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The Instrumentalisation of Historical Memory of Victory Day by the Putin Regime as One of the Sources of Legitimisation of the War against Ukraine

Summary: The article analyses the evolution and instrumentalisation of Victory Day within Russian memory culture as a tool of political and ideological legitimisation of Vladimir Putin's regime. It traces the transformation of the holiday from a grassroots commemoration of World War II veterans into a central myth of the Russian state's historical policy. The study outlines key stages of this process — from the institutionalisation of the holiday in 1965 and its revival under Boris Yeltsin, to its conversion in the twenty-first century into a cornerstone of the Kremlin's memory politics. The analysis examines the militarisation and sacralisation of commemorations, the cult of symbols (the St. George's ribbon, the Immortal Regiment, the letter Z), and the integration of the narrative of Ukraine's "denazification" into the legacy of the Great Patriotic War. The author argues that through these mechanisms, Victory Day has lost its commemorative function and evolved into a myth of abstract Victory, serving to justify Russia's aggression against Ukraine and to reinforce the revisionist model of historical policy.

Keywords: Victory Day, memory politics, historical revisionism, Putinism, Russia

Introduction

Victory Day constituted an important component of Soviet historical memory and has remained an important element in the Russian Federation. However, in Putin's Russia it has become not only an element of historical memory, but also an instrument of the

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policy of the Russian authorities aimed at legitimising the Russian regime and its foreign and domestic policies particularly after the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. This article examines the instrumentalisation of Victory Day, focusing on the growing narrative that its instrumentalised form alone constitutes authentic respect for Second World War participants because it supposedly preserves the continuity of the holiday's original commemorative practices. Is Victory Day during Vladimir Putin's presidency actually a faithful continuation of the Soviet tradition? This article traces the evolution of the holiday in order to answer the question: how, as a result of its instrumentalisation, did Victory Day become one of the sources legitimising the anti-Ukrainian narrative?

Origins and Institutionalisation of Victory Day in the USSR

Victory Day became the most important holiday in contemporary Russia,[1] but in the first years after the end of the Second World War it did not have such status or social reception. Although it became a state holiday and a non-working day as early as 1945, in 1947 it lost its status as a non-working day in favour of New Year's Day.[2] Despite losing this status, Victory Day remained an important holiday for many citizens of the Soviet Union between 1947 and 1965, who celebrated it with their families or by participating in events organised by local authorities.[3]

The widespread grassroots celebration of Victory Day in the individual republics of the Soviet Union[4] contradicts the narrative present in Vladimir Putin's rhetoric following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which presents only citizens of the Russian Federation as the rightful heirs to the Soviet Union's victory over the Third Reich, thereby excluding citizens of the other states that once formed part of the Soviet Union, particularly Ukraine.[5] This narrative denies the individual experience of millions of Ukrainians who, during the Second World War, were Soviet citizens and contributed to the victory over the Third Reich as members of the Red Army,[6] while also revising the history of the development of Victory Day commemorations by equating the USSR with Russia. This narrative acquires particular importance in the context of the instrumentalisation of Victory Day within the anti-Ukrainian narrative of Putin's Russia,

1 *Rossiyane.* 2025.

2 Gabowitsch M. 2021, 64.

3 Gabowitsch M. 2021, 78.

4 Gabowitsch M. 2021, 64.

5 This is manifested in Vladimir Putin's emphasis on the contribution of the Russian SFSR to the victory over the Third Reich while simultaneously marginalising the contribution of the other Soviet republics. Source: *Putin.* 2010; *Vstrecha.* 2025.

