Introduction
War and the Tensions of Patriotism

There was below the surface something of a conflict at that time between “Holy Russia” and the “Soviet Union.” Sometimes compromises were reached between the two.

– Alexander Werth, Russia at War

Our masters the Bolsheviks set up the Third International, and our masters the Bolsheviks developed the theory of so-called Socialism in One Country. That theory’s a contradiction in terms – like fried ice.

– Vasily Grossman, Life and Fate

In late November 1941, as the Battle for Moscow raged, Soviet newspapers heralded a remarkable act of bravery at a place west of the capital called Dubosekovo. According to reports, twenty-eight members of the 316th Rifle Division (later redesignated the 8th Guards “Panfilov” Division) stood their ground against a column of fifty-four German tanks, destroying as many as eighteen in the process. Although all twenty-eight men perished in the fighting, their gallantry had forced the withdrawal of the much larger and better equipped German force. This story, repeated in various iterations throughout the war, proved extremely popular. As the Germans advanced on the city of Stalingrad in the late summer of 1942, for example, one political officer noted in his diary that he was suddenly compelled “to call out to the soldiers of the south: ‘Fight like the twenty-eight! Crush tanks as they were crushed by the Panfilov-Guardsmen outside Moscow. Stand to the death, and the enemy will flee as it fled from Moscow.’” Only later did it emerge that a few of the twenty-eight Panfilovtsy had not died in the fighting at Dubosekovo. While the story was easily modified to accommodate the new details, the matter was further complicated when one of the survivors later admitted to military prosecutors that the Dubosekovo encounter was largely a

1 Werth, Russia at War, 741. 2 Grossman, Life and Fate, 299.
3 P. Logvinenko, “Traditsii 28 geroev (Iz dnevnika politrabotnika),” Krasnaia zvezda, Aug. 27, 1942, 3.
fabrication, the invention of frontline newspaper reporters and editors. The Prosecutor’s Office passed this information to the Politburo, which continued to promote the invented and sensationalized account as a highly effective source of agitation. The legend of the twenty-eight Panfilovtsy survived the war’s end and Stalin’s death; it would thrive for decades as an important component of the Soviet myth of World War II.

The appeal of the story of the twenty-eight heroes derived in large part from the unit’s multiethnic composition. Assembled in Soviet Central Asia, the Panfilov division had recruited heavily from the local population, with Russians constituting a small percentage of the overall formation. Although the first newspaper articles devoted to the engagement at Dubosekovo made no mention of the participants’ nationalities, by 1942 the central press was specifying that among the twenty-eight “were Russians, Ukrainians, and Kazakhs,” as well as troopers of other nationalities. “Their martial comradeship, sealed in blood, became the epitome of the great fighting friendship of the peoples of our country,” wrote Aleksandr Krivitskii, the literary secretary of the Red Army newspaper Krasnaia zvezda and the man most responsible for the myth’s creation and perpetuation. Such an emphasis on multiethnic friendship dovetailed with a broader mobilizational campaign highlighting the heroic pedigree of “non-Russian” men-at-arms. In fact, it was the head of the Red Army’s Political Directorate and Soviet Information Bureau, Aleksandr Shcherbakov, rather than Krivitskii, who first publicly emphasized the unit’s diverse ethnic makeup.

At the same time, the myth of the twenty-eight reinforced the more Russocentric themes of Soviet wartime culture. Most significant in this regard was the Russian political commissar supposedly in charge of the unit, Vasilii Klochkov. According to an expanded version of the story published in 1942, a few days before leading his men into battle, the unit’s multiethnic composition. Assembled in Soviet Central Asia, the Panfilov division had recruited heavily from the local population, with Russians constituting a small percentage of the overall formation. Although the first newspaper articles devoted to the engagement at Dubosekovo made no mention of the participants’ nationalities, by 1942 the central press was specifying that among the twenty-eight “were Russians, Ukrainians, and Kazakhs,” as well as troopers of other nationalities. “Their martial comradeship, sealed in blood, became the epitome of the great fighting friendship of the peoples of our country,” wrote Aleksandr Krivitskii, the literary secretary of the Red Army newspaper Krasnaia zvezda and the man most responsible for the myth’s creation and perpetuation. Such an emphasis on multiethnic friendship dovetailed with a broader mobilizational campaign highlighting the heroic pedigree of “non-Russian” men-at-arms. In fact, it was the head of the Red Army’s Political Directorate and Soviet Information Bureau, Aleksandr Shcherbakov, rather than Krivitskii, who first publicly emphasized the unit’s diverse ethnic makeup.

