PART 4

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CRAFTING THE HISTORY OF TERRORTIMES 1

 Manufactured Memory: Crafting the Cult of the Great Patriotic War

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In a 2015 interview in Kommersant with Sergei Mironenko, the director of the Russian Federation’s State Archive, Viktor Khamraev inquired about the veracity of the heroic actions performed outside Moscow in 1941 by twenty-eight men from General Ivan Panfilov’s 316th Rifle Division. Mironenko commented that the original newspaper article that gave rise to the myth was a fabrication. Khamraev replied that “since my childhood I have considered them heroes, and I do not want to think otherwise.” In turn, Mironenko insisted that “historical facts” and “documents” confirmed that the story of the twenty-eight heroes was nothing more than a Soviet journalistic creation. A few months later, a BBC article commented that despite a historical “debunking,” many Russians continue to believe the myth.¹

For the Soviet Union, the Second World War served as a defining event, overshadowing the importance of the Russian Revolution and Civil War (1917–22). War on the Eastern Front, which became known as “The Great Patriotic War,” provided a profound memory for the entire country to unite around. Every family participated in the war experience, whether fighting on the front lines, toiling in the rear, or enduring enemy occupation. Tens of millions were left dead, tens of thousands of villages were obliterated, and tremors from the war years continued to impact Soviet society in the postwar period. Thus, it should come as no surprise that presently many Russians continue to believe not only in the self-sacrificial tales of individual heroes and heroines, but also in the overall socialist realist narrative created about the war under Joseph Stalin, which infused their lives and sacrifices with meaning.
The politics of memory over the war period showcase the interplay of both individual and collective memory. In this chapter, memory or individual memory, refers to events that individuals can recall having lived through, while collective memory references the creation of a framework based on social interactions that individuals within a state can utilize to organize their history. Collective memory and history are engaged in a constant struggle. Where history is complex, inclusive of multiple viewpoints and detached from obvious biases, collective memory relies on oversimplifications and familiar stereotypes to appeal to the masses. Collective memory reflects numerous variables and conditions that through a selective process become defining moments of significant historical events within a collective body.

An essential question is whether individual memory and collective or national memory can be kept separate. As soon as individual memory joins the greater collective, it no longer solely belongs to the individual but occupies a space in something that is not constructed based on distinctly personal past experiences and traumas but rather by present-day needs; in many ways it retains a type of truth but also mixes in aspects of myth, which in this case need not mean something fictitious. On the contrary, the myth that is created around a collective war experience creates “order and meaning . . . to the incoherence of war,” a consumable narrative in its simplicity and relies on previously examined and resolved historical issues. It could be argued that collective memory provides the tapestry onto which details from individual memories are embroidered, establishing a simplistic narrative that conveys the myth, which constitutes a learned truth an authority aims to embed within the public consciousness. The political scientist Thomas D. Sherlock views the final product as “political myth,” which creates “a narrative of past events that gives them special significance for the present and the future.” The Soviet Union remained dependent on maintaining a number of myths in order to legitimize its existence, and the twenty-eight Panfilovtsy story is one of the most recognizable examples.

For the Soviet population, the myth of the war experience as propagated by the state became so all-encompassing that in some instances it was the preferred version, displacing or blending with personal recollections and factual documentation. The war’s collective memory was propagated by multiple outlets, and due to the shortage of war histories, the dominance of literary publications centered on the war resulted in individual memories becoming intertwined with literature. The collective memory of the war was less reflective of a war experience and more superimposed by what Olga Kucherenko has termed a “universality of experience,” in which not only were significant events similarly recalled but their interpretations were prepackaged and standardized for easier consumption by professional representatives of the state.

Historian Catherine Merridale has argued that “Red Army troops were presented, effectively, with two wars simultaneously. The first, the one that they alone could know,
was the war of the battlefield, the screaming war of shells and smoke, the shameful war of terror and retreat. But the other, whose shape was crafted by writers, was a war that propaganda created.7 This binary, which draws on the traditional dichotomy through which the relationship between the Soviet masses and state has been viewed by scholars, does not fully explain the situation that developed during the war. In numerous instances the language and rhetoric used by Stalin, newspaper correspondents, and readers came to resemble each other and left an enduring memory preference that many turned to when recalling the war period. This raises the question of to what extent each influenced the others and whether the discourse created during the Great Patriotic War was a combination of efforts from information producers and consumers as well as censors, all of whom initially occupied a partly flexible territory thanks to the limited openness created by the war.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union created an opening within Soviet society, literally and metaphorically. Although the publications that appeared were hardly free of censorship, this period was consistently viewed as defined by a “freedom” that many fondly recalled years after the war. This freedom was also experienced by artists, including photographers and filmmakers, thanks to the relaxation of certain cultural regulations. They might have been told what subjects to concentrate on, but they were given some latitude in deciding how to portray them.8 The hope and freedom many associated with the war years endured into the postwar period and contributed to a sense of failure when the expected changes never materialized.9

Drawing on contemporary newspaper articles, which signify an engagement with constructed memories, as well as letters from previously published and unpublished sources written by civilians and veterans, this chapter tackles the question of how much influence journalists and writers had on the creation of the war’s initial narrative and its continuing influence and popularity among veterans and future generations of Soviet and contemporary Russian citizens.10 It will become evident that the textual language used by state representatives, correspondents, and the reading public often mirrored each other’s, but the question of who wielded the greater influence or if it was shared rather than directed is open-ended.11 This language was then regularly recycled by future Soviet administrations in the post-Stalin period. No matter how much they vilified or praised Stalin, his successors could not commit to fundamentally reevaluating the Great Patriotic War and relied on Stalinist rhetoric to understand Soviet achievements.

In examining newspaper articles, the reader will encounter numerous references to the more prolific authors, such as Vasili Grossman, Konstantin Simonov, and Ilia Ehrenburg. Grossman began his writing career in the late 1920s. His earlier work was highly regarded for its authenticity and for being populated with “real people” rather than stereotypes. He worked as a correspondent for Krasnaia Zvezda during the war.12
Simonov became famous thanks to the war and his widely popular poem “Wait for Me.” Finally, Ehrenburg was already well-known for his reports during the First World War and his coverage of the Spanish Civil War. He was one of the most popular authors in the USSR, writing hundreds of articles for domestic newspapers and the foreign press. He also received a constant stream of letters from readers during the war and after. Ehrenburg helped define the war’s narrative and, in part through orders from above and in conversation with readers themselves, helped craft an initial narrative of the war’s history that has continued to influence popular views.

