

A Ca(u)se For Celebration:

De-Escalating the Ukrainian Crisis

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Introduction

Public opinion polls in Russia have shown consistent support for the annexation of Crimea and the Kremlin's anti-Ukrainian stance. In the American political establishment, it is often either mistakenly attributed to Russians' supposed innate hostility or brushed off as an understandable move given that the peninsula "used to be Russian anyway". The reality is, however, much more nuanced and is related to the way the conflict has been framed by the Russian political establishment and governmentally controlled media. Namely, by securitizing the conflict in Ukraine using the highly emotive collective memory of the Great Patriotic War (World War II), the Russian government has managed to secure the continuing support of the Russian population.

In Russia, Ukraine's Euromaidan has been presented as fascist coup and existential threat to the Russian-speaking minority in the country. By using Soviet tropes from the Great Patriotic War lexicon, evoking vivid images of civilian suffering and fascist atrocities, the Russian government has been able to tap into the national trauma, as well as to appeal to the "great power" identity associated with the geopolitical triumph of its World War II victory. The well-established, multi-layered and heavily mythologized meanings associated with the Russian memory of fascism served to increase the likelihood that Russian audiences would accept and support securitizing moves that employ this frame.

This memo outlines the distinctive features of the Russian collective memory of the Great Patriotic War and explains the political communication mechanisms at work that created the overwhelming support for the Kremlin's policies in Ukraine. What is also remarkable is the role that the US played in the framing of the Ukraine crisis, whereby securitizing actors from Russian government structures sought to underline America's alleged involvement in the "fascist coup". Thus, if de-escalation of the conflict in Ukraine is to be successful, a deeper understanding of the Russian collective memory of the Great Patriotic War and its connection to the Ukraine crisis is necessary.

Memory of the War

The Russian memory of the war has a number of distinctive features. First, the struggle with fascism is closely interlinked with Russia's national identity as a "great power" and as the "liberator of Europe". As Tatiana Zhurzhenko has noted, by condemning "neo-fascism" in the Baltic states and Ukraine, Moscow not only positions itself as the true defender of European values, but also relives its moment of "geopolitical triumph". This memory is cherished especially dearly in the context of the international order that was formed with the end of the Cold War and the emotions linked to the perceived fall in status that came with the demise of the Soviet Union.

Second, the vitality and prominence of the Russian collective memory of the Great Patriotic War in part represent the fruits of decades of work by ideologists, from the Soviet period onwards, including recent renewed and intensified efforts aimed at capitalizing on the growing popularity of Victory Day. The Great Patriotic War represents one of the few events in Russian history capable of uniting the overwhelming majority of Russians, and precisely for this reason, the memory of the

war was actively used for identity-making purposes in the late 1990s and 2000s. The revival of the Victory parade on Red Square in 1995, numerous patriotic commemorative initiatives by pro-government organizations, the use of the St George's ribbon as a visual commemorative symbol, and the large volume of cinematic works on the war all testify to the activation of the war memory, often with the direct involvement of securitizing actors from Russian government structures.

Third, the Russian memory of the war differs from its European and North American counterparts in its lack of emphasis on the memory of the Holocaust. For Russians, the memory of fascism is associated first and foremost with the immense suffering of the Soviet population, especially the civilian population in the occupied territories. As Maksym Yakovlyev writes, the primary chain of associations evoked by the Red Army's victory over fascism focuses on atrocities perpetrated against Soviet women and children. This is the standard chain of associations evoked by the concept of "fascism" for the average Russian citizen, who, even if he or she paid little attention in school history classes, will at least have watched a few movies about the war, and whose family will also have been touched directly by the war experience in one way or another. In the Soviet drama and demonology of the war, the perpetrators of atrocities against Soviet civilians function as the embodiment of absolute evil, and this aspect of the Russian war memory has proved especially useful for framing the current events in Ukraine.

In addition, the Soviet and Russian historiography on the war employs a distinctive lexicon which is in some respects especially supple and broad, thus lending itself to wider application beyond this concrete historical instance. Thus, for example, the term "Nazi" is used only infrequently in Soviet/Russian discussions on the Great Patriotic War, and then generally only with reference to contemporary neo-Nazi movements. Consequently "fascism" is the label more commonly used in Russia for German National Socialism. In general, as Stanley Payne has noted, the term "fascism" is notoriously hard to define and is sufficiently broad and vague as to encompass a range of different movements and ideologies. This flexibility, combined with the strong stigma associated with the term, opens up wide possibilities for its abuse for propaganda purposes, as in the current case, where it is freely re-applied to Ukrainian nationalists ("banderites" – supporters of Stepan Bandera) and their "US sponsors".