At the same time, the myth of the twenty-eight reinforced the more Russocentric themes of Soviet wartime culture. Most significant in this regard was the Russian political commissar supposedly in charge of the unit, Vasilii Klochkov. According to an expanded version of the story published in 1942, a few days before leading his men into battle,


5 See Table 13.2 in Glantz, Colossus Reborn, 594.


7 As Brandon Schechter points out, “non-Russian” was a catchall term to denote non-Slavic (Caucasian, Central Asian, etc.) peoples. Schechter, The Stuff of Soldiers, 1–2.

Klochkov took part in the famed November military parade on Red Square, during which Stalin delivered one of his most famous wartime addresses. “Let the heroic image of our great ancestors inspire you in this war,” Stalin urged, “Aleksandr Nevskii, Dmitrii Donskoi, Kuz’ma Minin, Dmitrii Pozharskii, Aleksandr Suvorov, Mikhail Kutuzov.” The author then recounts how, standing in formation, Klochkov felt as though he was following in the footsteps of Russian warriors through the ages, such as the forces of Dmitrii Donskoi before defeating the Mongol–Tatar horde at the Battle of Kulikovo Field, or the militiamen of Kuz’ma Minin and Dmitrii Pozharskii, who ousted Polish–Lithuanian forces in 1612. Alongside these young Red Army volunteers “are the mustachioed fellow-fighters of Suvorov,” and with them “Mikhail Kutuzov will soon pursue Napoleon’s vaunted grenadiers.” The story’s narrator then ponders whether it was this moment, admiring the ancient Kremlin walls, that inspired Klochkov’s legendary battle cry nine days later as German tanks bore down on the twenty-eight: “Russia is vast, but there is nowhere to retreat – Moscow is at our backs!”

The figure of Klochkov is instructive. While the 1942 account described the political commissar deriving inspiration from prerevolutionary Russian sources, by 1952 authoritative treatments were attributing the man’s bravery and sacrifice to a decidedly Soviet pedigree: “At the head of the platoon stood political instructor [Vasilii Klochkov]. The son of a poor Russian peasant, Klochkov passed through the difficult school of life. The Soviet Motherland opened before him a path to a happy future. But war broke out, and Klochkov left for the front to defend the Motherland.” It was in the name of a homeland that symbolized emancipation from the prerevolutionary epoch, as much as continuity with it, that Klochkov and his men sacrificed their lives. “I will fight to the last breath,” Klochkov’s 1952 iteration declared shortly before the fateful engagement, “for the Motherland, for Stalin.”

As the war experience receded further into the past, the multiethnic, even universal, aspects of the Panfilovtsy story often took precedence over its Russocentric and historical features. By the 1960s, delegations of young communists from around the world were identifying with this...
“socialist Thermopylae” (Figure 0.1).\(^\text{13}\) Cuban youths visiting Moscow in 1965, for instance, took an oath at the site of the battle, declaring: “As the twenty-eight Panfilov-Guardsmen defended Moscow, so too shall we protect Cuba from American imperialism.”\(^\text{14}\) All the while the legend of the twenty-eight resonated among the USSR’s multiethnic population. It should come as no surprise that one of the most revered Soviet war memorials still standing outside the borders of present-day Russia, one that has avoided the waves of post-Soviet iconoclasm that saw the toppling of other such monuments, is Kazakhstan’s Memorial of Glory, dedicated to the feat of the twenty-eight. Unveiled in 1975, at the peak of the late-socialist commemorative cult of the war, the monument consists of a massive sculptural depiction of representatives of each of the country’s fifteen republics wrought into the shape of the USSR (Figure 0.2). A popular venue for afternoon strolls and wedding processions, the memorial is situated in a leafy park in the center of Almaty that also bears the name of the Panfilovtsy.

\(^{13}\) I take the Thermopylae metaphor from Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir*, 265.
\(^{14}\) RGASPI M-1/32/1193/39.
Like the legend of the twenty-eight Panfilov-Guardsmen in particular, the larger Soviet myth of victory embodied the fundamental tensions of wartime mobilization, which incorporated seemingly contradictory “Russian” and “Soviet,” ethnocentric and “internationalist,” transhistorical and postrevolutionary tendencies. The tensions and contradictions between these countervailing patriotic currents did not dissipate after 1945. Rather, they underpinned later Soviet debates about the meaning of victory; about the nature of patriotism and patriotic identity in a socialist society; about the place of the Russian people, their history and culture, within a supranational entity that presented itself as a renunciation of the old imperial order. How the war’s “official” memory refracted these tensions of patriotism between the 1940s and 1980s is the subject of this book.

