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War in Ukraine and the Idea of the Russian order. Report – part 5

Protect from 'Nazism'

Acceding to the attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Putin accused this country of fostering the Nazi ideology. Hardly anyone could figure out what the Russian president actually meant. Ukraine has not cut itself off from the legacy of its participation in the victory over the Germany in the Great Patriotic War. Monuments celebrating the Red Army are still respected. The Head of the Ukrainian state is a person of Jewish origin, part of whose family died in the Holocaust and now this family was supposed to become a Nazi believer. It is true, that a public debate in Ukraine regarding the elections of particular Ukrainian political environments, made in the years of the World War II begun, but it did not go beyond a typical European discussion about the ambiguous choices in the years of the war. Papers were published, films were made, and people on academic forums discussed the participation of Ukrainians in pro-German military structures. However, all these activities were very far from glorifying Nazism.

However, the current Russian authorities, have decided to make accusing Ukrainians of pro-Nazi sympathies an important propaganda tool. In practice, since the 2014 conflict, images related to the 'Great Patriotic War' have been used in official discourse to describe the political situation in Ukraine. The division was simple: good Russians-Communists and bad Ukrainians-Nazis/Banderites. This message was escalating in the following years. The term 'Banderites' was used in describing contemporary Ukrainians and in the view of those supporting the war, was intended to justify the attack of February 24, 2022. Russia made an effort to 'convert' the lost Ukrainians to the right path. Just as in the days of the expansion of the communist ideology, when revolution was supported in various countries often against the will of a large part of the population, but always with a view of their 'well-being', a 'special military operation' is being carried out in Ukraine with the same intention.

Putin is a soviet man and in these categories he sees the world. Communist ideology has been replaced by the fight against 'neo-Nazism'. What is terrifying, not only Putin believes in this fight, but also a part of the Russian population. It was decided that the memory of the so-called Great Patriotic War would become a very effective tool for contemporary political and military expansion.

In the years of the Soviet Union, May 9th, the date of defeating the Nazi Germany hidden in the canon of the Soviet celebrations was on a par with November 7th (the holiday of the October Revolution) and May 1st (Labor Day). After the fall of communism, only May 9th was left of these three major holidays in Moscow, which grew into the largest public holiday in Russia in the 21st century. Just like previously the Soviet Union, today Russia assumes it has the full legitimization of authority to use the memory of the victory in the war against the Nazi Germany in pursuing a modern policy. No other European country has the right to compete with the Soviet-Russian memory and the image presented by Russia should be fully accepted. Any polemic with the official Russian image of World War II is treated as an attack on the memory of the war's victims. Just as in the Soviet times, the memory of the war is to be monopolized by the only accepted official state message.

In the Soviet Union, the memory of the fight and victory in the so-called Great Patriotic War became the key issue right after the war in 1945. The message of the success of the whole soviet nation, not exposing the role of particular people was preached. According to the information message after 1945, even when individual commanders or soldiers were performing heroic deeds, they were only following the orders of the infallible Commander-in-Chief — Joseph Stalin. The role and importance of the leader of the Soviet state had to be emphasized at every step and were reinforced over the years. This allowed the image of the war and the role of Stalin himself to become increasingly mythologized, with his personal contribution to the final victory growing in direct proportion to the cult's development. Articles published in the press in the early 1950s left no illusions who was the real father of the success. All descriptions of the so-called Great Patriotic War were constructed in a similar pattern. Attempts were made not to emphasize the date of 22 June 1941, and Stalin's first radio speech on 3 July 1941 was presented as the start of the actual actions that ultimately led to victory. It became the symbolic beginning of the subsequent military success.

In so constructed the image of war, the efforts of individual citizens were of secondary importance; what mattered was the collective and the one true leader. In these descriptions, Stalin was presented to the public not as a flesh-and-blood man, but as the living embodiment of communism in its most perfect form. All the successes of the Soviet Union were attributed to a single figure. The ubiquitous cult of the 'leader' promoted conformism, fostering uniformity of attitude and thought. The citizens were told about other revolutionary or communist activists, but these activists could not be able to compete with Stalin. Winning the war became a mark of the leader's greatest genius, sidelining all other previous achievements of the Soviet Union. The message of the recent history constructed in such a way was to prepare citizens for possible future war challenges. Guidelines for political course instructors on how to tell about the Great Patriotic War were published in the press. The new threat was the 'American imperialism', which, as in the case of Nazism, could only be opposed by the Soviet Union with Stalin in the lead.