REPLACING STALIN IN THE MEDIA

In the wake of the German invasion, the war was transformed into a people’s war, with Stalin and the Communist Party relegated to the background. Stalin’s omnipresence in the media ceased as the triumphs of the 1930s, collectivization, and industrialization, built on the shoulders of Lenin and the Revolution, were put in jeopardy. News of initial defeats suffered by the Red Army meant a situation arose wherein Stalin’s name and image were increasingly absent for fear of identifying defeat with his leadership. The truth of the war’s initial period was hidden from the population as journalists bypassed Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and appealed to Russian patriotism as a rallying cry for the defense of the state.

The war’s official title came from a Pravda article on June 23 by Emel’ian Iaroslavskii, a revolutionary, journalist, and historian, entitled “The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People.” The “Patriotic War of 1812” described the Napoleonic invasion of Russia; consequently the new title connected well-known tales of Russian resilience, courage, and eventual triumph to the current war. The words “Great Patriotic War” offered the Soviet Union an exceptional war experience and helped to separate and easily identify the Soviet war effort from what was previously portrayed as a conflict unleashed by two sides of the same capitalist coin (Britain and France, imperialists; Germany and Italy, fascists).

In the press, a lack of reference to Stalin’s words was replaced by the writings of popular reporters such as Ehrenburg and Simonov. With Stalin failing to dictate all aspects of society and becoming a closed-off figure, new narratives and a broader range of perspectives were allowed a place in the spotlight, which often resulted in more open conversations. Between August and October 1941, as the situation deteriorated further at the front, Stalin’s image slowly faded from reports. It was only with Stalin’s decision to remain in Moscow, in the face of continuing German advances, and his speech on the anniversary of the October Revolution in early November, that his image was published in Pravda on November 7 for the first time in many weeks.
Historian Anna Krylova notes that for Soviet citizens, newspapers were the “primary literary medium of wartime.” Correspondents themselves “waited for each communique with bated breath.” In 1943 Ehrenburg summed up the importance of newspapers for readers: “In peacetime the newspaper is a supplier of information, but in wartime the newspaper becomes the very air one breathes. . . . [P]eople open the newspaper before they open a letter from a friend, for their fate is tied up with what is printed in the newspaper.” The war provided a space in which newspaper articles represented the conflated needs of the population and government: simplistic wartime accounts and heroic tales that downplayed and concealed the administration’s prewar and wartime miscalculations while emphasizing the population’s penchant for heroic self-sacrifice based on love for the motherland, reconfigured into symbolic, stylized productions. Consequently, one of the most enduring aspects of the Great Patriotic War for the Soviet Union was the creation of what came to be the Cult of Heroes (or the Cult of Martyrs).

During the chaos of the first days of the war, frontline reports by journalists included crude reprints of articles from central papers exhibiting a low level of professionalism. Therefore, when correspondents were told of the importance newspapers carried for the war effort, they responded by requesting the removal of “stock phrases” and that they “be allowed to speak to readers in their own voices.” Ehrenburg argued that writers could help the cause with their talents and literary skills, as the “best agitator” was a writer who utilized his own voice, vocabulary, and tone. The atmosphere of the early period allowed such instances of “freedom” in creative thought to permeate wartime articles, and Ehrenburg noticed the difference: “War inevitably brings with it the censor’s scissors, but in Russia during the first eighteen months of the war writers felt much freer.”

Soviet readers were informed of the war’s progress by daily Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformburo) communiqués, which mainly tracked changes on the front lines and were tasked with controlling print and broadcast media that touched on major internal, international, and military events, as well as counterpropaganda work. Alongside official communiqués, well-known literary personalities, rather than journalists, took up the task of reporting on the war and offered newspapers pieces that reflected a “literary style” that deviated from traditional journalism. These authors were highly regarded by both the state and the people. It should be noted that readers viewed Sovinformburo communiqués and reports from frontline correspondents differently. While they questioned the former, the latter were eagerly consumed and internalized.

Authors took up the fight in their own way, and while serving on the front lines they were fulfilling a separate although equally important role in arming the population with
a hatred for the enemy. An editorial in *Literaturnaia gazetta* discussed the place of writers in the war less than two months after its beginning. Writers were encouraged to create generalizations in order to “reveal artistically in every example of heroism the national character of the Soviet people, the nobility of their ideas, which inculcate a scorn of death and hatred of the enemy.”\(^{18}\) Ehrenburg claimed many of his articles “were written at the front. . . . I was not thinking about the objective truth when I was writing. . . . I was thinking of one thing only: of victory.”\(^{19}\) Truth and objectivity were overshadowed by examples of heroism and the required slogans that authors and censors wanted imbibed by readers. Similarly, Ehrenburg’s exhortations for violence and retribution were often perceived as appeals for indiscriminate revenge.\(^{10}\) He was so well-known to the Germans that some believed “outside every uncaptured German village the political officer of a unit would read a declaration by Ilya Ehrenburg inciting the Red Army men to wreak vengeance.”\(^{31}\)

Wartime accounts created a direct link between readers and correspondents, forging a partnership. Grossman, writing to his father from the front, mentioned his popularity with frontline troops and how he would often see his books in their foxholes and bunkers. Works by Simonov and Ehrenburg were not only popular but deemed akin to holy symbols and icons by soldiers at the front.\(^{11}\) Due to the proximity of correspondents to soldiers, often readers could picture their own suffering or that of their families in articles. In April 1942 Ehrenburg received a letter from a Red Army captain mentioning that his mother remained in Kiev and asking if Ehrenburg “perchance” wrote “about her tears? Maybe you described her suffering?” A letter from A. F. Morozov at the end of 1943 compared Ehrenburg’s pieces with his memories of the war, filled with “feelings and passionate convictions and exhortations.” Readers expressed a similar sentiment in letters to Simonov about his war novels. Historian Polly Jones discovered that “a mother from Omsk and a son from Moscow both wrote to Simonov expecting him to be able to clarify the manner of their relatives’ deaths, since they had perceived unmistakable parallels between their biographies and those of the fictional heroes. Another widow, Kuznetsova, wrote more angrily, complaining about Simonov’s failure to mention her husband’s contribution to the battle at Borisov.” Soviet readers believed depictions of heroes needed to be “true to life,” and young audiences were heavily influenced by and identified with fictional heroes.\(^{33}\)

