

The Militarisation of Russian Society

About: Galia Ackerman, *Le Régiment Immortel. La Guerre sacrée de Poutine*, Premier Parallèle

By Clémentine Fauconnier

Russia has seen a huge increase in commemorations of the Soviet victory. Some of these parades are organized by civilians, while others are more official. But all of them reveal a rise in a nationalism that Putin would like to epitomise.

The Immortal Regiments first appeared during the 2010s in Russia. They represent new spectacular ways of commemorating the Soviet victory over the Nazis, with the population parading through the streets brandishing portraits of their ancestors who participated in the war. While they started as spontaneous gatherings, these new parades quickly caught the attention of the authorities who began to include them in the official celebration programme. So for the 70th anniversary of the armistice, on 9 May 2015, for the first time the Moscow procession was given permission to cross the Red Square, and Vladimir Putin himself marched among the crowds. Since then, every year, the event gathers millions of people—a million in Moscow, and ten million throughout Russia in 2018—and also mobilises Russian communities across the world, like in France, where parades were organized in about ten cities.

The (Geo)political Uses of a Sanctified Victory

Under the Soviet regime, there were almost no processions to honour the victory of 1945, so how did this commemoration become Russia's largest celebration over the short

space of a few years? How do we explain the success of this original form of glorification that attracts droves of civilians into the streets in a symbolic gathering of the living and the dead? This is the enigma Galia Ackerman seeks to unravel in her book. The author is a trained historian, journalist and translator, the author of numerous works on countries in the post-Soviet space, specifically Russia and Ukraine. She views the Immortal Regiments as the tip of the iceberg, a phenomenon that embodies both the crushing historical legacy that weighs upon the country, as well as the political and geopolitical choices made by its current leaders.

The first section of the book looks back over the centuries and, what the author describes as the common theme of the 'Messianic tradition' that inhabits the Russian people and gives their turbulent history its overall coherence. From the 16th century onwards, the idea of Holy Russia and Moscow's designation as a 'Third Rome', protector of the orthodox faith, accompanied a process of territorial expansion that culminated in the creation of one of the largest empires in history. The Bolshevik Revolution replaced one Messianic idea with another, and from its leaders' perspective, positioned Russia at the forefront of humanity. The Nazi invasion of 1941 provoked a decisive nationalist shift, marked by Stalin's reconciliation with the Orthodox Church, and a selective use of Imperial Russian symbols to mobilise the population. The 'Great Patriotic War' allowed the Soviets to claim the role of liberators in the face of the Absolute Evil incarnated by Nazism, while also permitting them to considerably expand their sphere of geopolitical influence. According to Galia Ackerman, the pride they drew from this during the decades following the Stalinist period, deeply permeated the Soviet population, particularly the Russians, encouraging a relationship of distrust and envy towards the West, in a context marked by penury. The collapse of the USSR was thus a tragedy for a large section of the population, and their sense of humiliation was compounded by the trauma of the economic and social difficulties provoked by the abrupt shift to capitalism.

In the second section, the author shows how this historical legacy, combined with the shock of a chaotic transition to democracy and capitalism, served as the basis for the inception of a 'Sovietism without communism'. The rehabilitation of the Soviet period that began with Putin's ascent to power, accompanied tighter control over political life and stricter regulation of the media. In parallel, the reunification of the Orthodox Church abroad¹ allowed 'compatriots' scattered across the four corners of the globe to gather, and reinforced Moscow's influence beyond its borders. The rewriting of history that encouraged a patriotic and reconciled reading of Russia's past placed the Second World War at the forefront, obscuring the country's darkest and most ambiguous episodes. The victory over the Nazis became a means of reviving the Messianic rhetoric and nurturing the Imperial nationalism at work in Putin's Russia, by making the identity of the victorious people, not merely a past glory, but 'an immanent quality of the Russian people' to paraphrase the author. (p. 140).

¹ The Russian Orthodox Church abroad was founded by Orthodox priests in exile after the Bolshevik revolution, and it remained independent during the whole Soviet period of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Act of Canonical Communion with the Moscow Patriarchate was finally signed in May 2007.

The final part of the book examines the effects of this means of legitimation by viewing the militarisation of Russian society as one of the main transformations in recent times. This process takes shape in a variety of projects, some of them being the creation of a military historical society in 2012, which organises excursions and reconstitutions, a ‘Young Army’ youth movement that, at the end of 2018, included over 250000 young volunteers, or the multiplication of military patriotic attraction parks. According to Galia Ackerman, this militarisation of society, particularly of its youngest members, serves both internal policy purposes—consolidating a unanimous and patriotic narrative around the personality of Vladimir Putin—as well as a geopolitical strategy to extend the zone of influence of a Russia increasingly hostile to the West. In this context, for the whole population, the Immortal Regiments are a means of embodying ‘the intrinsic moral superiority of the vanquishers’ (p. 265) whose adversaries are de facto assimilated with fascists, and since the Maidan revolution of 2014, the latter include the Ukrainians in particular.

