devalued and inflation took off. Poverty was widespread; finding work was difficult.

In part because of the destruction of the war, there was a shortage of adequate housing. Living space per resident declined throughout the 1940s. Most urban housing was in the form of communal apartments, where families lived together and shared the kitchen and bathroom. In Moscow in 1947 a significant proportion of the population lived without running water, plumbing, or central heating. Outside of Moscow the situation was more dire (Filtzer 2006; Manley 2006). In the countryside, many people had lost their homes in the war. They dug out shelter in the ground or in a hillside and lived in these “dugouts.”

The war interrupted education. The eldest of this generation started school and then stopped for the duration of the war. Others started late. Schools were overcrowded and undersupplied. One man restarted school in the second grade in October 1945 at thirteen years old, although “there was nothing to write with—no blackboard, nothing.” He said, “We would gather and tell each other stories. There was nothing else to do.” Another wrote in the margins and spaces of newspapers with a sunflower stalk. “There wasn’t anything—whatever the teacher said, that is what we memorized.” An entire class shared one primer; students sat four to a desk. Elementary education was four class years. “Incomplete secondary education” was seven years, and that only became compulsory in the late 1950s. After seven years, students might continue their studies at a vocational technical school or tekhnikum,
a trajectory encouraged after Stalin under Khrushchev (1953–1964). Higher education was available to those with “complete secondary education,” or ten class years. However, many of this generation went to work in factories after only four or seven years of schooling. They sacrificed their education first to fight fascism and then to build socialism.

The stories of Lyudmila and Viktor illustrate well how these early memories influenced the experiences of this generation during the early 1990s.

**Lyudmila**

Lyudmila’s father died before the war in 1938, when she was two years old. They lived in Kaluga Oblast, to the southwest of Moscow. “We were six children and mama raised us alone. She worked in the technical school and as a person of the steppe.” By this Lyudmila meant that in addition to working for a wage, her mother worked the land, growing food and raising animals. They were forced to evacuate fifty kilometers southeast as the Germans advanced in the fall of 1941, losing their cow in the process. Lyudmila would have been five years old then, and she remembered waiting in a ditch for older evacuees to bring back food as German shells exploded, raining debris on them. Separated from their mother, Lyudmila and her siblings temporarily resettled in a village that was shelled: “Oh, there we stayed in some sort of house going to pieces. Oh, glass flew and everything there. Somewhere a shell would explode [. . .]. The glass flew and everything on the face of the earth. . . .”

As the Germans retreated, they burnt villages. There were no houses standing when Lyudmila and her family returned to their home village. They dug out the *samovar* (a “self-boiler,” or a giant tea kettle of sorts with a spigot) that Lyudmila’s mother had buried and built a clay-walled dug-out to live in. They were poor and hungry. After school, Lyudmila worked on the collective farm where she turned hay and transported it by horse and cart. She hauled water and firewood for her mother. Lyudmila and her sister went to festivals in other villages to beg and gather the frozen potatoes that had been left in the fields during the winter. Her mother made potato cakes from them. They collected horse sorrel, an edible weed related to buckwheat. “We walked through the field collecting sorrel. We collected sorrel, we picked it. Oh! We ate grass.” They used sorrel to make cakes but Lyudmila remembered, “They are dry, you can’t swallow them.” There were no winter coats and no shoes. “We were destitute, destitute. Lord, we walked around
in winter, walked, skinny, and we had no shoes to walk in! And we wore foot wrappings and those foot wrappings came out through holes when we walked.”

After Lyudmila finished seventh grade at eighteen years of age she moved near her sister in Moscow Oblast’ where she worked in construction, living in a workers’ dormitory. She dug trenches, hauled mortar, and unloaded sand and stone chippings by the truckful at night. In winter they had to break up frozen sand first in order to unload it. After a year she transferred to a mechanics factory in a nearby city. She was married and had a daughter, who was raised by Lyudmila’s mother until she was seven years old. Then Lyudmila struggled to work two shifts and care for her daughter while her “hooligan” husband drank. She thought her personal life had not gone well, but she spoke fondly of her work: “I was among the best workers, I was on the [ . . . ] factory honor role. [ . . . ] With work, with work I did very well.” She remembered the time her pension was to be 132 rubles. Under the Soviet system, she would have retired at fifty-five years of age in 1991.