Much of the language utilized in reports appealed to the soldiers at the front, as writers rendered in print and often exaggerated their experiences for an audience desperate for information. Their goal was to support morale on the front lines and in the rear. Correspondents often found themselves in the midst of battles, entwining themselves and their struggles with those on the front lines. Alexander Poliakov was encircled with the 24th Rifle Division. His articles described the division’s struggle to get back to Soviet lines. Grossman witnessed the Battle of Stalingrad from the ruins of the city.
and offered one of the first documented accounts of the Holocaust in his article “The Hell of Treblinka,” which was used as evidence in the Nuremberg Trials. Ehrenburg claimed in 1944 that “on the first day of the war I forgot that I had previously written novels and poems. I became a journalist, only a journalist, whose place is on the firing line. I breathe the air of battle.” In all, the war’s propaganda effort encompassed the work of more than 1,000 writers. Hundreds participated at the front; 140 died and 300 received decorations. Many lived through much of what the Red Army suffered. Orders from editors and censors reinforced their training as writers. They utilized their experiences at the front as a foundation for the imagery they employed while exploiting emotions and crafting a tapestry of Soviet heroism based on a mixture of facts and cliché slogans that often went unchallenged.

Soviet authors also had to operate within the confined space set up by Stalin, who limited talk of military defeats. Simultaneously, Stalin predicated the idea that surrender was the equivalent of treason, and a brave death in battle was considered the norm. Heroic exploits, including death, became expected and acceptable for soldiers and their families. Stories of selfless sacrifice were refined by authors as Stalin personally edited drafts, while censors continually checked text and photographs for transgressions before and after publication. Newspapers and correspondents were stymied in their efforts to report on events, resulting in a repetition of heroic exploits that became fixed in Soviet minds and were soon internalized and reiterated on a regular if not daily basis.

MAKING SENSE OF DEFEAT: HEROES AND MARTYRS, 1941

Like an assembly line, stories began to be churned out about individual heroism, while reports of defeats were curiously absent. Almost immediately the population noticed the inconsistent claims and omissions evident in official reports. In the summer of 1941 V. Kazik, a disabled Soviet citizen, wrote to the editors of Pravda insisting that readers of a newspaper entitled “Truth” expected the truth, no matter how harsh. In September 1941 an anonymous letter arrived at the Sovinformburo claiming, “You do not systematically inform [readers] about the situation on the front, instead, reports for more than a week [contain] the stereotypical phrase—‘fighting along the entire front.’” Unlike the British, who portrayed Dunkirk as a “national epic,” or the Germans, who utilized the struggle for Stalingrad “to energize their forces,” the loss of Soviet cities was concealed throughout the summer of 1941. As a result, Soviet citizens approached Sovinformburo reports with skepticism, and many refused to believe official communiqués.
Reports of self-sacrificial actions, however, were regularly believed and used as inspiration. From the first days of the war, Soviet readers were presented with articles mentioning ramming attacks by Soviet pilots against the German Luftwaffe and dive-ramming attacks by pilots whose planes had caught fire and who were left with few other options. One of the most famous heroes was Captain Nikolai Gastello, who purportedly flew his damaged plane into a column of enemy vehicles, killing himself and his crew while inflicting damage and death on the enemy. For his selfless act, Gastello was posthumously awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union. The rest of his crew became recipients of the Order of the Patriotic War, First Degree.

While ramming in general was described as heroic, some disagreed. When Grossman visited a fighter regiment, he was met with a variety of views. One respondent believed ramming was representative of the “Russian character” and “Soviet upbringing,” but another claimed, “Ramming isn’t heroism. Heroism is to shoot down as many of them as possible.” Finally, a third insisted on asking: “What sort of a hero is a man who has a full load [of ammunition] and doesn’t manage to shoot [an enemy plane] down and has to ram [it]?” As much as Soviet correspondents and the state attempted to demonstrate what heroism meant in news reports, views on the ground were still conflicted when it came to pilots ramming enemy aircraft.

Heroism on the ground was epitomized by the ultimate sacrifice of twenty-eight men from Panfilov’s 316th Rifle Division. On November 16, 1941, to the east of Volokolamsk at the railroad junction of Dubosekovo, the Germans launched an attack against the 1075th Rifle Regiment, which sustained hundreds of casualties in hours of fierce fighting. The following day, before news about the German attack had made its way to higher headquarters, the division was renamed the 8th Guards Rifle Division for its steadfast defense. Panfilov was killed on November 18, creating a rare opportunity to associate the regiment’s heroic defense with its fallen divisional commander.

Instead of highlighting the heroic actions of the entire regiment, a handful of men who supposedly gave their lives to the last, sacrificing themselves on the approaches to Moscow, were treated as heroes. This case highlights the important role played by journalists and editors and the limited freedom they enjoyed from state censors in 1941. Without the involvement of state representatives on the ground, they knew without direction from above what was required of them. Writers took the initiative and aimed to serve a higher goal of mobilizing soldiers for battle. In highlighting this event, journalists were reinforcing Soviet war propaganda, which claimed it was possible to stop enemy attacks if only soldiers stood to the death and refused to retreat. The popularity of the Panfilovtsy was utilized to define “heroism,” resulting in countless reiterations of similar actions.