Questioning the Foundations of a Communications Operation

The ability the Russian State has developed over recent years to widely and increasingly mobilise the population in its territory, and beyond its borders, around the commemoration of the victory over the Nazis, is a fascinating subject. With her convincing view of the Immortal Regiments as a relevant entry point to envisage numerous aspects of the country’s trajectory, Galia Ackerman offers us an essay that is as coherent in terms of the argument it defends, as it is broad in terms of the aspects it covers. Looking back over Russia’s history, from the 16th century up to the latest interventions in Ukraine and Syria, not forgetting the wide array of nationalist intellectuals, in many ways the attention paid to the context goes beyond the analysis of the subject itself, which retains a part of its mystery. The Immortal Regiments, as such, only resurface beyond halfway through the development when the author raises a certain number of issues that would deserve to be the object of empirical studies in their own right.

The first point that would deserve a more detailed investigation is related to the very history of the Regiments and their transformation between their first appearance and their recuperation by the State. Galia Ackerman indicates that the system of citizens demonstrating in honour of the USSR’s victory over the Nazis, brandishing portraits of veterans, in fact dates from the Soviet period. At the time, these were spontaneous demonstrations that received no particular support from the authorities, and they occurred occasionally and in an isolated manner. It was only later, from 2011 onwards, that journalists in the city of Tomsk, in Siberia, took hold of the idea and named the procession: the Immortal Regiment. At this stage, the author writes, these demonstrations were mainly about obtaining justice for the memory of millions of war victims and giving the citizens and—symbolically—their ancestors,

who were victims of and witnesses to the events, the opportunity to participate in the celebrations. A deeper study of the instigators of the operation, the first participants and the methods by which it spread² so rapidly—before 2015—in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Israel in particular, would allow us to discover more about the factors behind the first successes. It would also help us better grasp the shift represented by the Central State's appropriation of the Immortal Regiments. To what extent did State intervention provoke an ideological reconfiguration or a change in the sociological composition of the participants—apart from a numerical massification; how did the original organizers and participants react?

The second series of questions concerns the means of mobilisation once the operation came under the control of the Russian State and attained the scale mentioned above, to the detriment of its original spontaneity. As we know how symbolically important the procession has become for the Russian authorities, we can ask to what extent the same mechanisms as those observed during elections are at work. These could be selective incitements or specific pressure applied to certain organisations or categories of the population that are particularly dependent on the State, in order to force them to participate. We can also envisage the hypothesis that the central authorities coerce the organisers in the field to fulfil numerical objectives, or place them in competition with other villages, cities or region. Finally, in terms of the geopolitical aspect, we can also question the drivers used to mobilise the 'compatriots' abroad, raising the question of relays and the means employed: Russian diplomats, the Orthodox Church, etc.

An analysis of the means deployed to mobilise the participants is directly related to a third possible axis of investigation, concerning the population's reception of the Immortal Regiments. Galia Ackerman emphasises the traumatic nature of the memory of the War, the millions of victims and the fact that no Soviet family was spared. This then raises the question of the connection between this memory, the existence or not of transmission between generations, and what she calls a 'fetishisation of the victory' (p. 163) promoted in recent years by the Russian State. While undeniably, the population participates massively in these events, the share of conformism, obligation and patriotic pride that accompanies Russia's current return to the international stage, or even the extent of the desire to pay homage to the suffering of former generations, are as yet unknown. Thus, in 2019, the prohibition in certain regions to brandish portraits of Stalin or red flags during the processions provoked virulent reactions from the Communist Party. In response, its leader Guennadi Ziouganov launched the operation 'the colour of victory is red' on the Internet, showing that, behind the unanimous and homogenous façade they present at first glance the Immortal Regiments can be the object of differentiated appropriations as well as political controversies.

In conclusion, an issue Galia Ackerman mentions several times is the key role communications and spin-doctors play in Russian political life, both in the governance of

² Mischa Gabowitsch, "Are Copycats Subversive? Strategy-31, the Russian Runs, the Immortal Regiment, and the Transformative Potential of Non-Hierarchical Movements", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 65, n°5, 2018, pp. 297-314.

internal affairs, and in strategies of international influence. The investment in occasional mediatised operations—the Immortal Regiments is one of the most successful demonstrations of this—to the detriment of a continual mobilisation of the population via mass organisations and a coherent ideology, is a major break between Soviet governmentality and the Russia of today. By focusing mainly on historical legacies, in the background Galia Ackerman’s essay also paves the way for a discussion that would open up the Russian case and allow us to view the phenomena mentioned in the light of trends we see elsewhere. These include the forms adopted by nationalism in the context of globalisation and all the practices of rewriting history it engenders,³ the militarisation of societies, including Western societies, or the impact of communications on the governance of consciences.

Galia Ackerman, *Le Régiment Immortel. La Guerre sacrée de Poutine*, Premier Parallèle, 2019, 285 pp., 20 €.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 16 September 2019.

Translated from the French by Renuka George with the support of the Institut français.

Published in booksandideas.net, 25 November 2019.

³ Marlène Laruelle, *Russian nationalism: imaginaries, doctrines, and political battlefields*, London; New York: Routledge, 2019.