We figured out everything about the pension. It was enough for us. And when we would go on the pension. We will work, [then] we’ll retire. It was enough for us. All of us saved for our funeral. And it was adequate, enough. A 132-ruble pension and here [then] sausage was two rubles [per kilogram] and meat two rubles. But then suddenly it was all over. And it turned out there was no manner of pension.

In 2007, at seventy years of age, Lyudmila was still working in the factory. In the early 1990s her retirement pension and savings, which represented approximately three years’ pension at the time, both evaporated. She was still waiting for her savings to be reimbursed. “I had five thousand in savings. So far nobody has returned it to me.” Lyudmila’s daughter, who was present during the interview, asked her mother, “What will they return to you? Are you still. . . .” Lyudmila interrupted,

No, now they are paying in full. I was talking with [a friend]. She said her aunt signed up for three thousand in old money. Then when they paid it out, then it came to sixteen. Instead of three it came to sixteen. At first they gave by one thousand. Then they decided to return all of it. But how they returned it all, with a percentage [interest] or how, I don’t know. So I have five
thousand somewhere, and I don’t know how much they will return to me. Will they return five thousand or even more?

She will likely never receive her five thousand rubles, which in 2007 was only worth about two months’ pension. When Sveta asked her what the most important thing in her life was, Lyudmila said, “Oh, to rest [. . . ] To rest a little.” Sveta asked her where, but Lyudmila wasn’t referring to a vacation. “Well, to stop working. Yes, if only to stop working. If only. But by the look of it, it won’t happen for me. Probably while my legs still go, as long as I don’t crumple, then probably, that’s it.” Rest was the expected reward for her years of labor, but for Lyudmila there is no rest.

When Sveta asked Lyudmila about the early 1990s, Lyudmila spoke again of the poverty of her youth. Sveta tried to clarify, “But that was before, right? Not after perestroika.” Lyudmila said, “Well, but afterwards too. How we didn’t have anything. People were also frayed [in reference to clothing].” She continued by telling a story about needing a winter coat in the late 1940s. To Lyudmila, economic shock therapy looked a lot like war-ravaged Russia. In a terrible sense it was as if the poverty of her youth and the poverty of the early 1990s had merged together. Thirty-five years of her life, from age nineteen when she started work in the mechanics factory to age fifty-five when the Soviet Union fell, fell out of view. Her marriage had not gone well, but she had been proud of her work in the factory. Yet she would end life where she began it—in poverty and need. Many in this generation were forced to reevaluate their past during the early 1990s. Their lives circled around to the poverty of their youth, which they believed they had overcome.

**Viktor**

Both of Viktor’s parents went to the front in 1941 when he was still an infant. His mother left immediately on June 22 as she was with the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (the NKVD, precursor to the Committee for State Security, or KGB) and ran eleven reconnaissance missions in the enemy’s rear. His father left in August. He and his grandmother returned to her village in southeastern Ukraine. He vaguely remembers his grandmother pulling him, along with a rooster, in a wagon across a small bridge. This was about the time the Germans were advancing on Kharkov in northeast Ukraine, the largest Soviet city the Germans took during the war. A German shell hit the bridge and the wagon overturned. He and the rooster ended up
in the water below, and his grandmother jumped in after them. Later she would tease him about jumping in to save the rooster. At six years old, Viktor began work on the collective farm as a cowherd grazing calves. Those were the years of famine; the collective farm was how Viktor and his grandmother survived. “I remember my first workdays. They didn’t give us wheat. A little corn, seeds, four oil cakes or mill cakes, as we called them then, two cans of milk. I was a shepherd, a little shepherd. [ . . . ] Those were my workday payments.” At six years of age these workday payments made an impression on Viktor and he was thankful for the collective farm.