6 As P.J. Potichnyi reports, approximately 4.5 million Ukrainians served in the Red Army in 1941–1945. Of these, 409,668 received the Medal For Courage, and 961 were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Source: Potichnyi P.J. 1986, 61.

especially since, as the Canadian historian Roman Serbyn rightly observed, "Ironically, Ukraine seems to have played a central role in the revival of what eventually became the main Soviet holiday."[7] The crucial role of Ukraine in the revival of state Victory Day commemorations consisted in the fact that in 1964 Petro Shelest, then First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, requested that the Central Committee of the CPSU organise state Victory Day commemorations in 1965, arguing that this would respond to public demand, since, as he wrote, the inhabitants of the Ukrainian SSR were creating new "rituals and customs" from below to commemorate Victory Day and the memory of participants in the Second World War.[8]

As a result of Petro Shelest's initiative, in 1965 Victory Day once again became a non-working day.[9] In the same year, the first military parade on Red Square in Moscow was organised to mark Victory Day.[10] This marked the beginning of the Brezhnev model of institutionalising Victory Day commemorations, which also included the construction of numerous monumental memorials[11] and support for cinematography devoted to the Second World War and expressing the state's official narrative.[12] Despite its numerous manifestations, the Brezhnev-era model of Victory Day commemorations, although it strengthened the cult of the Great Patriotic War, did not reach the scale characteristic of Putin's memory politics. This was because many veterans were still alive during the Era of Stagnation, and consequently strong grassroots, family-based historical memory continued to exist. The dual nature of Victory Day in the Brezhnev era was well captured by the American historian Nina Tumarkin, who wrote that Victory Day during the Era of Stagnation "was both the tool of propagandists touting its triumphs and a memorial day for milions of relatives and friends of the war dead."[13]

Re-instrumentalisation of Victory Day in the Russian Federation, 1995–2014

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a decline in the importance of Victory Day. During Boris Yeltsin's first presidential term, Victory Day was perceived in Russia as a holiday belonging to the previous era.[14] In order to emphasise the break with the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin stopped cultivating many Soviet traditions, including state

7 Serbyn R. 2007, 116.

8 Quoted after: Serbyn R. 2007, 116.

9 Gabowitsch M. 2021, 74–75.

10 Malinova O. 2017, 50.

11 Tumarkin N. 1994, 143.

12 One of the most important examples is the film Liberation (*Освобождение*), directed by Yuri Ozerov and made for the 25th anniversary of Victory Day. Source: Youngblood D.J. 2006, 158.

13 Tumarkin N. 1994, 37.

14 Malinova O. 2017, 48.

Victory Day commemorations.[15] During these years, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which opposed President Boris Yeltsin, organised its own Victory Day commemorations.[16] The situation changed in 1995, when Boris Yeltsin organised the first Victory Parade in the history of post-Soviet Russia on Red Square in Moscow. The 1995 Victory Parade included a march by Second World War veterans.[17] Their participation was a manifestation both continuation of the Soviet tradition and of grassroots historical memory centred on direct participants in historical events. The aesthetics of the Parade were to a significant degree Soviet, as demonstrated, among other things, by the decoration of Red Square with images of the Soviet Order of Victory, by the fact that the parade was received for the last time in its history by a Marshal of the USSR,[18] and by the continuation of the tradition whereby the head of state received the parade from the tribune of Lenin's Mausoleum. In his speech, Boris Yeltsin emphasised the victory of the Soviet Union as a state and as a union of all the individual republics, rather than emphasising the role of Russia.[19] Such extensive recourse to Soviet symbolism by Boris Yeltsin, who had avoided it in previous years, was connected not with the fact that 1995 marked the 50th anniversary of Victory Day, but with the presidential campaign then underway. By organising commemorations in a form referring to the Soviet tradition, Boris Yeltsin intended to gain the support of a segment of the electorate nostalgic for the Soviet Union and therefore inclined to vote for Yeltsin's most important opponent in the 1996 presidential election — the Chairman of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Gennady Zyuganov.[20]

The 1995 Victory Day commemorations constituted a turning point in the instrumentalisation of Victory Day due to the combination of elements of the Soviet form of commemoration with a new model, emerging from that year, which subsequently became the Yeltsin–Putin model. The Yeltsin Victory Parades of 1996–1999 constituted a reproductive continuation of the model of organising ceremonies developed in 1995, characterised by Boris Yeltsin's extensive use of Soviet symbols in the context of Victory Day. However, an evolution limiting Soviet symbolism to some extent is noticeable. This was expressed in Yeltsin's abandoning, from 1997 onwards, the practice of receiving the Victory Parade from the balcony of the Mausoleum,[21] as well as in the gradual increase in references to Russia rather than the USSR in presidential speeches.[22]