The beginning of the Cold War conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States and Great Britain led to the fact that that historical descriptions of the Great Patriotic War minimized or even omitted the contribution of the recent allies to the victory over Nazi Germany. Facts were freely manipulated, for example, by omitting the role of Great Britain and the United States in providing military assistance to the Soviet Union at the most difficult moments in 1941 and 1942. The alliance between the countries and the Soviet Union was no more than a forced tactical operation caused by the conditions in which the capitalist countries found themselves at the time of fighting with the Nazi Germany. In practice, they were unwilling to help the Soviet Union, the best example of which was to be the delay in opening the front in the west.

The entire population was subjected to the intrusive influence of the Soviet system. The totalitarian system demanded unconditional obedience from its citizens to the proclaimed slogans and principles, forcing them to support the actions of the state in an active manner. State holidays served the purpose of glorifying the power of the Soviet Union and the figure of Stalin during the war years.

The changes taking place in political life of the Soviet Union after 1953 were also reflected in the approach to the narrative of the victory in World War II. The previous communist

ideology, based on the glorification of Stalin, saw a partial reconstruction. The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, at which the cult of Stalin was exposed to criticism, marked a new direction for change. Khrushchev and the new party leadership accused Stalin and Beria of departing from the historical tenets of communist ideology, as represented by Lenin. Beria was blamed for mass repressions mainly, while Stalin was accused of overemphasizing his role in the ongoing transformations. Among other things, it was explained to the citizens that the greatest military success on the basis of which the idea of the Soviet nation was built, namely victory in the so-called Great Patriotic War, was possible not because Stalin was at the head of the country, but because he in fact had to share his responsibility. It was therefore a triumph of the whole party, not of one man.

Ordinary soldiers as people committed to the communist ideology and the party's orders were going to become new heroes. Films produced during this period that spoke of the 'Great Patriotic War' emphasized the sacrifice of the nation and individual soldiers. Among the flagship works of that period were the following titles, available in cinemas in Belarus: 'The Immortal Garrison' (1956), 'Soldiers' (1956), 'The Cranes are Flying' (1957), 'Ballad of a Soldier' (1959) or 'Destiny of a Man' (1959). Zinaida Portnova, a young girl who was killed in January 1944, has become a role model for children and young people and was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union title by the highest authorities in 1958.

The best example of the transformations taking place in the Soviet Union after 1956 was the myth of the defenders of the Brest Fortress. Until 1956, very little was known about the fighting for the fort and its defenders in the Soviet Union. No one mentioned the fallen soldiers. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, published in 1951, did not even contain one entry about the fighting for the fortress. In the post-war Stalinist era, it was inadvisable to mention the defeat of 1941, as the successes of later years needed to be highlighted. The soldiers who fought in June 1941 in defense of the Brest Fortress were fully remembered again only during the period of transition. The press began to publish information recalling the history of the fort. News were circling about work on a book praising the heroic stand of its defenders. Scientific research was initiated. The fortress and its defenders began to be used to build a new history of the so-called Great Patriotic War and to highlight the sacrifice of the citizens. After 1956, in order to weaken the personal role of Stalin in the victory over Nazism, which had been exposed by propaganda until then, it was necessary to build a story about the sacrifice of the soldiers who fought to the end despite the defeats suffered in 1941. The defenders of the Brest Fortress were perfect for this role. Their sacrifice only needed to be properly publicized and accentuated. The highest authorities of the Belarusian republic were highly active in the 1960s and 1970s in this endeavor. A monumental museum complex was built at enormous expense. The gigantic propaganda machine was set in motion. On May 8, 1965, the Brest Fortress received the most honorable title - that of hero. Previously only Leningrad, Stalingrad, Sevastopol and Odessa had been so honored. Novels were written about the battles, plays were staged, films were made. The sacrifice of the young soldiers was highlighted. A museum was built on the fortress grounds. At the end of the 1960s, a project for a monumental memorial was conceived. The centerpiece of this huge artistic project, inaugurated in 1971, was an enormous sculpture of a soldier cast in concrete. Several stores high, it was supposed to make an overwhelming impression on everyone who would observe the grimace of pain on the face of a wounded Red Army soldier. An everlasting fire was also an obligatory element.

One did not have to wait long for the effects of the actions taken. The defenders of the Brest Fortress became a symbol commemorating the date of June 22, 1941 - the beginning of the German-Soviet war. It was here, in the fortress, that patriotic ceremonies were held and new conscripts took the oath.