His mother returned from the war, demobilized in 1948, but his father, who survived, did not return to the family. He remembers childhood fights where he threatened other children, “I’ll tell my papa,” and the other children replied, “You don’t have a papa.” When his mother remarried, he went out into the street and told his playmates, “Well, now I have a real papa.” In 1952 the family moved to Sevastopol where eleven people lived in a three-room communal apartment. Viktor finished seventh grade and began work in a factory. He continued his schooling at night and became a secondary school history teacher.

This is how Viktor described his generation:

In history our generation is called the generation of the victors, because our fathers were victorious and we are the generation of victors, that is the generation [born] at the end of the thirties, forties, and even fifties—a few before the war, during the war and after the war. Our parents came back then, those whose parents did come back. I remember in our class there were forty students in the first grade, and in response to the question of our teacher, “Whoever has fathers, raise your hand,” only six or seven students raised their hands, no more. Even though there were children of different ages in the class, from seven through thirteen years of age. [ . . . ] I remember, when we went to first grade, my [step]father took me by the hand and led me to school. That was one of my memorable days. I stood with pride and looked at everyone and thought, “You don’t have fathers, but I have one.” Of course, that was all childish. But I was proud to have a father, because there were not many fathers, there were not. And that was the tragedy of my generation. And such a tragedy that revealed itself afterwards. Unfortunately, many men of my generation drank themselves to death. [ . . . ] That was the echo of war, so to speak, the echo of growing up without fathers, growing up without mothers.
Viktor summarized the early 1990s thus:

I became unnecessary [ne vostrebuemym] to the state. History is not needed. [. . .] We ourselves walked through that history. We didn’t need to go through the war. We didn’t need to go through collective farms. We didn’t need to go through it—how we labored in the factories. Almost all of my generation after seventh grade left for the factories, and some even earlier after fourth grade. We went through that, and in 1954, 1956 we went to Virgin Lands, to all those projects. We are history. We apprehended this history not only in school, but we believed it. Yes, we really believed in that radiant future. We believed, we believed.

Viktor thought even history was no longer needed—the war, collectivization, factory work, and labor projects. Like Lyudmila, Viktor thought his life efforts were in vain. Moreover, the sacrifices of an entire generation were unnecessary.

In 2007, Viktor and his wife Vera consoled themselves that their students still came to see them, to ask advice, and to borrow books. “It means a lot,” Vera said. Multiple times during the interview with Sveta, a former student, Vera said that she and Viktor were thankful their students remembered them. “Thank you students, for not forgetting.” It was not simply about remembering, though. It was also about the fact that the students came for advice and borrowed books. “Books are our riches,” Vera said. They might not be able to offer much, but tea and books were within their means. Vera told Sveta, “We are still sought-after [vostrebovany] by our students.” Both Viktor and Vera used forms of the word vostrebovannyi, which has the sense of being in demand, sought after, necessary, or useful. Those that are not vostrebovany are dispensable, expendable, and unneeded.

**BEING UNNEEDED**

There was another expression with a similar meaning that was much more common: needed by nobody (nikomu ne nuzhny). It is clumsy to translate, but it is central to the story of the demographic crisis in the early 1990s. The phrase has been included in other ethnographies of Russia. Rethmann notes how the Koriaks of northern Kamchatka Peninsula use it daily to mean “nobody needs us, we are worthless” (Rethmann 1999, 205). She writes, “Koriaks’ convictions that they do not matter lead to self-neglect and
outbursts of pain, soothed only by radical bouts of drinking” (205). *Needed by Nobody* is the title of Höjdestrand’s ethnography of the homeless in St. Petersburg.

Once I began my fieldwork in St. Petersburg in 1999, I heard the phrase “needed by nobody,” *nikomu ne nuzhen* . . . more or less every day. “Needed by nobody” is a set expression that conveys the worthlessness or rejection of something or someone. It can be used disparagingly to belittle others or . . . to convey subjective feelings of loneliness and vulnerability. As the logic goes, those who are not needed are, in Douglas’s terms, matter out of place, dirt embodied, for real human beings are by definition immersed in social webs of mutual responsibility and protection. (Höjdestrand 2009, 2)

Here being unneeded expresses social exclusion. In her conclusion, Höjdestrand acknowledges “most Russians in the 1990s were in a manner of speaking, homeless” (195).