The tale of the 28 Panfilovtsy can be dated to a similar story in a 1931 Soviet play, *The Final Battle*, which highlighted the idea of an imminent war for Soviet
citizens. Historian Jochen Hellbeck described how “the final scene shows a group of twenty-seven Red Army soldiers defending the border against an imperialist enemy. In a hail of machine gun fire, all die but one. The injured survivor drags himself to a blackboard, where just before collapsing, he writes, ‘162,000,000 – 27 = 161,999,973.’”* The writing was already on the proverbial wall, the deeds described and entrenched in Soviet memory; all that was missing was a war to superimpose familiar memories onto. However, the truth about these twenty-eight heroes was known as early as 1948, when a report about Panfilov’s men by Nikolai Afansiev, the chief military prosecutor, was sent to Stalin and a number of high-ranking officials, detailing how the story was crafted from the imagination of journalists and the editor of Krasnaia Zvezda.*

Another hero appeared in the form of Zoia Kosmodem’ianskaia, a high school girl selected to go behind enemy lines as a saboteur. She was caught torching a stable of German horses. Reportedly, although tortured, she refused to give the enemy any information and died while defiantly proclaiming “It is happiness to die for my people” and “Stalin is with us” before being hanged.* A few weeks later, in the midst of the Red Army’s Moscow counteroffensive, a reporter from Pravda glorified her deeds after her frozen corpse was discovered, establishing one of the most iconic stories that became a national cry for vengeance. The British correspondent Alexander Werth remarked in 1946 that while there were others who performed similar deeds and suffered a similar fate, Kosmodem’ianskaia “was the name people were made to remember.”* While her torture and death were a fact, details surrounding her capture and treatment by locals remained in the shadows, as did the fact that the sabotage she was responsible for in the village of Petrishchevo left several families without a roof as winter was fast approaching. The truth would have undermined the narrative of the population’s support for the all-out partisan war Stalin initiated in the German rear.*

The state and journalists never had trouble finding heroes to embrace and emulate, especially those who perished, since histories and facts could be amended to suit the needs of the greater collective. When it came to Kosmodem’ianskaia, two articles appeared, in Pravda and Komsomol’skaia pravda. The article in the latter became an obscure reference, while Petr Lidov’s “Tanja,” which appeared in the former, received the nation’s attention because of its “vivid” quality.* Elena Seniavskaia recounts that according to “legend,” “Stalin, on reading the newspaper account of the partisan’s response to the Hitlerites’ question, ‘Where is Stalin?’ namely, ‘Stalin is at his post!’ — himself uttered the words that decided her posthumous fate: ‘There is a true national heroine.’” The propaganda apparatus went into action, and Tania, an unknown member of the Komsomol, was turned into Zoia, the first woman to be awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union during the war.*
THE TURNING POINT: 1942

With the retreat of German forces outside Moscow in January 1942, Stalin began to reassert control over the narrative about the war in the press. If 1941 was characterized by Stalin’s marginalization in the press, the beginning of 1942 found the Soviet leader portrayed as a strategic genius. Previous defeats were now portrayed in the press as part of his grandiose plans to lure German forces into the Soviet interior while operations were made for their ultimate defeat, a rehashing of 1812. Stalin leaned into the Red Army’s retreats and allowed the enormous loss of territory to influence future descriptions of his strategic brilliance. Similar rhetoric could then be applied to describe the German advance on Stalingrad. Soon reports about Stalin’s genius were being consumed and reiterated by soldiers at the front. In a letter to his parents in April 1942, a frontline soldier wrote that Stalin’s “ingenious strategy” was responsible for the successful defense of Moscow.

As Red Army success in early 1942 proved unsustainable and failures were again omitted, covered up, or excused in reports, at the end of July Stalin issued Order 227, “Not a Step Back!” The order was read out to every unit in the Red Army. On July 30 Pravda exclaimed “Not a step back!” at the top of its front page, and a leading article invoked the feat of the twenty-eight Panfilovtsy during the defense of Moscow. The same day Krasnaia Zvezda featured an article exhorting the troops to stand their ground: “Not one step back!—such is the country’s order, such is the order of the Commissar of Defense, our leader and general comrade Stalin.” For those who retreated without orders, no mercy was to be expected, as soldiers could utilize all the powers given to them by the state. Soon soldiers themselves exhibited the same mindset. In an August 1942 letter, the soldier Iosif Gil’man commented, “Every day we beat the Fascists under the slogan ‘Not one step back,’ and we fulfill this slogan with honor.” Many viewed exhortations to defend Stalingrad to the death as needed support, but commanding officers in the field differed in how they interpreted and implemented the order, allowing veiled or explicit threats of bodily harm and execution to substitute for patriotic zeal.

Defeats were masked behind the veneer of a learning experience that would unite and strengthen the Soviet population. Although large swaths of territory were lost, Ehrenburg argued that “we can say that we are stronger now than in the 22nd of June, 1941.” Ehrenburg urged his audience to “remember about what has been acquired and tell ourselves that the man who will return from the Front is worth ten prewar men... In the war we have acquired initiative, discipline, and inner freedom.” Ehrenburg’s thoughts were reflected in a letter he received from a Guards first lieutenant in the summer of 1942, who exclaimed, “We shall return from the war, not purer, not more upright—before the war we were as pure as white snow and completely upright. We shall return wise, more clear-sighted, and sterner.”
If the preceding is an example of when reader’s thoughts matched Ehrenburg’s, the summer of 1942 also witnessed an exchange in which Ehrenburg reflected the thoughts of his readers. On July 14, a letter from S. Kazantsev to Ehrenburg stated:

We, the men at the front, beg you to write articles which may still more effectively summon the Russian men, small and great, to fine deeds and to heroism. It is necessary to arouse in our Russian people such fury, such hatred for the Germans that the Russian will fight the German with whatever is available. So that a woman, and a little girl, an old man, and a boy may arm themselves with axes, scythes, stones, and in any encounter with a German kill him. It is necessary to say more loudly to the Russian man: he who does not kill a German is helping the Germans.  

Ehrenburg’s response was an article he became infamous for, “Kill!,” published on July 24:

We know everything. We remember everything. We have understood: the Germans are not human beings. From now on the word ‘German’ is for us the most horrible curse. From now on the word ‘German’ discharges a rifle. We shall do no talking. We shall not express indignation. We will kill. If you have not killed one German during the day, you have lost a day. If you think that instead of you your neighbor will kill a German, you have failed to understand the menace. If you will not kill a German, a German will kill you. . . . If you cannot kill a German with a bullet, kill him with a bayonet. If there is a momentary calm in your sector, if you are awaiting a battle, kill a German before the battle. If you leave a German alive, a German will hang a Russian man and will dishonor a Russian woman. If you have killed one German, kill another—nothing gladdens us more than German corpses. Do not count the days. Do not count the miles. Count one thing: the Germans you have killed. Kill a German!—this is what an old mother begs of you. Kill a German!—this is what a child implores you to do. Kill a German!—this is what your native land cries to you. Do not miss fire. Do not let him by. Kill!  