Similar sites were established throughout the Soviet Union. As in the case of the October Revolution, the entire society was made part of the propaganda actions commemorating the Great Patriotic War. A local network of museums and memorial chambers was expanded; series of Soviet historical feature films, mainly related to the so-called Great Patriotic War, were screened. Productions such as 'Clear Skies' (1961), 'Father of a Soldier' (1964) and 'Commissar' (1967) gained great popularity. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a whole series of documentaries were produced showing the society's sacrifice during the war years. Lectures were given at workplaces, where historical topics were also discussed. The memory of the 'Great Patriotic War' was a reminder of the need for constant sacrifice to the Soviet state and, at the same time, maintained the state of tension caused by the threat of a potential conflict with the United States.

The construction of a single Soviet nation, identified with the party and, in turn, with communist thought, became the basis of the entire state ideology. The idea of a common, great Soviet homeland used to be revived on the occasion of each anniversary of the victory over Nazism in the 'Great Patriotic War'. Throughout the Soviet Union, including in Ukraine, the events of the World War II period played a key unifying role for the entire society. The narrative of the events of the war was all-encompassing - from large-scale state demonstrations, to lectures, theatre performances, films and school academies. On the occasion of successive anniversaries, propaganda posters were displayed to remind people of the great victory. The memory of the war was to be present in almost every aspect of political and social life. According to the concept adopted after 1956 and reinforced in subsequent years, the entire Soviet nation emerged victorious in the so-called Great Patriotic War. It was therefore no coincidence that the war period became the main axis around which collective identity was built. The sacrifice was made by the entire Soviet nation, of which individual nations were a part, which is why, despite the commemoration of Jewish extermination sites, the Holocaust was not categorized as a separate issue. The memory of the Great Patriotic War, and especially Victory Day itself, became the key historical moment around which much of the Soviet ideological message was constructed. May 9th was portrayed as an 'great day to be celebrated forever' that should be remembered by everyone in the Soviet Union. In the press, archive photos from the war years were interwoven with contemporary images of happy people paying tribute to their defenders. Accounts of patriotic celebrations, memories of veterans, descriptions of battles, etc. were a regular feature of newspapers published in the Soviet Union. They became the basic historical image that dominated the mass media. The solemn, patriotic mood of state celebrations was mixed with folk revelry, often ending in drunkenness. New monuments glorifying the efforts of the Soviet people in the victory over Nazism were erected in towns and villages. Heroes of the people were both the grand marshals: Georgy Zhukov or Ivan Koniev, as well as ordinary soldiers giving their lives for their socialist homeland. This was also the image of the war portrayed in the numerous feature films made at the time. The war was the main historical topic appearing in the press. At this time, it gradually overshadowed even the memory of the events of the October Revolution and the Civil War. By contrast, the period of the great collectivization of the 1930s was completely ignored, and the figure of Stalin himself almost completely disappeared from the

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In Ukraine, the correctness of the choice of that part of the population which had sided with the Red Army was further emphasized. National circles that used to collaborate with the Germans were the object of criticism. No attempt was made to explain or justify the choices made - reality was described solely in black and white. The aim was to arouse a sense of shame and embarrassment in Ukrainian society and, more specifically, in those circles sympathetic to national ideas, which would effectively eliminate such political choices in the future. The world was divided in a simple way: into nationalists (pro-German circles) and patriots (members of the Soviet community). The term 'nationalist' became the greatest insult in Soviet times. It has also been carried over into modern times. There are no nationalists in

today's Russia, there are patriots. Nationalists might be found in Ukraine, Belarus, not to mention the Baltic states. All those who share Russia's historical vision are patriots, the rest deserve to be called nationalists, who in turn are only a small step away from Nazis.

The first incomplete information about changes in the depiction of history in the Soviet Union began with the consolidation of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika. Gradually, the changes accelerated. Gorbachev, wanting only to reform communism, unknowingly activated previously dormant layers of discontent. In the new reality, the proclaimed slogan of a return to the 'purity of historical Leninist principles' was becoming less and less comprehensible. For it soon became apparent that this was just another newspeak party slogan. Nothing new came out of the picture of the past, because the authorities could not allow uncontrolled historical research. Corrections could be made, but the ideological assumptions of the past, one of the key pillars of which was the myth of the Great Patriotic War, could not be undermined. One could talk about the non-aggression pact signed with Germany in August 1939, but no one admitted to the secret stipulations establishing the division of Central Europe. The responsibility for signing the agreements with Hitler was, according to the already accepted rhetoric, placed by the Soviet authorities on Great Britain and France, which were allegedly torpedoing the agreement with the Soviet Union. Any admission of collaboration with Hitler could have undermined the 'sanctity' of the 1945 victory, which the Soviet authorities were unwilling and unable to accept. The crimes of the NKVD or the reprehensible behavior of Soviet soldiers in the occupied territories could not be exposed either.