For my informants, many of whom still had some close social relationships, being unneeded expressed a particular logic of social exclusion, based on no longer having anything to offer others. This was a terrible position for a generation who had been brought up in hardship with an ethic of mutual sacrifice during and after the war. Officially this mutual sacrifice was for the greater good of the state. Unofficially mutual help was practiced in networks of social connections which often served to circumvent the state. In the late 1980s these social networks would have been broadest for the generation of victors after two or three decades working. They were on the cusp of retirement. They were in the position to make things happen—for themselves, yes, but more importantly, for others around them, including their children who were establishing themselves. Then, suddenly, their work and retirement were no longer certain. Their social connections were insecure. They could hardly help their own children. “Nobody needs us,” they said again and again. What they meant was, “We have nothing to offer.”

**ECHOES OF WAR**

The Great Patriotic War may seem peripheral to an account of the more recent Russian mortality crisis. However, those at greatest risk of dying were born in the years 1936 through 1951. They were the generation of victors Viktor describes above. The war exacted a tremendous Russian sacrifice, a
sacrifice that was officially interpreted as necessary for a Russian victory over fascism and as necessary for the future of socialism and communism. Viktor’s wife Vera asked, “How is it possible to forget the Great Patriotic War? When we won, and we are a victorious people? Is it even possible? All should bow before our mother Russia.” In this view Russia paid the price for an Allied victory and changed the course of history, as only Russia could. Vera added, “And only we could have withstood such a war. Only we [could have], only we, the Russian people.” The sacrifices and deprivations of the 1940s were not in vain, at least not until the Soviet project failed. Then the future that the war was supposed to have secured disappeared.

Professor Vladislav, who headed the institute where I was affiliated during my stay in Moscow, told me:

I myself remember [ . . . ] the wartime generation of Russians, who lived through the war—men and women. They had, naturally, different fates. They came through that war in different ways. But those people, you know, they had a beautiful identity, a social identity. They understood what it was to be Russians. They understood what the government was, what they were responsible for. They answered not only for their family. They were ready to answer, especially men, for the situation around them.

Professor Vladislav was perhaps speaking of his parents’ generation here, but it is likely some of that social identity, based on an idea of what had been fought for and what was being built, was imparted to the next generation. The Great Patriotic War became a central aspect of Soviet identity for certain generations. “For the majority of post-war citizens, being Soviet was easy. . . . ‘Sovietness’ was a natural attribute of all those who had fought in the war, either actually at the front or metaphorically on the ‘home front,’ and survived” (Fitzpatrick 2006, 272).

When the Soviet Union fell and much of the Russian population was thrust into poverty, this generation would recall the Great Patriotic War and its aftermath. Everywhere this generation was confronted by scenes they could only comprehend as analogous to the postwar years. During her interview, Lyudmila conflated conditions in the late 1940s with those in the early 1990s. Another man described his impressions upon seeing street children in the early 1990s. “At the train stations, in every underground space, it was as if, the impression was that suddenly a war had ended, just like when our war ended or even before the war ended.” At least twice in 2007, walking
through informal markets outside metro and train stations, where individuals sold various odds and ends laid out on tarps or overturned crates, Margarita told me with some disgust, “It is just like after the war.” And then she would add—half angry, half baffled—“But there was no war.” And certainly there was no victory. The fifty-seven-year-old taxi driver I interviewed said, of those older than himself, “They will never understand what happened. No war, nothing. And everything fell apart.”

The chaos and poverty, panic, and despair of the early 1990s had only one historical parallel for this generation. But this analogy with postwar Russia brought with it a terrible reckoning—it was as if all of their life efforts from the war onward had been futile.