This exchange illustrates how the population worked in tandem with correspondents during the war, or even how the latter saw readers as muses. Ehrenburg comments in his memoirs that he received “hundreds” of requests from soldiers at the front to “tear the Fritzes to pieces in Red Star.” The textual inspiration for those begging Ehrenburg to write about killing Germans, like Kazantsev, could have originated from the previous year and from an unexpected source. When Stalin addressed the nation on November 6, 1941, he quoted from a directive found on a dead German lieutenant from Frankfurt/Main: “You have no heart and nerves; they are not needed in war. Destroy the pity and
The Red Army’s victory at Stalingrad in February 1943 coincided with Soviet attempts to tighten control over the media, as there was a fear of reporters inadvertently divulging military secrets due to inadequate experience. The state hoped to control the flow of information by placing limits on the number of reporters at the front. Correspondents went through additional training, while lists were circulated with preapproved subjects for both journalists and photojournalists. Simultaneously, censors continued their work. In 1943 Ehrenburg’s book *One Hundred Letters*, a collection of articles and letters received from soldiers at the front, was rejected for publication. When he asked why, he was told: “This isn’t 1941.”

Thus ended a period of the war when Soviet correspondents enjoyed a level of freedom they would never again experience in Stalin’s lifetime. As the Red Army found itself on the offensive, correspondents attempted to clarify the failures of 1941 and 1942. In doing so they highlighted ideas that explained away initial Soviet retreats, arguing that the Red Army had no experience and learned to “fight by fighting.” They steered attention away from the sacrifices and achievements of the allies after their landings at Normandy, keeping the focus on the Soviet war experience and the Red Army’s sacrifices.

In early 1945 Soviet outlets continued to stress that most of the fighting was taking place on the Eastern Front. An article by Ehrenburg on April 11 entitled “Enough!” described German soldiers surrendering to the western allies with “fanatical enthusiasm,” in contrast to the casualties Soviet forces suffered as they continued their advance. Ehrenburg was soon rebuked by the head of Agitprop (the Directorate of Agitation and Propaganda), G. Aleksandrov, for “over-simplifying” the situation. In response, Ehrenburg wrote to Stalin claiming that he was not expressing his own “line [but] the feelings of the people.” Ehrenburg was not arrested, and he published again on May 10, 1945. As this incident shows, he seemingly believed that he retained a freedom and ability to portray and interpret events as he saw fit.

The public agreed with Ehrenburg to some extent, demonstrating that they preferred the narrative some journalists were championing over that of highly placed officials who represented Stalin’s position. Ehrenburg later claimed that he received “many sympathetic letters” in the wake of Aleksandrov’s rebuke. As one example, a frontline
soldier wrote him that “comrade Aleksandrov speaks from the point of view of the TsK [Central Committee] and reflects the party line, however my voice and the voice of my comrades are with you.” Readers had become so familiar with Ehrenburg’s work and valued his contributions so much that they preferred his narrative over that of a highly ranked public official who represented the party line.

STALIN AND THE MEMORY OF THE WAR

In the immediate postwar period Stalin started to do away with anything that was not part of a polished, sanitized version of Soviet experiences in the Second World War. The memory of the war constituted a threat to Stalin’s power just when it had reached its zenith and his status as demigod was cemented in the minds of the population. As Stalin’s cult dominated the war’s narrative, limits appeared on publications about personal experiences. Many understood that their memories needed to be amended to fit the state’s version of events and mirror Stalin’s interpretations, creating a shared war experience that extended from the top to the bottom. Deviation by authors in public was initially evident but soon extinguished as recollections that opposed the party line were attacked in the press. With Stalin continuously found at the center of events, historians were left with nothing to do but repeat well-known myths. Those who tried to utilize source material deemed unacceptable were denied the use of key documents.

Aside from amending the war’s historiography, discussions and public expressions revolving around the war’s memory were discouraged. Initially, May 9, 1945, was treated as a festival and a general holiday. The Victory Day parade was held on June 24, 1945. There was no parade the following year; local events took its place. In 1947 Victory Day was done away with as a state holiday, not to be resurrected until 1965. This decision, combined with the prohibition against demobilized soldiers’ forming veterans’ organizations in the immediate postwar period, severed the ability of veterans to gather for public recognition. Finally, Stalin did not want the public to dwell on the damage sustained during the war years. Instead the war needed to be portrayed as a stepping-stone, with the focus oriented on the future rather than the past. The victory was a bridge to a new society, built on the blood and sacrifice of millions.

Stalin’s speech on February 9, 1945, which began to codify various themes that were present during the war, signified a shift from military campaigns and achievements to the economic and political foundations that were able to sustain them. Such an adjustment to the war’s history facilitated two shifts that remained intrinsic parts of the postwar narrative. The role of the party was enlarged, while that of the people, soldiers, and military leadership was diminished. The war’s portrayal relied on abstract notions rather than on the actual bloody encounters that had left a marked trace on
every frontline veteran and defined the war experience for more than one generation. With the war depicted as a “bloodless” affair, the memories of the defeats in 1941 were erased, to be replaced by universal myths. Authors suffered as they were forced to rewrite their novels in order to obscure the initial period of the war and play up the role of the Communist Party. But unlike historians, literary authors could write about their own experiences without needing to consult government documents or archival information.

When it came to war literature, readers expected authenticity. Veterans themselves reconfigured the war’s collective memory into a history written in blood. This was initially evident in an emblematic Jewish partisan song, “Zog nit keynmol,” from 1943, which claimed its lyrics were written “in blood and not in lead.” Similarly, an August 1952 letter to Grossman from A. Adamovich, a major in the reserves, stressed that “the Soviet reader requires good historical fiction literature on the Great Patriotic War from writers, but authors should work carefully and painstakingly around recent history, many pages of which are written in our blood.” High-ranking veterans were able and willing to lend their expertise and “services” so that historical episodes could be “truthfully” depicted. Grossman’s work in particular was greatly prized at the front, and his novels were also valued as historical documents. In *The People Immortal*, published in 1942, he was one of the first authors to discuss the Red Army’s retreats of 1941, something no other writer dared to mention, and *For a Just Cause* was considered by a reader to be the best thing written about the war. Stalingrad veterans viewed Grossman as “more than a journalist—he was one of their own, their comrade in arms.” The editor of *Krasnaia Zvezda*, David Ortenberg, commented on *The People Immortal*: “Nothing of the kind was written since the war began. And even after the war literary historians regarded *The People Immortal* among the most significant works of the period.” Consequently, novels and novellas about the war experience blurred the line between fact and fiction.

