

# Victory Day celebration in Russia reveals deepening political and social tensions

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While Russia's President Vladimir Putin had intended the 60th anniversary of the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany as an occasion to boost Russia's standing in world affairs, the day's events largely served to reveal the depth of the political and social tensions wracking the country.

In the week leading up to the Victory Day celebrations, the capital was transformed into an armed camp, with the center of Moscow placed under virtual lockdown. Foot and automobile traffic was banned except by special pass, major subway stations were closed, and roads leading to the city were cleared of private vehicles.

Those working in downtown office buildings were told to stay off balconies lest they become targets for the hundreds of snipers placed on nearby rooftops. According to one report, government officials promised to expel the homeless and anyone found without a Moscow residence permit from the city.

This extraordinary security was publicly justified by the attendance of 50 foreign heads of state and the threat posed by Chechen terrorists. Last year's Victory Day celebrations in Grozny were bombed, killing 32 people, including the pro-Moscow president of the Caucasian republic, Akhmad Kadyrov.

Moscow's residents were encouraged not to venture out of their homes, and if possible, to leave the city. Attendance at the festivities in Red Square—which included a military parade replete with marching bands from various countries, Soviet-era tanks, and an air show—was by special invitation only.

The Moscow public, which usually celebrates the holiday on the city's central streets, was relegated to marking the anniversary in the parks and fairgrounds on the outskirts of the city. This geographic separation served as a telling reflection of the growth of social inequality and the vast gulf separating working people from the new ruling elite.

While the official ceremony included the participation of dozens of veterans, many survivors of the hostilities were denied access to Red Square even to observe the event. "I didn't need an invitation to go to the front," said one 79-year old veteran in disgust after being turned away from the parade area because he lacked the necessary document.

The Putin administration is widely disliked by pensioners and

those who served in World War II because of recent changes in social welfare policy implemented by his government. Earlier this year, thousands of pensioners took to the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities across the country to protest the drastic cuts in welfare payments resulting from a new law that transformed social benefits-in-kind—such as free public transportation—into monetary compensation of a significantly lower value.

The celebration of the USSR's victory in the Great Patriotic War (as World War II is known in Russia) has a different significance for the millions of ordinary people whose families made tremendous sacrifices to defeat the Nazis than it does for the section of Russian capitalists and ex-bureaucrats grouped around Putin.

The Putin Administration carefully choreographed the Victory Day events to pay homage to the Soviet Union and the Russian nation. The May 9 ceremony was replete with hammer and sickle flags, displays of Soviet military machinery, portraits of Lenin, and veterans waving red flowers.

While ordinary people may have viewed these symbols as a commemoration of the efforts made by the Soviet people to defeat Hitler, for the Putin administration they are a vehicle for promoting Russian nationalism. An opponent of the socialist traditions of the 1917 revolution and an outspoken anti-communist, Putin correctly understands the Soviet patriotism of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a form of Russian nationalism.

This was the spirit embodied in Stalin's policy of building "socialism in one country." The Kremlin designed the May 9 celebrations to pay tribute to these traditions, while at the same time tapping into the pride and nostalgia that many ordinary Russians feel for the accomplishments of the Soviet period.

Although not on display at the Victory Day celebrations in Red Square, the lead-up to the anniversary was accompanied by a government-backed attempt to resurrect the image of Stalin. In the weeks prior to May 9, commemorative posters appeared with his picture. The "Victory Train" that arrived in Moscow's Belarussky train station, which retraced the route traveled by victorious Soviet soldiers returning from the front, was outfitted with a giant portrait of the dictator on its engine. A statue of Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill had been set for unveiling in time for the May 9 celebrations in Moscow, but, concerned

over the opposition it might unleash, city officials decided to scrap the plans.