**SACRIFICE FOR A RADIANT FUTURE**

This generation’s lives were measured against the war and its aftermath. Compared to the deprivations of the war and postwar period, life had steadily improved in the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1970s and 1980s stagnation set in, but it remains true that most of this generation had never seen their circumstances dramatically worsen. They had only ever seen them improve.

The worst of Stalin’s repressions, in the late 1930s, occurred before they were born. For most, the promises of Soviet socialism rang true during their formative years and through the 1960s. A radiant future was possible, based on the incredible rate of progress in rebuilding western Russia after the war. “Well, we lived in hard times, all the population lived in hard times, but somehow we lived, found work and all the time thought that it will be better, that there will be improvement. [ . . . ] We lived with such instilled hopes.” And another woman remembered, “We thought that now there is poverty, now we will endure, but afterwards we will live. [ . . . ] It seems to me that everyone thought it would be better.” In addition to the fact that lives did improve in the 1950s, hopes and expectations for further improvement were high.

Sacrifice, long an important motif in Russian culture and orthodoxy, was also central to Soviet citizenship. The Soviet state made constant use of the notion of sacrifice to goad the population to rebuild the country and ensure the radiant future of communism. When that future was lost, it was as if the war and the sacrifices to build socialism were in vain. Even in 2006 and 2007 middle-aged Muscovites said, “What did the people fight for? But now look at what is being done!” The sacrifices they had made—in lives, housing, education, and labor—counted for little.
According to many informants, there is no more radiant future. Where society is going is unclear to them. In an interview a female defense worker lamented:

And what we have now, I don’t even know. There is no ideology now, nothing to aim for. Before we had that we were aiming for communism. How was it? Well we had some sort of dream that there would be communism, meaning that it will be better and better. Although it seemed as if the lines were getting longer, but all the same we thought that all of that was temporary. Afterwards it will be better. Work! We are going towards a radiant future. But now it is unclear where we are going.

A male engineer concurred: “When we started to build socialism and then communism people at least knew what they were building. Now nobody knows what they are building in Russia, and there is not one slogan—‘Let’s build capitalism.’ Nobody says that we are building capitalism even though we have the most bandit capitalism that ever was in eighteenth-century Europe.”

COLLECTIVITY

While this generation recalled the war during the early 1990s, for them the late 1940s were essentially different from the early 1990s, however much the hardship and poverty seemed comparable. Vera described herself and her husband, Viktor, as “children of the war.” She lost her father during the war, yet she said, “I remember those years like a wonderful, beautiful dream. No, no, no, I don’t want to say that, but somehow. . . . We lived friendly [druzhno].” One woman, who lived in Kazakhstan during and after the war, said, “And you know, despite these hardships, we lived, we lived somehow very friendly [druzhno], very friendly, and we tried to help one another.” She spoke of Kazakh and Russian children sharing an apple or dried mare’s milk cheese. “We didn’t disdain each other.” This time was special, “even a happy time for mama and all those relatives [who had fled eastward from the front].”

During interviews individuals struggled to describe the society in which they came of age, one that no longer exists. Soviet society was a “tight society”; “we all lived alike.” Vera said, “We lived friendly. [ . . . ] Now, of course, we are upset. [ . . . ] We are very upset that we are strangers in
one country—strangers.” She referred to the political party of Putin and Medvedev, United Russia, with irony: “What sort of United Russia? It is funny to even say it, and I don’t want to say it.” Vera thought Russia needed another 1941. “Truly we need another war in order to unite us, so that we are together. But now, what disorder [bezporiadok]! Neighbor doesn’t know neighbor. That’s just, that’s just . . . That’s a catastrophe. It’s really scary! How can it be so? Sorrow unified people, they were together, holidays together. And now we don’t know each other. Is that really good? A person dies—we don’t know about it.” According to Vera, war and sorrow are the only ways to bring Russians together. “We’re that type of people,” she said. People not knowing other people—“neighbor doesn’t know neighbor,” “now we don’t know each other”—is a mark of disorder.

A male engineer spoke of the collective that was knit together during Soviet times. This generation is no longer unified by participating in a big social project. “But now they have torn everyone apart. Everyone has disbanded. Everyone has once again begun to work to survive. Each one for himself and the culture of consumption.” People are much more concerned with securing their own lives. Another man similarly told me that everyone wants “to live their own private lives.”

