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THE ROOTS OF THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR MYTH

ESSAYS

Abstract

This essay outlines the sources of the myth of the Great Patriotic War that was used by the Soviet propaganda to legitimize the power of the authorities. It aims to discuss briefly the components of the myth, namely, emotions, the sacred element or *sacrum*, and the Great Russian nationalism. The German-Soviet 1941–1945 war has been described as a Manichaean confrontation between good and evil, *sacrum* and *profanum*, civilisation and barbarism. The significance of the myth is manifested to this day. On the one hand, Russian authorities still use it to validate the socio-political order. On the other, the memory of the victorious war is an important element of historical policy pursued by the countries that are part of the 'Russkiy Mir'.

Keywords: the Great Patriotic War, political myth, Soviet Union, propaganda, politics of history, Russkiy Mir

Introduction

In the second year of the war, the state machine of the Third Reich was in full swing to implement the goal that Hitler had outlined in *Mein Kampf*:

‘We put an end to the perpetual Germanic march towards the South and West of Europe and turn our eyes towards the East. We finally put a stop to the colonial and trade policy of pre-War times and pass over to the territorial policy of the future.’ (Hitler 2020, 777).

Huge military forces were gathered on the border with the Soviet Union. Approximately 4 million soldiers equipped with over 3600 tanks and nearly 3,000 planes were assembled in the Zamość-Rzeszów region, in Eastern Prussia and in eastern Romania. German and Allied military forces confronted about 2,5 million Red Army soldiers equipped with 14,000 tanks and located in the western part of the country. Wehrmacht’s victorious march was stopped at the outskirts of Leningrad, Moscow and Stalingrad. Soon after that, the Soviet military forces began their counterattack.

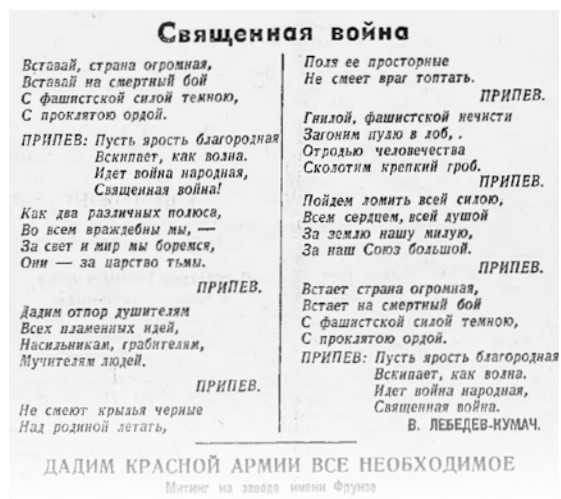
However, the German-Soviet war is not only a history of combat between two military powers. It is also a story of a battle fought in the sphere of social consciousness. While specialized institutions in the Third Reich were spreading propaganda justifying the military aggression against the USSR, thousands of Soviet propagandists were perpetuating the myth of the Great Patriotic War – a story whose roots grew out of emotions, *sacrum*, and the Great Russian nationalism.

Emotions as the Building Blocks of the Myth

As a response to fundamental human needs, such as the need for the sense of meaning and aim of life, knowledge and the ability to create generic models of the world, a political myth is a non-discursive, emotional, and figurative way in which an individual perceives socio-political reality.

The ‘hunger for myth’ often arises in crises caused by disasters, turbulent changes or armed conflicts that may lead to traumatic experiences endured by the community and individual people (Cassirer 2006, 310; Tismaneanu 2000, 18). The world represented

in myths is black and white, filled with images relating to emotions (the word ‘myth’ derives from the Proto-Indo-European root *meudh*, *mudh*, which means ‘to remember’, or – in reference to feelings – ‘to miss’; Szyjewski 2004: 120; cf. also the significance of emotions in creating and cultivating political myths as discussed in S. Filipowicz, T. Biernat, A. Siewierska-Chmaj; Filipowicz 1988, *passim*, Biernat 1989, 95–96, etc.; Siewierska-Chmaj 2016, 74–80). Undoubtedly, such a situation occurred during the 1941–1945 German-Soviet war. After all, the victory of the USSR over Germany was won at the cost of casualties among the civilians and the military. Fatal casualties in the USSR ranged between 40,1 and 40,9 million, out of which 13,2 to 14 million were the civilians (Sokołow 2021, 451, 453). From the first days of the war, Wehrmacht was followed by Einsatzgruppen troops responsible for mass murders, such as the one in Kyiv’s Babi Jar, where nearly 34,000 Jews, mainly old men, women and children, were killed at the end of September 1941 (Sokołow 2021, 398). The Slavs became the target of an extermination policy based on racial theories, which affected not only millions of civilians but also Soviet prisoners of war, merely every second one of whom survived the war. According to Christian Streit (after Wojtkowiak 2015, 14), up to 3.3 million people were killed in executions, died as prisoners of war or in concentration camps (out of 5.7 million of the Red Army soldiers held in German captivity). During the harsh winter of 1941–1942, millions of Russians died of starvation. In some places, for example, in Leningrad, there were acts of cannibalism. The decisions of the Soviet leadership also contributed to the huge number of victims, for instance, the ruthless orders issued by Stalin, such as order No. 227, ‘Not a step back!’, and order No. 270, which forbade soldiers to surrender and leave weapons to the enemy, and deprived their families of state welfare and assistance. In January and February 1942 alone, irrevocable losses of the Red Army (killed or lost without trace) reached 1,7 million soldiers (Sokołow 2021, 156). Taking into account the dead prisoners of war, the estimated total number of victims in the Soviet armed forces during the war