The culmination of a war narrative that forfeited realistic portrayals of heroic acts and propagated a specific heroic archetype meant a revised understanding of what defined heroism and victory while steering discussion away from fundamental errors perpetrated by the leadership and armed forces. The ability of the Soviet media to create a heroic narrative around the selfless sacrifices of the population paved the way for Stalin to reconfigure the portrayal of the war’s initial period. Defeats were transformed into preplanned retreats, serving as part of a greater plan to defeat the enemy in exchange for space and time.

Wartime depictions of heroism became intertwined with the war’s collective memory. During the war, in 1944, the film *Zoia* appeared in Soviet cinemas. The movie was shown at the front and a soldier, in a March 1945 letter to his family, commented that the film “made a great impression” on him and insisted “here is the real truth [*istinnaia...*]"
After the war, the film’s director met a friend, a war correspondent, who arrived from the front and hinted that the “real” story of Zoia differed from the cinematic production. The director, rather than being upset, replied, “I would have made the film just the same. The story is more important than the actual details.” Margarita Aliger, a poet who wrote about Zoia’s feat, agreed with this notion. Almost three decades after the war she continued to insist “that her depiction of Zoia was not invented, but ‘reflected the truth we believed in.’” Thus, the various representations of “Zoia” reflected stylized depictions that people wanted to believe in as the “truth,” superimposed onto their memories by wartime correspondents and state-endorsed propaganda. Continued exposure to the same idealized narrative made a dent in Soviet minds that continued to influence perceptions, ideas, and beliefs. According to Kucherenko, “as the war was gradually mythologized . . . interpretations also became standardized, creating an impression of universality of experience.” In such a way, “uncomfortable truths were either bent or concealed to fit the overall heroic picture, and personal experiences made irrelevant to the master narrative.”

**WAR MEMORY AFTER STALIN**

After Stalin’s death in 1953, Stalinist thinking was still a formidable obstacle to interpretations that might devalue the Soviet war effort. While there were detectable differences in how the history of the Great Patriotic War was discussed under Nikita Khrushchev, more often than not its foundations, including terminology and rhetoric, mirrored the Stalin period. Once again, Soviet literary personalities were at the forefront of discussing historical issues, and literature provided a medium for historians to explore Soviet history, including the Second World War. Inspired by de-Stalinization, writers such as Grigorii Baklanov, Iuri Bondarev, and Vasil’ Bykov pushed against previously imposed boundaries and discussed the war while the Communist Party and censors continued to limit what could be admitted about the war’s true costs. Authors produced fictional works that often “resembled memoirs in their autographical perspective” and “aroused furious discussion about topics that were so new that they required unfamiliar phrases and neologisms,” including “the truth of the trenches (okopnaya Pravda)” and “deheroisation (degeroizatsiya).”

The dearth of historic literature on the war was addressed by Khrushchev when the Institute of Marxism and Leninism created a commission in 1957 tasked with researching and publishing the first official history of the Great Patriotic War. Commission members identified numerous weaknesses in previous publications on the war, including drafts of the official history. They were guilty of presenting a “dry” history that lacked any “vivid” character that might capture readers’ interest. For instance, the
official history’s depiction of the battle for Stalingrad was considered too bland to describe an event of “great importance . . . it should be spoken of more vividly, colorfully.”

One of the main editors argued that the “dryness” in the volumes was due to the authors’ being military historians, and it was “our misfortune, that our military authors have often dealt with purely military books” that revolved around the art of war. The multivolume history, however, was of a “different character.” Given to a general reader, the war’s history “will strain his thoughts, and he will be left with the impression that this is a military book, but we need to affect people’s minds and hearts.” Facts and “protocols” needed to be transformed into a memorable “living historical narrative.” Editors pleaded with authors that their main goal and challenge should be a “need to correctly squeeze out all that is possible, not only in the content but in the form of presentation, so that it is vivid, intelligible material, maybe even so that at times tears will appear, because these events are full of drama, because tens, hundreds of thousands of people died, often as a result of errors, and often deliberately sacrificing themselves so as to defend this or that boundary. . . . I appeal to you . . . when you work on this material, think, so that the material is dripping blood, blood that was shed, then our goal will be achieved.”

Undoubtedly this was a reference to the heroic self-sacrificial narrative that so many had grown familiar with from wartime articles. If under Stalin the war was sanitized, then under Khrushchev the goal was to insert once more the human element, but within limits that allowed for justifications for Soviet domestic and foreign policies; whether a shortage of housing or the presence of Soviet troops in Eastern and Central Europe, everything was a result of the blood spilled during the war.

Attempting to remedy the problem of a historical narrative that lacked mass appeal, commission members petitioned for the inclusion of heroic acts such as that of the twenty-eight Panfilovtsy, arguing that their actions represented “mass heroism” and claiming that “they alone defended our land and delayed a large number of the enemy.” Such assertions reinforced the narrative of the war created under Stalin, emphasizing a heroic feat already part of the war’s collective memory that many would not question. Stories of heroism seemed to ignite regular debate among commission members. One member was unhappy with how Zoia Kosmodem’ianskaia’s heroic feat was portrayed, comparing it to a “protocol” with its “dry” description of events and people. Leaning on literature produced during the war, he advocated including “excerpts from documents published in Pravda. [Like] Lidov’s wonderful literary, political and artistic article ‘Tania’ with Strunnikov’s photo—Zoia Kosmodem’ianskaia with a rope around her neck as soon as she was removed from the gallows.”

Consequently, even those privy to detailed information and with access to archives preferred to lean on wartime literary publications with their raw emotional appeal. This speaks in part to the lack of historical information available on the war in general, but also shows the
connection that many retained with the news they were exposed to during the war and what writers believed would continue to resonate with readers.