These memories made claims about the true Russian character—“that type of people.” Viktor said, “We love to be a collective. And we tear ourselves apart. You should never break tradition, do you understand? Yes, individuality is also necessary to nurture, but we are Orthodox and that is solidarity, solidarity [sobornost’].” Viktor used a Russian word that comes from the root sobor; meaning both cathedral and assembly, or gathering. Boym notes that the word is an “untranslatable antipode to the Western concept of the individual and identity” (1994, 87). Viktor considers solidarity an essential Russian quality, deep and spiritual in nature. His meaning is clear. What is happening now is not Russian. He derides the new Day of Unity on November 4, a holiday plagued by nationalist demonstrations. “Unity between whom?” Viktor asks. “Unity-holiday, and the whole month they tootled to us about the Bolsheviks, how bad Stalin was. They showed films and on the fourth of November again films about the bad Bolsheviks. [ . . . ] That was on the day of Unity. Do you understand? As a historian I was ashamed. Do you understand? Ashamed, ashamed. Then there was unity.”

Memories are socially constructed. The Soviet state legitimated and crafted memories of the war and the postwar period. Moreover, accounts
of middle-aged Muscovites are laced with nostalgia. Connerton notes that “images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order” (1989, 3). However, in the case of older Muscovites, memories often serve to comment critically on the present. As seen above, one way they do this is to emphasize collectivity, solidarity, or unity in the past, focusing on the war and the radiant future. They exclude sentiments of individuality, inequality, or conflict, which are reserved for characterizing the present. Beyond the question of whether these memories objectively reflect the past, they surely reflect something about the post-Soviet experience for this generation. That experience is marked by a feeling of social isolation, in contrast to the collectivity and unity of Soviet times.

A sense of collectivity is undoubtedly part of their early experiences, forged through the war and the difficult years after the war. People shared struggles to feed themselves, house themselves, educate themselves, and secure a better standard of living. The state provided a master narrative of progress: the radiant future of Soviet communism came only after sacrifice and hardship. Indeed, sacrifice and hardship resonated with people’s experiences. The destruction of the war and the destitution of postwar Russia meant that hardship and sacrifice were a daily reality. Whether or not hardship and sacrifice were interpreted as furthering socialism was another matter. But as people’s lives improved, a more radiant future with better housing and more consumer goods would have been believable—the master narrative reflected experience. As anywhere, people internalize messages that resonate with their experience.

**POSTWAR DEMOGRAPHICS AND GENDER**

Many in this generation lost one or both parents in the war. In the years after the war Russia had almost seven hundred thousand orphans who were raised in children’s homes. Viktor’s childhood coup, when he told his playmates that he had a “real papa,” reflects the demographic consequences of the war. An estimated twenty-seven million people had died, three fourths of whom were men (Zubkova 1998, 20). The state reacted to this demographic catastrophe by introducing the 1944 Family Law, which made divorce more difficult and granted state aid to single mothers and mothers of three or more children. Any mother could place her children in a children’s home and retrieve them at a later date (Bucher 2006, 14). In the same law, single mothers could no
longer sue the father of their children for support (Bucher 2006, 15), given that the state was prepared to assume responsibility. Fathers were no longer legally required to take responsibility for offspring outside of marriage.

The state was intent on increasing the birth rate and replacing the lost population. As a side effect, fathers were divested of legal responsibility in the domestic sphere. Men retained the breadwinner role and were expected to bring home a paycheck. Their social identity centered around work. As Viktor notes, the consequences of a fatherless generation were only fully revealed later and perhaps most fully in the early 1990s when men were unemployed, unpaid, or unable to adequately support their families. During those years, the breadwinner role itself was at stake.