** * * *

This is a history of the Soviet myth of victory in World War II from its Stalinist origins to its emergence as arguably the supreme symbol of state authority during the late-socialist period. The book argues that the war's memory encapsulated a range of competing ideological tendencies that gradually coalesced to form a “pan-Soviet” counterpoint to broader notions of Russian leadership and Russian-led ethnic hierarchy. While
Introduction

Russocentric historical narratives of the prerevolutionary and early Soviet eras continued to stress Russian benevolence and assistance on the path to modernity, the story of the war evolved as a parallel but countervailing ideological current, which flattened hierarchical configurations among Russians and non-Russians alike. At the same time, many contested the notion of a horizontally integrated “Soviet” political community. The book shows how a “Russophile” faction of party elites, nationalist-oriented intellectuals, and even some non-Russian party organizations in the republics, perpetuated a Russocentric understanding of the war “from below.” The competition between Russocentric and pan-Soviet conceptions of victory, which burst into the open during the late 1980s, reflected a wider struggle over the nature of patriotic identity in a multiethnic society that continues to reverberate in the post-Soviet space.

The book challenges a commonly held view that official war memory embodied and reinforced the fundamentally Russocentric basis of Soviet multiethnic governance.\textsuperscript{15} Particularly in the years after Stalin’s death, the Soviet leadership looked to the war’s memory to bolster lateral “friendship” bonds and a supra-ethnic sense of belonging, one that did not succumb to, but remained in constant tension with, state-sponsored Russocentrism and a centuries-long narrative of Russian exceptionalism. In highlighting the fluid and ambiguous nature of the state’s informal ethnic hierarchy, the present study sheds new light on long-standing questions linked to the politics of remembrance and provides a crucial historical context for the patriotic revival of the war’s memory in twenty-first-century Russia.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15}This view is discussed in the following sections. Here, I distinguish between linguistic Russification, which was an assimilationist and homogenizing policy, and “Russocentrism” as the more general promotion of the Russian people as a distinct, leading entity vis-à-vis other Soviet peoples. On this distinction, see Aspaturian, “The Non-Russian Nationalities,” 143–198.

\textsuperscript{16}In 2014, the war served as a framing device for the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-backed separatist movement in eastern Ukraine. In both cases, Russian state media cast the Russian-speaking near abroad as the heirs to the Soviet generation of victors while branding the Ukrainian government and its supporters “fascists” and “banderovtsy” (a reference to followers of the Ukrainian nationalist leader and Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera). Ukrainian media took part in its own war-related framing of events. See, for example, McGlynn, “Historical Framing,” 1058–1080. In Russia, the rekindling of the war’s public memory has not been an exclusively top-down process, but has ridden a preexisting wave of popular enthusiasm for victory and grassroots efforts to remember the dead of war, conferring an air of authenticity on this official endeavor. On government cooption of popular commemorations, see Bernstein, “Remembering War,” 422–436. The tradition of the Immortal Regiment, to take one example, began as a journalist-led, grassroots movement in the city of Tomsk in 2012. The political leadership has since appropriated and politicized the tradition to the dismay of its originators. See Gabowitsch, “Are Copycats Subversive,” 297–314; Fedor, “Memory, Kinship,”
The Myth of the War Victory

As in other countries that experienced the devastation of war and occupation, the Soviet leadership fashioned a self-serving “myth of the war experience,” which recast the conflict as an event with profound meaning and sanctity. Although national myths are always selective and grounded in forgetting as much as remembering, this book is less interested in ferreting out “myth” from “reality” than in looking at how myths structure reality. As the cultural historian Michael Kammen proposes, even where there is a willful distortion of the past, “description and explanation serve us in more satisfactory ways than cynicism about bad faith or evil intent on the part of dominant elites.” War myths reflect “a normative desire for . . . national unity, stability, and state-building.” They are, moreover, hardly confined to authoritarian regimes. This is to say that the Soviet myth of the war victory, like all officially sanctioned mythologies of war, reflected the universal drive for social cohesion in the wake of national upheaval.

And yet, in the Soviet Union, the collective remembrance of World War II attained a significance arguably without parallel. This was due in part to authoritarian regimes in the Soviet Union which recast the conflict as an event with profound meaning and sanctity. The Soviet leadership fashioned a self-serving “myth of the war experience,” which recast the conflict as an event with profound meaning and sanctity. Although national myths are always selective and grounded in forgetting as much as remembering, this book is less interested in ferreting out “myth” from “reality” than in looking at how myths structure reality. As the cultural historian Michael Kammen proposes, even where there is a willful distortion of the past, “description and explanation serve us in more satisfactory ways than cynicism about bad faith or evil intent on the part of dominant elites.” War myths reflect “a normative desire for . . . national unity, stability, and state-building.” They are, moreover, hardly confined to authoritarian regimes. This is to say that the Soviet myth of the war victory, like all officially sanctioned mythologies of war, reflected the universal drive for social cohesion in the wake of national upheaval.