One particularly prominent theme here is that of US and EU involvement in the events in Ukraine, which is often articulated with the fascist motif. Thus, for example, numerous collages depicting former President Obama with a Hitler moustache have appeared since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis. Here, the US is constructed as the underlying source of the "fascist" existential threat. This notion of the US as a crypto-fascist state can be traced back to the Cold War era, when it was a prominent trope in Soviet propaganda. In the post-war period, caricatures by the Kukryniksy group and other artists featuring propaganda images of "West German fascists" in cahoots with the American military occupy an important place in the "picture memory" (visual collective memory) of Russians. Meanwhile the US role as part of the anti-German coalition and one of the victors of the war is for the most part completely ignored.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the Russian TV coverage of the protests in Ukraine was the emphasis placed on the role of radical right-wing Euromaidan activists. The labelling of this group as "fascists" can be viewed as a bid to activate and instrumentalize the collective memory of the Great Patriotic War. This was especially noticeable on Russian state TV that featured references to "fascism" in most of their Ukraine stories. State TV is not an aberration: Integrum World Wide database that tracks Russian-speaking mass media shows a dramatic increase in references to "fascism", essentially from the beginning of the Euromaidan. This is markedly different from previous years, where the frequency of "fascism" references was generally linked primarily to the war's key anniversary dates (9 May and 22 June). "Fascism" frequency reached its peak around March 2014, that is, at the time of the Russian annexation of Crimea; and in April-May 2014, during

the armed conflict between pro-Russian fighters and the central Ukrainian authorities. In general, the variations in the frequency of references to “fascism” map closely against the dynamic of the conflict.

The terminology used in narrating the conflict in Ukraine is heavily loaded and indicates immediately where one’s sympathies lie. The Russian mass media signal a positive attitude towards the pro-Russian militarized groups in East Ukraine by using the term employed by the fighters themselves, namely “militia” (opolchentsy). This term calls up a chain of associations linked not only to the Great Patriotic War and the popular resistance to fascism, but also back further, to the militia led by Minin and Pozharskii during the seventeenth-century Time of Troubles. When it comes to describing the Ukrainian side, the brutality and inhumanity of the forces fighting the pro-Russian militia is constantly underlined. The obvious point of this fictitious report was to show the “barbarity” of the pro-Ukrainian side. The term *karatel’* was also frequently used on Russian TV - another borrowing from the Great Patriotic War lexicon that is conventionally used for describing the perpetrators of Nazi (and especially SS) atrocities against civilians on occupied territory. The use of the term *karateli* with reference to pro-Ukrainian forces thus creates yet another clear discursive parallel with fascism, further reinforcing the notion that these forces represent an existential threat.

In the context of the crisis in Ukraine, new and old Russian media have acted as transmitters for securitizing discourses that construct the Maidan protest movement and the Ukrainian military operation in the Donbass using categories of existential threat which in post-Soviet space are closely linked to the powerful and highly emotionally charged collective memory of the Great Patriotic War. The Euromaidan has been branded fascist, and the Ukrainian “Anti-Terrorist Operation” has been depicted as a series of brutal and chaotic acts of violence committed by “banderites” and “ukro-fascists” against the civilian (Russophone) population. This instrumentalization of Russian war memory appears to have been remarkably successful in stigmatizing and demonizing the Ukrainian side in the conflict.

Chto Delat’?¹

It is clear that if de-escalation in the East of Ukraine is to be achieved, the Normandy format of negotiation as a UN Security Council approved peace process has to be pursued. There are several towering roadblocks on the way to de-escalation, including the responsibility for the shooting down of MH17 passenger airliner, the future status of Crimea, and alleged Russian military support to the separatists in the Eastern Ukraine. However, at least one hurdle on the road to peace could be removed and it is directly related to the public perception of the Ukraine crisis in Russia.

Especially after the election of President Zelenskyy, Russian public opinion polls already see a positive change in the attitude towards Ukraine as a country. Sociologists explain that also with growing interest in economic issues as opposed to foreign policy agenda. But at the same time the election of Zelenskyy shows that a country overtaken by a Russophobic fascist junta could have hardly elected a Russophone Jewish president with cultural ties to Russia, dealing a severe blow to the negative mass media image of Ukraine created by the Russian governmental media.

As I indicated above, it’s not just about the perception of Ukraine. YouGov polls indicate that people in the US and several European countries hardly credit USSR with the fight against Nazism, with Germany attributing the highest proportion of war effort to the Soviet Union – a mere 27%. Russian population and its leadership are keenly aware of these trends that are in part inferred from Russian Victory Celebration international attendance. Coupled with almost united international

¹ What is to be done?

support for the Euromaidan (that was largely presented in the Russian media as dominated by far-right groups) and refusal to recognize “the reunification with Crimea”, there is a wide perception among the Russian population that European and American leaders are no longer on the “right side of history” if it is even remembered that once they were there. That, in turn, not only perpetuates or increases the anti-Ukrainian prejudice, but also feeds into anti-Western and, specifically, anti-American narratives.

What is possible to do, however, is to focus on emphasizing the sacrifice that the Soviet people made in the fight against fascism. Justly underlining Russian contribution to the war will go a long way winning “hearts and minds” in the Russian population and its elite. One of the ways to do that would be to commit to the common celebration in 2020 in Moscow that would show that international leaders know of and value Russian contribution to the war. Moreover, common celebration will give less fuel to the governmental mass media in their anti-Western rhetoric. It can also give an opportunity to de-link the issues: international community may not be on board with “Crimea re-unification” but it can still honor the memory of those who liberated Auschwitz.