The image of the 'Great Patriotic War' created between 1944 and 1991 became a permanent feature of Soviet public consciousness. The citizens of the Soviet Union, especially Russia, Belarus, but also to a large extent Ukraine, were not prepared after 1991, as a collective, to accept an image of history other than the Soviet one. It was difficult for generations completely brought up in the Soviet world to discard what they had been taught to genuinely believe in and start accepting a new historical picture. This was all the more difficult to do the less support there was for the political and economic changes taking place after 1991. The time of the so-called Great Patriotic War and the victory over Nazism were such a great triumph for the Soviet people that it could not and still cannot be erased from their minds. Anyone who tried to undermine the previous narrative was subjected to critique. In time, Russia even adopted appropriate legal measures stipulating penalties for those who would deny the Russian state's adopted image of the war.

Moscow quickly understood the importance of the propaganda message of the 'Great Patriotic War' as a natural myth to build unity in post-Soviet society after the collapse of communism. It had already been exploited during the Yeltsin era, but the memory of the Soviet soldier in all his glory was fully restored by Vladimir Putin. It is not without reason that the Russian state has made the memory of victory one of the most important pillars on which the Russian society stands. Its importance has been confirmed by the results of many successive polls. In this society devoid of other major communist holidays (November 7th, May 1st), the memory of the war has been made into something akin to a civic religion, accepted by the majority of Russians. The memory of victory was a cornerstone of Russian identity.

The subsequent military parades held every year on May 9th under Putin had an official and extremely solemn character. The authorities succeeded in taking over and incorporating into the canon of official celebrations the social initiative 'Immortal Regiment', commemorating

the ancestors who had fought in the Second World War. The same was done with the 'Ribbon of St. George', which refers to one of the military decorations from the Russian Empire (the Order of St. George established by Catherine II in 1769) - it was restored in 1943 in the Soviet Union to the Order of Glory, and then in 1945 appeared with the order 'For Victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945'. In Russia, it is now the most important and widely recognized memorial to the victory over Nazi Germany.

The use of the memory of the so-called Great Patriotic War to explain the reasons for the new war we are now facing in Ukraine may surprise a Western observer, but it is not surprising to the majority of Russian citizens. They are subjected to a one-sided propaganda narrative, but also choose to absorb information selectively of their own free will. Just as in Soviet times (or even after the collapse of the communist system) they did not want to hear about communist crimes, they now reject information about crimes committed by the Russian army. Russia was unable to answer for the millions of victims of communism - so why should it be any different for Ukraine?

The message about the victims is getting through, but, as in Soviet times, its scale is being suppressed. In the collective Russian consciousness, the end justifies the means - victims were inevitable when the communist system was introduced, and now it holds true as well in regard to cleansing Ukraine of 'Nazis'. The 'nobility' of the goal justifies the mistakes made. In the view of at least some people in modern Russia, the success of rebuilding the empire is worth all the sacrifices.

The Soviet and now Russian system is based on two fundamental pillars - propaganda (ideology) and terror. Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes have always required their citizens to unconditionally obey their slogans and principles, thereby forcing them to accept the actions of the state. The blurring of the boundary between what is real and what is utopian made it easier for those in power to create an image that allowed citizens to accept anything and everything, even the most criminal actions of the authorities. A world constructed in this way is only acceptable if one believes in the reality created, while rejecting everything that conflicts with the propaganda-built image of the world. People wanting to function relatively 'normally' in the created reality have to accept the rules of life imposed by the state, and as time passes, the difference between the fictional and the real becomes indistinguishable.

Modern Russia is built on the foundation of the Soviet Union. The generation in charge grew up in that reality and, according to its own vision, paints an image for subsequent generations. The more time passes since the collapse of communism, the more the memory of the Soviet Union becomes romanticized. Putin's words about the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century were not those of a madman, he simply expressed a view shared by the majority of his citizens. The myth of the 'Great Patriotic War' remains an important part of this nostalgic picture.

In the new Russian reality, the tsarist concept of *Old Rus*' is mixed with a post-communist message. In this created narrative, Russia is directly obliged to save its 'lost' Ukrainian brothers from a new type of Western threat, 'neo-Nazism'. Encircled, defending itself against an aggressive West, it has the right and even the duty to defend itself, to protect itself from 'Nazism'. In reality, however, the war in Ukraine does not prevent any potential external aggression. It is an attempt to salvage the Russian reality, a mixture of 19th- and 20th-century ideas, to save them from modern changes. Putin does not want to repeat Gorbachev's

mistakes. He cannot allow to the rapidly progressing changes. The war in Ukraine is saving modern Russia, the preserved world largely based on nostalgia for the great Russian-Soviet empire.