The city of Volgograd, previously known as Stalingrad, had a new statue of the three signatories of the Yalta agreement created to mark this week's anniversary. The local Communist Party has proposed changing the city's name back to Stalingrad. In Mirny, a city in the eastern Siberian republic of Yakutia-Sakha, a new Stalin statue was one of the centerpieces of the day's festivities. Leaders of the city of Oryol, a few hundred miles outside of Moscow, recently called for the restoration of Stalin memorials previously removed from the city and the return of Stalin's name to streets that had been renamed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Putin himself has been careful not to praise Stalin too directly, most recently describing him as a "tyrant" in an interview with a German newspaper. An open move by the Kremlin itself to resurrect Stalin would only provide ammunition for the Bush Administration's attacks on the Putin administration, which it regularly criticizes for eroding Russia's limited democratic institutions.

These efforts to rehabilitate Stalin in conjunction with the 60th anniversary of the defeat of the Nazis are based on a complete falsification of the role the dictator played in World War II. The Soviet Union triumphed over fascism in spite of Stalin's crimes. His extermination campaign against those most closely identified with the October 1917 revolution—including the murder of the Soviet Union's best military generals—his betrayals of the German and Spanish working class in the period leading up the war, and his efforts to reach an accommodation with Nazi Germany, left the USSR completely unprepared for Hitler's assault.

Putin speaks in the interests of that section of the Russia's ruling oligarchy that feels the pro-US orientation of the Kremlin during the 1990s undermined the country's national interests and their own power and privileges. The evocation of Soviet imagery surrounding the Great Patriotic War and the resurrection of Stalin are aimed at cultivating nationalism within the population and convincing people that the social collapse that Russia has experienced over the past 15 years is a result of the loss of the country's great power status, rather than the restoration of capitalism.

Despite the Kremlin's best efforts, the 60th anniversary celebrations revealed the increasingly precarious position of Putin's government, both at home and abroad.

They were partially upstaged by Bush's stop in the Latvian capital, where he delivered a speech repudiating the entire post-war agreement hammered out by Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill at Yalta in 1945 as an appeasement of tyranny.

Coming on the heels of months of criticism by the US administration of the anti-democratic character of Putin's regime, Bush's comments were an open provocation. The Russian president responded by defending the actions of the Soviet army in the Baltic region. "Our people not only

defended their homeland, they liberated 11 countries in Europe," said Putin. The same day, in an interview with the Russian president aired on the CBS weekly news program *60 Minutes*, Putin rebuffed American criticisms of his regime by pointing to the anti-democratic character of the US electoral college system and the way in which Bush was installed in office by the Supreme Court in 2000.

In another affront to the Putin administration, after the May 9 ceremonies and prior to leaving Russia for a visit with the pro-American government of Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia, Bush met with so-called democracy advocates and opponents of the Kremlin regime.

The 60th anniversary was also marred by a series of diplomatic failures for the Russian government, pointing to the political fracturing of Moscow's post-Soviet sphere of influence. The Presidents of Estonia and Lithuania boycotted the festivities in order to demonstrate their orientation to the West and to promote anti-Russian nationalism at home.

Georgian President Saakashvili likewise declined the Kremlin's invitation in protest over Moscow's failure to set a deadline for the agreed-upon closure of Russian military bases on Georgian territory. The leader of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, also failed to show up, as a result of his country's ongoing dispute with Armenia over control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

The troubled state of political relations in Russia's traditional sphere of influence found clearest expression in the summit held May 8 between the leaders of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the political bloc created out of the former Soviet countries in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR. The fate of the organization has been thrown into question by the growth of American influence over the countries on Russia's western border and in Central Asia.

On Sunday, Viktor Yushchenko, the pro-US president of Ukraine, who recently rose to power as the result of the US-backed "Orange Revolution," described the CIS as being of "little use" without significant reforms reflecting the divergent political trajectories of the organization's member countries. The Ukraine, as well as CIS member states Georgia and Moldova, are seeking entry into NATO and the European Union. While Moscow has indicated that it is willing to take the lead in crafting changes to the CIS in an attempt to boost the economic integration of the region, the bloc is increasingly regarded as a largely decorative institution.



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