15 Malinova O. 2017, 48.

16 Malinova O. 2017, 51.

17 Malinova O. 2017, 51–52.

18 The Marshal of the USSR who received the Victory Parade in 1995 was Viktor Kulikov, *Post·sovetskiye parady. Ch. 1.* 2013.

19 *Parad Pobedy 9 maya 1995*.

20 Zygar' M. 2021, 247–249.

21 *Post·sovet·skiye parady. Ch. 1.* 2013.

22 Malinova O. 2017, 55.

The greatest change in the 2000 Victory Parade was the person of the President of Russia himself, since that year the Parade was received for the first time by the new president, Vladimir Putin. The commemorations emphasised this change through the presence of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin alongside one another; thus, the 2000 Victory Parade additionally legitimised Vladimir Putin as Boris Yeltsin's successor. In terms of symbolism, no significant changes occurred in 2000 compared with 1996–1999, apart from the continued evolution of the narrative towards emphasising Russianness.

The Beginnings of the Anti-Ukrainian Instrumentalisation of Victory Day

The instrumentalisation of Victory Day commemorations in Russia began to increase markedly after 2005 as part of a broader reaction by the authorities to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004). Both this event and the earlier Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) were described in Russian political discourse as colour revolutions.[23] The authorities of the Russian Federation interpreted them not as the result of internal social processes, but as attempts to destabilise the region inspired by Western states.[24]

In this context, efforts in Russia to consolidate society around the state intensified through the creation and subsequent strengthening of the so-called Russian idea.[25] One manifestation of this was the concept of sovereign democracy promoted by Vladislav Surkov, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration.[26] In parallel with this process, the campaign to distribute the St. George's ribbon, initiated in 2005, became an element of memory politics.[27] The symbol, originating from the Order of St. George established by Catherine II in 1769,[28] began to acquire new meaning and increasing popularity.[29] Gradually, the St. George's ribbon was transformed into a key element of the state cult of Victory,[30] which served to strengthen the new model of commemoration and the historical policy associated with it. Over time, the significance of the ribbon began to extend beyond the sphere of memory of the Second World War. In public and political discourse, it began to be presented as an emblem of loyalty to the concept of the so-called Russian world (*русский мир*) — an idea

23 Laruelle M. 2025, 236.

24 Laruelle M. 2025, 236.

25 Suslov M. 2024, 96.

26 Surkov V. 2006.

27 Weiss-Wendt A. 2022, 93.

28 Kolstø P. 2016, 668.

29 Kolstø P. 2016, 672.

30 The culmination of this process occurred on 29 December 2022, when the St. George's ribbon was granted the status of a symbol of Russian military glory. Source: *Federal'nyy zakon ot 29.12.2022 No 579-FZ*.

of a cultural-civilisational community encompassing all peoples who speak Russian and recognise Russia's spiritual heritage.[31]

The form of the Victory Parade underwent another significant evolution after 2004. In 2005 an air component was introduced into the Parade,[32] and for the first time the decoration of the Victory Parade was designed so as to conceal Lenin's Mausoleum, which until 2004 had been one of the central visual points of military parades on Red Square. In 2004, these decorations took the form of a series of state flags of the Russian Federation positioned in front of the Mausoleum, while from 2005 onwards the Mausoleum has been covered every 9 May by a special structure.[33] The structures concealing the Mausoleum are decorated mainly with Russian symbolism (the colours of the Russian state flag, the St. George's ribbon, official logos of individual round anniversaries), or with neutral imagery (photographs from the Second World War and the words Victory Day).[34] Soviet symbolism is rare on these structures and is represented mainly by images of Soviet orders.