307–344; Edle, “Fighting Russia’s History Wars,” 90–124. For an excellent overview of these processes under Putin, see Walker, The Long Hangover.

17 Mosse, Fallen Soldiers, 3–11.


19 Kammen, In the Past Lane, 200, 204. In the United States, politicians, journalists, novelists, and many historians engaged in a mythmaking of their own after the war, which perpetuated a sense of American exceptionalism rooted in the wartime experience. Of course, liberal-democratic societies have produced other, more problematic war-related myths. See, for example, the “Lost Cause” erasure of slavery from Civil War memory in the southern United States or the blotting out of collaboration and communist participation from the Gaullist myth of resistance in postwar France. On these issues, see Blight, Race and Reunion; Golsan, “The Legacy of World War II in France,” 73–101; Lagrou, The Legacy of Nazi Occupation; Roussos, The Vichy Syndrome; Bodnar, The “Good War” in American Memory.


21 Although there are various labels used to describe the phenomenon of group memory, each expressing a slightly different nuance, this book generally uses the terms collective, social, or cultural memory or remembrance interchangeably to mean “the body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future.” Following John Bodnar, the book takes this “body of beliefs” to be the outcome of a dynamic interaction between “official” and “vernacular” cultures; the former advanced by authorities in positions of power, the latter reflecting “an array of specialized interests that are grounded in parts of the whole.” See Bodnar, Remaking America, 13–15.
no small part to the sheer scale of Soviet losses. By most estimates, close to twenty-seven million Soviet citizens lost their lives as a direct result of the conflict. The Germans and their allies destroyed as many as seventy thousand Soviet villages and nearly two thousand towns and cities, leaving some twenty-five million people homeless by war’s end.  

Beginning in the 1960s, the public celebration of victory acquired the characteristics of a state-sanctioned cult, which included ubiquitous monuments, commemorative rituals, and mass media productions devised, in part, to legitimate the aging political elite (Figure 0.3).  

Official portraits of Leonid Brezhnev increasingly tied his personal authority to supposed wartime service and heroics, a connection reflected in the almost comical number of military and other decorations adorning the general secretary’s uniform.  

By 1984, ... living & the dead.  

On the war’s veneration as constituting a state cult, see Tumarkin, The Living & the Dead.  

On Brezhnev’s connection to the late-socialist war cult, see Davis, Myth Making.
according to official figures, the CPSU had helped to establish as many as one-hundred thousand monuments and memorial sites dedicated to the war, with more than forty thousand of these falling within the territory of a single republic – the Ukrainian SSR. Even amid the USSR’s collapse, the war remained, in the words of one Western chronicler at the time, the only “unquestionable victory of the regime.”

The “Great Patriotic War,” as Soviet media dubbed the conflict, emerged as the central defining event of the Soviet epoch. It was the lens through which Soviet citizens made sense of everything that had come before. From the vantage point of 1945, the brutality of collectivization, headlong industrialization, the Gulag, show trials, and purges became necessary measures to prepare the country for the long-anticipated showdown with the forces of imperialism, among which Nazi Germany embodied a particularly monstrous strain. Although the war’s mythology fluctuated with the evolving political landscape, several key ingredients to victory remained constant: the Soviet political and economic system, the unity and unwavering patriotism of the Soviet people, socialist ideology, cooperation among Soviet nations, and the leadership of the Communist Party.

Long dismissed for its blatantly propagandistic function and its association with both Stalin’s cult and late-socialist gerontocracy, the war’s public memory has become the object of sustained scholarly investigation over the past two decades. Grounded largely in the theoretical and methodological approaches of the “memory boom” of the 1980s and 90s, studies focusing on the Soviet Union have shed light on the often-dynamic role the war’s commemoration played in shaping individual and historical provenance of the Russian people. In a recent overview of victory culture in the USSR, for example, Mark Edele cites the Soviet system and Russian leadership theme as more or less equal factors: Edele, “The Soviet Culture of Victory,” 787.

Indeed, for many years, Tumarkin’s *The Living & the Dead* was the only monograph to deal exclusively with the war’s public memory. Other early works to identify the significance of the war’s memory in Soviet society include Lane, *The Rites of Rulers*, esp. chap. 9; Vail’ and Genis, 60-e mir sovetskogo cheloveka, esp. 88–100; Gallagher, *The Soviet History of World War II*; Arnold, *Stalingrad im sovjetischen Gedächtnis*; and individual chapters in Stites, *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*; Garrard and Garrard, *World War 2 and the Soviet People*; Barber and Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front*; Linz, *The Impact of World War II*.