Consistently concentrating on a familiar heroic narrative omitted the question of why Red Army soldiers needed to sacrifice their lives in the first place. It was more important to figure out who had performed a specific heroic deed first, as in the case of a reader who wrote to the head editor of Pravda asking for clarification concerning the famous Aleksandr Matrosov, who threw himself on an enemy machine gun embrasure in 1943. The reader’s main concern was why Matrosov received all the praise for his selfless act when others had performed similar feats before him.91 A reply to another letter, inquiring about why two previous examples of a similar exploit were practically unknown, claimed that because Matrosov’s name and actions had fallen into the hands of some “lucky journalist, who publicized them through the press,” the reading public had become familiar with his story before that of anyone else. Moreover, he was also mentioned in fictional literature.92 Consequently, a journalist’s wartime exposure of Matrosov’s heroic feat to the population, combined with mentions in literature, embedded his exploit in Soviet collective memory with little concern for why such sacrifices were necessary.

The enduring legacy of the narrative that appeared during the war was a result of the efforts undertaken by numerous literary personalities as they attempted to follow the party line while being cognizant of censors. Because collective memory relies on simplification, the universalization of the war experience made it that much easier for all sectors of society to eventually build a cult around it. Famous war correspondents gave voice to an event that impacted every Soviet family and, in part, a tragedy that could not be hidden from the population or the international community. The war’s beginning could only be represented as a treacherous betrayal that allowed Soviet citizens to unite and help the Red Army and their state achieve victory. Tales of heroism and self-sacrifice became entrenched in readers’ memories, representative of the desperate situation the state found itself facing, and the portrayal of a Manichean version of the war made it that much easier for many to internalize its narrative and make it their own. Germany’s invasion and the existential threat it unleashed created a break from the prewar period when it came to censorship that allowed a limited period of “freedom” and forged an unforgettable unity between the state and society that the population had never before experienced.

When Leonid Brezhnev came to power in 1964, Khrushchev’s reforms ground to a halt; the initial period of the war was never objectively examined due to the perceived harm it would cause the Soviet state at home and abroad. Soviet writers were urged to portray the darkest period of the war in 1941 as the first step toward Germany’s eventual defeat. Concentrating on the tragedy of the first days meant taking attention away from Red Army victories. Aleksei Epishev, the head of the Political
Administration of the Army and Navy, only allowed historical studies that would be advantageous; failures were hushed up and defeats were turned into victorious episodes of the Red Army’s inevitable march toward Berlin. State censors went to work and, in analyzing narratives that dealt with the war’s initial period, they seemingly followed in footsteps that portrayed the entire war as one whose victory could be predicted from day one. 93

This view became enshrined in memorial complexes like Brest Fortress, which altered perceptions about the war experience. The defense of Brest Fortress was made famous by Sergei Smirnov’s Brestskaia krepost, published in 1957—another book by a literary personality that helped define the heroism of Red Army soldiers in 1941.94 In 1971, one visitor saw the memory of Brest transformed from a site that formerly housed “a modest exhibition of photographs and newspaper clippings” into a home for “rows of granite graves, photographs of the ‘heroic defenders’ of the fortress, an eternal flame, immense statues, the works!” A “tragic defeat” was reshaped “into an exploit of heroic defense” with the Communist Party leading the people. “It was incredible.”95 Defeats became representations of selfless Red Army heroism.

A connection to the war was also passed down to Soviet youth. They were ingrained with an appreciation for their parents’ and grandparents’ accomplishments and vicariously established a connection to the war. Historian Donald Raleigh encountered a veteran’s son who recalled how his father “shared his experiences with me in great detail to the point where I sometimes would think that all this happened to me rather than to him.” The war experience was ritualized and became a constant companion for Soviet citizens from cradle to grave as they were turned “into ex post facto participants.”96 A former Soviet citizen recalled that during her childhood “war and hunger [were] the two words we hear[d] everywhere: in our classrooms, in our news, in the conversations of babushkas on the benches of our courtyard. They [were] nonspecific and worn out, something that happened not to individuals but to the entire country.”97

The further removed the events of the war were, the more contested issues became. In conversations during the 1980s and 1990s it became apparent that people with no real way of knowing the truth about the Panfilovtsy continued to vehemently defend the original version of the myth.98 The war narrative’s entrenchment in the minds of veterans and the continued exposure of current Russian citizens to the heroic and self-sacrificial collective memory of the war have resulted in the defense of a history based on socialist realist ideals—defined as depictions of events as they should be and not as they are—and emotions rather than facts and research.

If under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s Russia initially moved away from its Stalinist past—military parades were abolished and the war became less prominent in media outlets—under Vladimir Putin the government turned to the Second World War for a ready source of patriotism. In 2000 the wartime Soviet anthem was restored as the
new Russian anthem (albeit with different lyrics), and in 2003 a textbook critical of Stalin’s role in the war was removed from circulation. Stalin was still intertwined with the war’s history thanks to a narrative that continued to link him to victory. Putin’s administration fixated on a mythic event that underlined national unity, struggle, and perseverance, a narrative familiar to many. An attack on the memory of the war was transformed into “a personal insult, a sacrilege.” The general war narrative persists in revolving around the themes of Russian exceptionalism, selfless heroism, and victimization at the hands of belligerent enemies. Unfortunately, the ongoing portrayal of the war in a simplistic binary continues to influence Russian historians and inhibits a more nuanced understanding of a war treated as sacrosanct.

The increasing popularity of May 9, which became a yearly national holiday in 1965, speaks to how the war continues to resonate with the population. The war offered inspirational examples for an “apathetic populace” struggling with national identity, and elderly war veterans were reinvigorated with self-esteem. Victory Day celebrations are reinforced by a heroic narrative many continue to favor. In a conversation between a librarian and a veteran who liked to read about the war, the librarian asked, “But why? You yourself were a soldier in the war. Wasn’t that enough?” The veteran replied, “Oh, what kind of war was that? I like to read about a real war that has heroism and brave deeds.” Similarly, Soviet families developed strong connections with the memory of the war and its stylized narrative. A “Soviet baby boomer” claimed that “I don’t want to know or to hear that Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya’s feats never happened. The war was always a sacred topic in my family. I continue to believe that the people fought for justice . . . and that the country and the people were united like never before. For me the war is sacred, and I don’t want to subject this to reexamination.” Breaking away from memories of the sacredness of the war disconnected many with a nostalgia for a time of “freedom,” which featured a heroic history that became the cornerstone of their understanding of the value and worth of the USSR’s accomplishments during the Second World War, the only event all can confidently celebrate.