„Svyashchennaya voyna“ – lyrics of the song written by V. Lebedev-Kumach, published in “Krasnaya Zvezda”, June 24, 1941, no. 146 (4901)

amounted to 26.9 million people (Sokolov 2021, 438), and nearly 41 million dead or killed, if civilians are included (Sokołow 2021, 441). The atrocities of the war have been described in the literature, for example in books written by the Nobel Prize winner – Swietlana Alexiyevich. A heroine in one of her books remembers the war that appears to be a domain of violent carnal confrontation between the men – so drastic that she does not feel strong enough to describe it (Alexiyevich 2011). It is stories like these that became the foundation of the Great Patriotic War myth created later (naturally, in the case of myth-making processes it is often difficult to pinpoint a specific moment when such images were created. It is no different in the case of the Great Patriotic War; see Materski 2017). The myth justified, *post factum*, the enormous sacrifice of the entire society and millions of victims, and legitimized the communist government.

The Sacralisation of the Myth

During the war, a lot of proclamations were issued, and thousands of posters were printed and posted, for example, “Motherland is calling!”, “What have *you* done for the front?”. However, myths may also be carried by music and not only by words and images. One of the songs that encouraged Russians to fight against the Wehrmacht troops was ‘Svyashchennaya voyna’ (The Sacred War). Lyrics to that song were written by Vasily Lebedev-Kumach, who also composed the Bolshevik Party Hymn, and music – by Aleksandr Alexandrov – the composer of the later Soviet Union’s anthem (by 1943, the International was the USSR national anthem). ‘Let the noble wrath arouse like a billow! The people’s war is coming, the holy war!’ – thus were the listeners encouraged by the song (*Svyashchennaya voyna*). The Soviet propaganda used various tools to make everyone believe that the German-Russian conflict was not an ordinary war but a sacred war in which the forces of good were wrestling with the forces of evil, light contended with darkness, spirit with matter, and civilization with barbarism. The brutality of Germans was highlighted and their image was demonised and dehumanised. They were constantly described as the dangerous force that threatened the entire civilization. In a popular film made by the Soviet propaganda, Wehrmacht was represented as a fierce animal trampling down one country after another, spreading fear and destruction. At the end of the road was the homeland of the world’s proletariat. The final scene of the film shows rays of light

passing through a cloud after Soviet planes had flown into it (Ivanov-Vano 1941). The intention was to show that the triumph of the USSR over Hitler's plague was (and still is) supposed to cover the dark side of the Soviet Union history (Domańska 2019).

The Great Patriotic War was also sanctified by the Russian Orthodox Church. After a period of cruel persecutions in the first years of communism, the Church unexpectedly became an ally of the Soviet government. After the German attack on the USSR, there was a radical change in policy: the League of the Militant Atheists was dissolved, anti-Church propaganda was discontinued, religions were granted greater freedom of cult, and the Patriarch Sergius of Moscow issued a pastoral letter in which he called the entire nation to defend their homeland and faith. In September 1943, Stalin met the bishops of the Orthodox Church – Sergius, Alexy and Nikolas – at the Kremlin and proposed that the repressions may be alleviated in exchange for political support. Thousands of Orthodox Churches were opened soon after that. In early 1945, Alexy, the new Patriarch, praised Stalin for leading the nation to the victory in the Great War. Today, Russian authorities regard the Orthodox Church as an element of national identity and state continuity, while the Holy Ruthenia is considered the cradle of the Russian state.