The Conservative Turn and the Sacralisation of Memory (2012–2022)

The beginning of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term in 2012 marked the beginning of the so-called conservative turn, consisting in a radicalisation of the ideology of Putinism.[35] This radicalisation manifested itself in placing greater emphasis on shaping historical memory within the concept of a unified, uninterrupted, thousand-year history of Russia (*единая, неразрывная тысячелетняя история*), according to which Kyivan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Russian Empire, the USSR and the Russian Federation, regardless of their different political systems, were supposedly one and the same Russia.[36] Traditional values were another concept introduced in 2012.[37] These ideas became crucial for the historical policy of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term and supported by Vladimir Medinsky, the main populariser of the concept of historical policy as an instrument of Russian politics and Minister of Culture in 2012–2020.[38] He also contributed to strengthening the instrumentalisation of Victory Day and its use in the anti-Ukrainian narrative

31 Laruelle M. 2025, 237.
32 *Post·sovet·skiye parady*. Ch. 3. 2013.
33 *Post·sovet·skiye parady*. Ch. 3. 2013.
34 *Post·sovet·skiye parady*. Ch. 3. 2013.
35 Laruelle M. 2025, 61–63.
36 *Poslaniye Prezidenta*. 2012.
37 *Poslaniye Prezidenta*. 2012.
38 Laruelle M. 2025, 64.

with the help of state-supported cinematography,[39] which contributed to an increase in nostalgia for the USSR.[40]

The annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas caused another breakthrough in the development of the use of instrumentalised Russian memory politics towards Ukraine. A narrative emerged portraying supporters of Euromaidan as "Nazis" or "Banderitas."[41] One consequence of this narrative was the adoption of an amendment to the Russian Criminal Code adding Article 354.1, which penalises the rehabilitation of Nazism.[42] Its purpose was to emphasise that Russia was taking action against the ideology of Nazism, while the Ukrainian authorities supposedly tolerated or even supported it. This narrative was also used by pro-Russian separatists. They referred to the Tsarist concept of Novorossiya[43] and selectively to some Soviet symbols, such as Soviet city names and the red banner, while simultaneously re-ideologizing them and instrumentalising Putin's concept of the "Russian world."[44] For this reason, the separatists cultivated the Putinist form of Victory Day commemorations and made the St. George's ribbon one of the symbols of the struggle against Ukraine.[45]

In Russia, the annexation of Crimea produced the effect known as the Crimean Spring[46] — that is, a significant increase in support for Vladimir Putin and in nationalism and militarism in Russian society as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea.[47] This translated into both a rise in anti-Ukrainian sentiments[48] and an increase in public support for the state version of Victory Day commemorations.[49] As a result of the Crimean Spring effect and the intensification of historical policy, the state model of historical memory began in the 2010s to become increasingly important. This is demonstrated by the absorption of the largest grassroots initiative associated with family historical memory — the Immortal Regiment movement. The Immortal Regiment was initiated in 2012 by journalists from Tomsk.[50] The idea of marches carrying portraits of ancestors who had participated in the Second World War was transformed

39 Wijermars M. 2019, 221.

40 Werner W. 2019, 205–220.

41 Laruelle M. 2025, 93.

42 *Federal'nyy zakon ot 05.05.2014 No 128-FZ.*

43 Laruelle M. 2025, 242–243.

44 Bækken H. 2025, 28–52.

45 Haskins E. 2021, 208.

46 The name of the annexation of Crimea used by the Russian media and authorities. *Khronika anneksii*. 2019.

47 Laruelle M. 2025, 63–64.

48 Laruelle M. 2025, 63–64.

49 This is evidenced by the increase in support for the view that the most appropriate form of Victory Day commemorations is military parades and other official events — from 28% of respondents in 2010 and 29% in 2015 to 35% of respondents in 2018. Source: *Den' Pobedy*. 2018.