Many women, even before the war, managed their households and worked as wage laborers without much help from men. Under Lenin’s and then Stalin’s push to industrialize Russia women entered the workforce en masse during the 1920s. In 1939 women represented 39 percent of the workforce; at the end of the war they were 56 percent of the workforce, although this declined a little in the postwar years (Clements 1991, 271). Women’s salaries, however, were less than men’s throughout the Soviet years. Men were always regarded as the primary breadwinners; women’s wages were supplementary. Nonetheless, women fulfilled both productive and reproductive roles in society.

Professor Vladislav spoke of the faded image of men as saviors, an image promoted by Soviet war propaganda. The image retains little cultural currency. “The war, yes, yes, yes. The man was the savior, you know there is the image of the Russian men-saviors, saviors. [. . .] The woman was the guardian, the guardian of the family, children, homes.” According to Clements,

In the iconography of the war, and undoubtedly in the minds of many Soviet soldiers, women came to stand for endurance, rebirth, and the tenderer emotions rare in the world of combat. Women as well must have drawn sustenance from this vision of themselves, for it honored their contribution to the war, justified their suffering, and legitimated their own deep feelings about their succoring role within the family and the community. (Clements 1991, 272)

At some point soon after the war, the image of men-saviors who sacrifice for the future of Soviet communism lost relevance in greater society. The ethic
of sacrifice was preserved, but it was most relevant in the domestic sphere. “The practice of self-sacrifice in favour of future generations became reoriented towards one’s own children” (Ledeneva 1998, 102). While the image of men-saviors eroded, the image of women guardians expanded into domestic martyrs after the war. Sacrifice became the purview of women. Professor Vladislav told me that men were no longer the saviors, that now “the woman must comfort, support, and sometimes save the man.” He, along with others, told me that the best men had died in the wars of the twentieth century. Women became the saviors of those who were left.

ORDER

Particularly during the late 1940s the Soviet state was reasserting itself. Stalin used the war to galvanize his vision of the Soviet project. Central ideology, organization, and control were tightened, along with renewed persecution of Jews, intellectuals, and students. This period of time was the height of the Soviet state, but it also contained the seeds of collectivity and individuality apart from the state. It is tempting to equate order with the Soviet state, but order, in the memories of older Muscovites, is fundamentally knowing other people—an interpersonal order. This order is akin to Giddens’s structure: invisible rules that facilitate social practices. Many of these rules would have depended on the existence of the state, but they were not determined by the state.

Children of the war were inculcated in the morality of sacrifice but also independence and spontaneity, as the state struggled with “reconciling order and heroism” (Livschiz 2006, 204). In her seminal literary analysis, Dunham (1976) wrote about early yearnings for freedom after the eye-opening experiences of the war. The desire for more freedom was contained by the state through a “Big Deal” permitting moderate middle-class materialism in exchange for continued support of the regime. More recently historians have argued that the general population was much too destitute to yearn for anything other than to rebuild their individual lives (Zubkova 1998; Filtzer 2002). But as they rebuilt their lives, aspirations surfaced. The radiant future began to apply to individual lives as well as the communist project, and the state tolerated this development. Fürst (2006a) recognizes this time as the maturation of the Soviet state and claims that the reassertion of state control coincided with growing individuality. “Thus, precisely in the regime’s highly
developed sense of control rests the very possibility to avoid, undermine and reinterpret” (12). Postwar Soviet order inadvertently created space to circumvent and contest that same order.

At least retrospectively, the informants of this study found the roots of their social identity in the war and postwar years, notwithstanding that they themselves were too young to serve. After the war people’s growing aspirations for their own radiant future eventually exceeded the state’s ability to deliver. In order to deal with this problem, people cooperated to push against the limitations of the state and form alternative channels of redistribution.

The two dimensions of order and space in the Soviet era had their roots in the war but were later epitomized in the workplace. According to Livschiz, the solution to reconciling order and heroism (individuality) was found in the promotion of “love for labour and work that emerged as a key theme and ultimate demonstrator of patriotism and peacetime heroism” (2006, 204). At work, individuals were integrated into the state’s industry and bureaucracy. Work also helped organize social connections that circumvented and co-opted state control and structure. In the next chapter we will turn to work to understand the intertwined relationship between order and space during this generation’s working years.