Communist Form Versus National Contents

The 1941–1945 war was preceded by the 1812 campaign, which had an impact on the emergence of modern Russian nationalism. Not only was the victory over Napoleon's Grand Army deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of Russians, but it also paved the way for an effective dissemination of the myth of the Great Patriotic War. Both stories are built on similar themes: martyrology, the defeat of a powerful enemy, and the sense of mission (Czubaty 1997). Political myths often arbitrarily use historical facts to carry through the interests of people governing the state: truth is mixed with fiction, and the objective assessment of the situation with wishful thinking. The myth of the Great Patriotic War does not rely so much on the idea of communist internationalism as on the nationalist ideas. The latter were used as a means to legitimize the power of the authorities and galvanize the society when needs be (Zaremba 2001; Tyszka 2004). Even the titles of books published after the war invoked connotations with nationalist contents and ideas, for example, Joseph Stalin's *On the Great Patriotic*

War of the Soviet Union (Stalin 1951). The Soviet propaganda had applied this technique before: in 1918–1920, people were called to fight the Poles accused of aspiring to create the ‘lordly Poland’ and conquer Moscow. People who disseminated this idea, abandoned the concept of a social class in favour of nationalism (Iwanow 2017, 28). Already in the 40-ties of the 20th century, Sergius Yakobson and Harold Lasswell proved that the Soviet Union had been gradually departing from cosmopolitan slogans and adopting national themes, instead (Łuczewski 2017, 258). In the first year of the war against the Third Reich, in a radio broadcast, Stalin used expressions such as ‘brothers and sisters’, ‘the honour and duty to one’s Homeland’, ‘the great War’, ‘the liberating War’, ‘Mother-homeland’, ‘duty to one’s country’ (Tyszka 2004, 114; Stalin did not use the term ‘Great Patriotic War’ in this speech). The ideas disseminated by the Soviet propaganda highlighted the respect for historical heritage of the Russian state. People were reminded of momentous events, such as the one in the Middle Ages when the Ruthenian army shook off the burden of the Golden Hoard after more than 100 years. The names of Alexander Nevsky, the leader of the Novgorod troops against the Livonian Order, Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky, who led the uprising against Poles in the early 17th century, and the tsarist general Mikhail Kutuzov, who contributed to the defeat of Napoleon’s Russian campaign, were often remembered (see Flig 2014, 86–145 for further details on the idea of how history was used to create national myths in Soviet literature and cinema). All these measures were taken to make people believe that they were part of the chain of recurring historical events. The Soviet man was expected to rise to the challenge and defend his homeland in a pitched battle. The Soviet propaganda assured people that the mortal combat will once again be victorious. Just like in the song quoted above: ‘We will defy those who squash impassioned ideas, the rapists, bandits, and bullies’ (*Svyashchennaya voyna*).

The Day of Victory

The importance of the myth of the Great Patriotic War may best be demonstrated by the fact that it has been used by the authorities to legitimize the socio-political order in Russia, and the memory of the victorious war is an important element of the historical policy adopted by the states that are part of ‘Russkiy Mir’ (see Śleszyński 2016, 171–187; the term ‘Russkiy mir’ denotes ethnic and not civic community).

The roots of the myth should be sought for in the war crisis and the resulting fear, Great Russian nationalism, and the sacred element or *sacrum*. From the beginning, the Soviet propaganda presented the 1941–1945 war as a Manichaean conflict between the civilisation and the German barbarism, good and evil, light and darkness, the triumph of spirit over the Nazi antichrist. The story that recounts the conflict between the two former allies fails to acknowledge the defeat of the Red Army and the unnecessary losses. Russian history textbooks emphasize the sacrifice of the Russian nation and maintain that it was the Soviet people and not the Jews who suffered most due to Hitler's murderous policy (Moskwa 2020, 169).

The victory of the Red Army over the German occupant is remembered during the anniversary of World War II when a grand military parade takes place by the Kremlin walls (the first military parade celebrating the victory over the Third Reich took place in 1945. The next parade, organized after 1947, took place only in 1965). Today, this is one of the most important national holidays. During the first parade, the Marshall Gieorgij Žukov was riding on a white horse, and the white standards of the Third Reich were ostentatiously flung to the feet of the Red Army commanders (*Parad Pobedy*). During the communist period in Eastern Europe, the celebrations in front of Kremlin gathered party secretaries from 'brotherly nations'. After the fall of the USSR, among the invited guests were not only the leaders of the countries which were formerly part of the Soviet Union, but also the leaders of Western countries including Germany, Austria, Hungary and Romania. These celebrations help to reassure the Russians that they are members of a great and strong nation of international importance. They take pride in their country and its achievements. The myth of the Great Patriotic War relies on history but, at the same time, it is an instrument of propaganda that spreads misinformation and aims to legitimize the authorities. The political propaganda contains elements of truth, but it is deliberately used to manipulate citizens in the interest of people governing the state. The myth of the Great Patriotic War is also the foundation myth of the Russian society, which has been used by its leaders to build and develop the historical policy of the country. During the parade in 2021, president Vladimir Putin emphasised the fact that the Soviet Union 'saved the home country and set the European countries free from the brown plague'. He added that Russia 'has been consistently defending international law' (Wróbel 2021). The old myth has been enriched with new strands. And so the story evolves.

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