50 Haskins E. 2022, 194–195.

into an element of official memory and a demonstration of loyalty to the authorities when the process of the Russian state taking control of the movement was completed in 2015.[51] The symbol of the Russian authorities' assumption of control over what had previously been a grassroots initiative was Vladimir Putin's participation in the 2015 Moscow Immortal Regiment march, in which he carried a photograph of his father, a Second World War veteran.[52] After 2015, the Russian authorities used the Immortal Regiment movement as a tool of legitimising power, presenting its mass attendance and growing popularity as evidence of widespread support for the state historical memory canon.[53]

In the 2010s, the development of the state cult of Victory Day encompassed additional institutions, including the Russian Orthodox Church. A symbolic expression of this was the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, erected in 2018–2020 to mark the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Second World War.[54] Its architecture and interior sacralise the cult of Victory Day. The height and number of the Cathedral's domes reflect key dates of the Great Patriotic War.[55] The mosaics reflect the ideas of a unified and uninterrupted history of Russia. One is devoted to the annexation of Crimea.[56] The mosaic legitimises and heroizes the act of annexation by depicting Russian soldiers standing before a crowd of Crimean residents carrying banners reading "Crimea is ours" and "Forever with Russia". The mosaic suggests that the annexation took place by the will of God in response to the piety of the inhabitants of Crimea, since the crowd carries an icon of the Mother of God and her figure rises above it. The mosaic is framed by the St. George's ribbon, which additionally emphasises the connection between the cult of Victory Day and the legitimisation of anti-Ukrainian policy.[57]

The Radicalisation of the Anti-Ukrainian Instrumentalisation of Victory Day as a Result of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022

The instrumentalisation of Victory Day to legitimise Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was employed from the very beginning of the invasion. In his first speech on 24 February 2022, Vladimir Putin identified "the denazification of Ukraine" as one of the main goals of the war.[58] In all his Victory Day speeches in 2022–2025, Vladimir Putin

51 Haskins E. 2022, 197–198.

52 Fedor J. et al. (eds), 2017, 313.

53 Fedor J. et al. (eds), 2017, 325–326.

54 *Glavnyiy Hram*.

55 *Glavnyiy Hram*.

56 *Chem zamenili mozaiku*. 2020.

57 *Chem zamenili mozaiku*. 2020.

58 *Obrashcheniye*. 2022.

linked the events of the Second World War with the so-called special military operation, SMO (*специальная военная операция*, *СВО*),[59] through the thesis of historical continuity between the generations of Second World War participants and Russian soldiers. In every speech he consistently linked the Second World War with the so-called SMO, presenting it as a continuation of the struggle against Nazism and proof of the historical continuity of generations.[60] This narrative, based on the myth of defending the truth about the Great Patriotic War, served to justify aggression and to reinforce Russians' identity as the descendants of the victors.[61] Identifying victory in the Second World War with the Russian-Ukrainian war is not merely an element of Vladimir Putin's Victory Day rhetoric, but part of a broader process of transforming the meaning of the holiday. Victory Day, once dedicated to commemorating people who directly experienced the war, has been transformed into a cult of abstract victory — a myth gradually losing its historical reference to 1945 and becoming an "eternal" feature of Russian identity. Pro-Putin writer Aleksandr Prokhanov put it as follows: "The Victory of 1945 goes beyond the calendar; it ceases to be a calendar date. Russian Victory has always existed; it is eternal."[62]

Although the intensification of this process occurred after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its manifestations had appeared previously. They included works linking memories of the Second World War with current politics, including Oleg Gazmanov's song "Forward, Russia!" (*Вперёд, Россия!*),[63] composed for the 70th anniversary of the victory, and "Donbas Is Behind Us" (*Донбасс за нами*) from 2020.[64] Both songs were performed on 18 March 2022 during the For a World Without Nazism concert at Luzhniki Stadium,[65] aimed at showing the unity of society around Vladimir Putin.[66] The event, organised less than a month after the beginning of the invasion, directly linked the rhetoric of the fight against Nazism with the cult of Victory Day. The concert stage was filled with a new symbol of Putinism — the letter Z,[67] originally a marking on Russian military vehicles, which during the first weeks of the war was transformed into a symbol of the so-called Z-patriotism movement.[68]

The concert of 18 March 2022 was only one of many events organised by the Russian authorities in order to promote the idea of abstract victory and legitimise the

59 *Obrashcheniye*. 2022.