Veterans preferred a familiar and idealized historical narrative. The author Vasil Bykov commented on the attitude of war veterans in a letter in 1996: “No country in the world has such remarkable veterans as our native and beloved USSR. Not only are they not promoting the truth and justice of the war, but on the contrary—they are most concerned with hiding the truth, most eager to replace it with mythologizing propaganda, in which they appear to be heroes and nothing else. They like this inflated role of theirs, and would not tolerate any attempt to challenge it.” Entwining their wartime experiences with those of Stalin’s Soviet Union meant that invalidating the legitimacy of one risked nullifying the other. The courage, heroism, and sacrifice of their generation would be left in the dustbin of history together with the “Soviet experiment.”
Another author, Viktor Astafiev, reflected in 1999 that “everything connected with” the war “has been so confused, that in the end the ‘made up’ war eclipsed the real one.” When he decided to leave the theme of war behind, he commented that “it is difficult and pointless. The young cannot understand, hardly anyone understands, and older folks don’t want to be reminded. If you must write about the war, it should be about the one that was made up, where they look heroic, where it wasn’t the Germans beating them, but them beating the Germans.” Thus the original narrative of the war, crafted in fire and blood, continues to resonate and displace efforts to offer a more nuanced and objective account.

For Soviet veterans, the war was continuously cloaked in an aura of heroic self-sacrifice throughout the Soviet period. Future generations were raised on a multi-layered diet of heroism, exceptionalism, and victimhood that hid the war’s true complexity behind a simplistic binary of Soviet altruism and Hitlerite tyranny. The enemy were easily discernible by the language they spoke and the uniforms they wore. Soviet heroes, united in their hatred for the perfidious invader, waged war in unity with the state. Denouncing Stalin’s cult of personality during de-Stalinization only reinforced Soviet victimhood and that the world continued to owe a debt it could never repay to a generation of Soviet idealists who had paid the ultimate price for Hitler’s defeat. For veterans, a deep-rooted nostalgia for a past that infuses their sacrifices with meaning and present-day pensions and benefits underpin their wartime contributions, making any invalidation of the heroism of their war effort not only an emotional trauma but an attack on their quality of life.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union created a fertile environment for a narrative of selfless heroism to take hold in the hearts and minds of the Soviet population. Well-known authors, correspondents, and editors went to work as Stalin’s voice was momentarily marginalized and, using their talents, they crafted a beautiful tapestry of sacred heroism frozen in time. Objectivity and truth were a secondary concern as writers joined the troops on the front line, suffered with them in the trenches or behind enemy lines, and witnessed heroism on an unprecedented scale. Others took a back seat to the action and used what minor facts they came across in battle reports to create the heroic narrative they knew readers needed to be exposed to in order to sustain the war effort. Memorable stories came to represent what the Soviet population was capable of in an existential crisis as correspondents emphasized the all-important role played by the Red Army and Soviet state: they were saving Europe and the world from Hitler’s tyranny. Literary flair, generalizations, and an author’s imagination created a literary style that filled the reading public with an appreciation for Soviet self-sacrifice and nostalgia for a time of unity between the state and the people that endures in the present.
NOTES


5. Sherlock, Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia, 3.


23. RGASPI, f. 629, op. 1, d. 110, l. 1.


29. Ehrenburg, Tempering of Russia, v.

30. Lev Kopelev, Khranit’ vechno, kniga pervaya (Moscow: Terra-Knizhn’i Klub, 2004), 152.


34. Popoff, Vasily Grossman, 2.


37. Berkhoff, Motherland in Danger, 5, 35; and Shneer, Through Soviet Jewish Eyes, 90.

38. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 58, l. 95–96.


40. Brooks, Thank You, Comrade Stalin!, xvii; and Jochen Hellbeck, Stalingrad: The City That Defeated the Third Reich (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 12.

41. Seniavskaia, “Heroic Symbols,” 73. One “debunking theory” posits that in 1951 authorities discovered Nikolai Gastello was not the hero he was purported to be. It was, in fact, Aleksandr Maslov, another captain from the same unit as Gastello, who, according to evidence, attempted to fly his plane into a German anti-aircraft emplacement and wound up hitting the ground some 180 meters away from the highway. Eduard Polianovskii, “Dva kapitana,” Izvestia, January 28–29, 1997.


43. Berkhoff, Motherland in Danger, 62.


46. Hellbeck, Stalingrad, 30.

47. RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 890, l. 85–88. The most recent case study of this event and its history is Alexander Statiev, “‘La Garde muert mais ne se rend pas!’: Once Again on the 28 Panfilov Heroes,” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 15, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 769–98.

49. Alexander Werth, *Year of Stalingrad*, 76.
52. Seniavskaia, “Heroic Symbols,” 76.
55. *Pravda*, July 30, 1942, 1; and “Stoiko zashchishchat’ rodnuiu zemliu!,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, July 30, 1942, 1.
60. Ehrenburg, *Tempering of Russia*, 351.
65. Ehrenburg and Simonov, *In One Newspaper*, 252.
79. RGALI, f. 1702, op. 6, d. 55, l. 1, 9, 25; and Popoff, *Vassily Grossman*, 133, 134.
81. Cited in Altman, Terushkin, and Brodskaya, Sokhrani Moi Pisma, 256.
83. Kucherenko, Little Soldiers, 16.
86. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 60, l. 10; d. 68, l. 5; d. 69, l. 69–70.
87. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 39.
88. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 69, l. 5, 12, 13, 71–72.
89. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 28, l. 54–55.
90. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 30, l. 43.
91. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 585, l. 327–28.
92. RGASPI, f. 71, op. 22, d. 396, l. 41.
94. Sergei Smirnov, Brestskaia krepost (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1957).
95. Tumarkin, Living and the Dead, 145.
101. Timothy Snyder, “Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939–1999,” in Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies


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