Professional historians were responding to a confluence of circumstances that included the *Hitlerherrschaft* in West Germany and renewed interest in Holocaust memory, the fiftieth anniversary of V-E Day, and the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe.
group recollections and identities. In recent years, pathbreaking mono-
graphs have explored both the production and reception of Soviet war
memory from a variety of perspectives.

Europe. For an overview of the memory boom, see Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper, “The
Politics of War Memory,” 4–7. Key works in the English-language literature include
Calder, The Myth of the Blitz; Mosse, Fallen Soldiers; Sherman, The Construction of Memory
in Interwar France; Thomson, Anzac Memories; Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning.
See also important discussions in Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past
Mean?” 114–129; Gillis, “Introduction,” 3–26; Herf, Divided Memory; Huyssen,
Twilight Memories; Koonz, “Between Memory and Oblivion,” 258–280; Koshar, From
Monuments to Traces; Passerini, Fascism in Popular Memory. This wave of scholarship was
attuned to modernist developments in the study of nationalism, which conceptualized the
nation as a fundamentally modern construct: Anderson, Imagined Communities; Gellner,
Nations and Nationalism; Hobshaw, Nations and Nationalism; Hobshaw, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions”; Hroch, “From National Movement to the Fully-
Formed Nation.” More recently, theorists of nationalism have highlighted the quotidian
aspects of nation and ethnicity: Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups; Billig, Banal Nationalism.
Likewise, they incorporated insights from the bourgeoning field of memory studies, namely the idea that memories are given distinct shape and meaning in relation to the
(group or groups within which one is embedded: Nora, “General Introduction: Between
Memory and History,” 1–20; Assmann and Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 125–133. These ideas were rooted in the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who argued in the 1920s that memories are “socially framed”: Halbwachs, On Collective Memory.

In her excellent study of war memory in Leningrad, for example, Lisa Kirschenbaum
reveals how official remembrance practices produced a framework within which individu-
als structured their conceptions of the past, “endowing loss with meaning as the neces-
sary and terrible price of victory.” See Kirschenbaum, The Legacy of the Siege, 11–17,
186–228, qt. 320; Peri, The War Within, passim; Merridale, Ivan’s War, 189, 264,
373–395.

Perhaps no single monograph has done more to invigorate scholarly interest in the war’s
political and cultural legacy than Amir Weiner’s work on the west-central Ukrainian
region of Vinnytsia. Weiner demonstrates the conflict’s profound impact on the nature of
political authority and legitimacy, state violence, and collective identities. Weiner also
revealed the war’s place as a key milestone in Soviet eschatology: Weiner, Making Sense of
War, 16–17; Weiner, “When Memory Counts,” 167–188; cf. Lane, “Legitimacy and
Power,” 213. On the eschatological features of Marxism in Russia, see also Halfin, From
Darkness to Light: The relatively recent literature on Soviet war memory includes import-
ant examinations of the local dimensions of memory in Leningrad and other urban and
regional milieus (e.g., Mijnsees, Russia’s Hero Cities; Donovan, Chronicles in Stone; Peri,
The War Within; Davis, Myth Making; Maddox, Saving Stalin’s Imperial City; Hellbeck,
Stalingrad; Amar, The Paradox of Ukrainian Lives; Risch, The Ukrainian West; Qualls,
From Ruins to Reconstruction; Kirschenbaum, The Legacy of the Siege; Weiner, Making
Sense of War); the war’s treatment in Soviet cinema, literature, and historiography (e.g.,
Dobrenko, Late Stalinism, esp. 35–86; Kozlov, The Readers of Novyi Mir, esp. 263–283;
Jones, Myth, Memory, Trauma, esp. 173–211; Ellis, The Damned and the Dead;
Younblood, Russian War Films; Markwick, Rewriting History); the evolution of Victory
Day (e.g., Gabowitsch, “Victory Day before Brezhnev” as well as his forthcoming edited
volume, Pamiatnik i prazdnik: etnografiia Dnia Pobedi); and on post-Soviet Victory Day:
Norris, "Memory for Sale," 201–202); the plight of veterans and their part in propagating
war memory (e.g., Edele, Soviet Veterans of World War II; Fieseler, Arme Sieger; Merridale
Ivan’s War, chap. 11); the impact on women, gender, and youth (e.g., Fraser, Military
Masculinity; Krylova, Soviet Women in Combat; deGraffenried, Sacrificing Childhood;