**THE ECHO OF WAR IN MORTALITY**

Some scholars interpret the age distribution of excess deaths during the mortality crisis as the impact of early childhood experience on mortality. Demographers Anderson and Silver (1989) find elevated cohort mortality for Russian men and women born during the war, especially those in western Russia. There is literature suggesting that risk of cardiovascular disease is, in part, determined by early experience, even as early as fetal and infant growth (Barker 2001). For the most part, this cohort would have been in utero during years of hardship and stress. They often had restricted diets when they were young and poor diets thereafter. Many men smoked and drank heavily throughout their lives. Perhaps very early, biological vulnerabilities to cardiovascular disease may have developed, compounded and mitigated over individuals’ life courses. It is also true that biological vulnerabilities and their life-course histories are the bodily imprints of larger political-economic processes. Moreover, the meanings given to vulnerabilities such as a wartime childhood may also attenuate or heighten their biological impact. This generation grew up as the generation of victors. In the early 1990s they became
the generation of losers. Such a radical retelling of their lives’ worth affected their health.

At the alcohol policy seminar in the spring of 2007, two women of the sobriety society Sober Russia were in attendance. As the seminar drew to a close, Maria stood up in the back of the amphitheater and proclaimed loudly that Russians needed to learn from their own history. She continued emotionally, “You are not looking at reasons, but consequences. Russians can’t live for themselves, for their pockets. There is no more ‘radiant future.’ We need to talk about our own people, the war, our ‘radiant past.’ You need to talk about that and if you don’t talk about that you aren’t talking about Russia.” It is not possible to understand the mortality crisis without some understanding of Russian history and this generation’s place in it. I scribbled frantically in my notebook as Maria made an anthropologist’s appeal to look at mortality in context. Although the seminar’s scholars recognized that rising rates of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related deaths coincided with the demise of the USSR, they were focused on risk reduction strategies through government regulation to limit access and control quality. In Maria’s opinion, though, high levels of alcohol consumption were a consequence of a new Russian society where the logics of individualism and monetary accumulation reign. In Soviet times a radiant future was the glorious future of a truly communist Russia. While Maria does not see any radiant future for Russia, she refers to the past, Russian history, as radiant. The war in particular symbolizes a moment of Russian history where Russians were brought together by collective sacrifice at the same time that the Soviet state was in ascendance. The state asserted itself, on the one hand, and, on the other, individuals did what was necessary to survive, often relying on each other. “Russians can’t live for themselves,” Maria said. In Soviet times Russians lived depending on each other to address the difficulties and absurdities of daily life in the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union was dissolved in December 1991, so were the social logics by which people were connected.

Above all, this generation mourned the loss of being needed. Both the ideology of the Soviet state and the logic of social relations emphasized that people were worthy and had status based on their ability to offer something. They gave their labor to the state. They offered favors and goods to others around them. In Russian ethnography being unneeded means “hurt and pain” (Rethmann 1999, 205) and “loneliness and vulnerability” (Højdestrand 2009, 2). These come from the loss of ability to give to others. Fundamentally, being unneeded is about the loss of ability to give to others and thus to
intervene in social life. Social epidemiology has shown that social isolation has serious emotional and physical health consequences. Ethnography shows how the logic of social isolation is culturally and temporally specific. Being unneeded is how many middle-aged Russians experienced the early 1990s. Being unneeded is also why some of them did not survive those years.

This chapter has touched on early hardships suffered by the generation of victors and the meaning given to these hardships in terms of sacrifice and collectivity. These meanings were promoted by the state, but they were powerful precisely because they resonated with everyday experience. These meanings, however, evolved through this generation’s lives. Collective sacrifice for the radiant future of Soviet communism, emblematized in men’s wartime service, was displaced by collective sacrifice among family and friends, emblematized by women’s daily struggles. Older Muscovites, identified as victorious in Soviet history, attempt to reassert the meanings of sacrifice and collectivity through their memories of World War II. They do this against a strong tide that sees their sacrifices as a failed project—ultimately unnecessary.