60 *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi.* 2022; *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi.* 2023; *Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi.* 2024; *Parad v chest' 80-letiya Velikoy Pobedy.* 2025.

61 *Parad v chest' 80-letiya Velikoy Pobedy.* 2025.

62 Prokhanov A. 2025.

63 *Oleg Gazmanov*. 2025.

64 *Narodnyy gimn.* 2024.

65 *Kontsert v Luzhnikakh*. 2024.

66 Garner I. 2023, 21–22.

67 Garner I. 2023, 21–22.

68 Laruelle M. 2025, 36–37.

invasion of Ukraine. This narrative was consistently present during Victory Day commemorations in 2022–2025. The Immortal Regiment was particularly important because, owing to its scale and established tradition, it became a key vehicle for this idea. The organisers of the marches allowed participants to carry portraits not only of Second World War veterans, but also of soldiers killed during Russia's aggression against Ukraine, thereby symbolically equating them.[69] This form of equation also appears in Russian schools as part of the Hero's Desk (*Парта героя*) programme, under which school desks are decorated with photographs and biographies of participants in the Second World War[70] as well as participants in the so-called SMO.[71]

The Hero's Desk campaign was one of the new tools of Russian historical policy used to promote the cult of Victory Day within the educational system. Similar functions were performed by other initiatives, including the Guardians of History[72] (*Хранители Истории*) and Victory Dictation[73] (*Диктант Победы*) projects, as well as the international school olympiad Great Victory (*Великая Победа*), organised to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of the war.[74] The state's historical-policy objectives were also implemented through the compulsory school subject introduced in 2022, Conversations about Important Things[75] (*Разговоры о важном*). The most important instrument of educational legitimisation, however, became a new series of history textbooks. The first volume, prepared by former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky and Anatoly Torkunov, Rector of MGIMO, was published in 2023 as a textbook for Grade 11. It covers the period from 1945 to the present, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, presented as a heroic struggle of the descendants of victors against Nazism and the so-called collective West.[76] In this way, the textbook reinforces a revisionist vision of Russian history in the spirit of the idea of a thousand years of state continuity and legitimises aggression against Ukraine by employing a narrative derived from the Putinist cult of Victory Day.

Conclusion

Victory Day during Vladimir Putin's presidency does not constitute a faithful continuation of the Soviet tradition of commemorating this holiday because, although it retains part of the Soviet form of commemoration, it changes its function and meaning

69 *V aktsiyu.* 2022.
70 *Parta geroya.* 2022.
71 *Geroi.* 2025.
72 *Hraniteli istorii.*
73 *Diktant pobiedy*.
74 *Ob olimpiade*.
75 *Minprosveshcheniya*. 2022.
76 Medinskiy V., Torkunov A. 2023, 390–411.

from a day of remembrance of victory in the Second World War into an instrument legitimising Russian power and aggression against Ukraine. This process developed gradually — from the appropriation of grassroots memory rituals through their militarisation and sacralisation to the consolidation of the cult of symbols such as the St. George's ribbon, the Immortal Regiment and the symbol Z. The transformation rests on the institutional monopolisation of historical memory through the production of a state canon by means of revisionist historical policy, standardisation of the educational curriculum, subordination of grassroots mass forms of commemoration, religious sacralisation and the re-ideologisation of the symbolism of Victory Day.

This model of memory serves to consolidate society around a revisionist vision of history, strengthens memory wars in the international sphere and also serves as an instrument legitimising Russia's war against Ukraine. It does not focus on commemorating the victims of the Second World War, but instrumentalises their memory, creating a myth of abstract victory that normalises militarism and perpetuates a revisionist, instrumental model of historical memory.

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