

Victory Day

by George Friedman - April 25, 2023

We are a few weeks away from the anniversary of Victory Day, which marks the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany. The annual parade in Moscow boasts pictures of famous Soviet and Russian leaders and heroes standing atop the Kremlin, watching all the new military weapons roll by. For U.S. intelligence, it's like Christmas Day, as analysts are gifted a treasure trove of new military hardware to parse and analyze. But for anyone old enough to remember World War II, it's a recollection of despair. A Russian associate once told me that those who died early and quickly were the war's only victors. He took pleasure in the fact that Russia, whose chances of survival were dismissed by much of the world, handed to the Germans everything they had dealt out and more.

My father, who was born in Hungary, fought in World War II in his own way. Hungary allied with Germany and sent troops to fight Russia. A forced laborer, my father was at Voronezh north of Stalingrad, where the Hungarians and other allies were deployed. From his point of view, the Russians and the Germans were the same in that they were to be evaded at all costs.

The war began with a treaty between Germany and Russia. Together they agreed to invade Poland, which they did comfortably, with Russia taking the eastern portion. For Germany, the treaty with Russia vastly increased the chances of defeating Poland. Germany was unsure about it; it would be their first major campaign, and Berlin didn't know how well Poland or its own army, for that matter, would fight. A German attack from the west and a Russian attack from the east simplified the matter. In any case, Germany saw Poland as the first step in a far more ambitious campaign. It wanted Europe, and Europe included Russia. Berlin intended to turn on Russia in Poland and drive toward Moscow to subdue a country of vast resources. The ensuing war lasted until 1945. The truth is we will never know how many died, only that a generation's representatives stood in front of the Kremlin when the first parade was held.

To be sure, Russians regard the war as a brutal obscenity, but they also regard it as sacred. The dead might not be saints, but, in Russians' eyes, they are worthy of the name. The viciousness of the Stalin regime is no secret, yet many in Russia still regard the war as a moment of test and triumph, a time that proved its worth on a global stage. Russians regarded their country as a superpower for a generation – not just because it had nuclear weapons but because it had the Red Army, which defeated Hitler and conquered much of Europe. Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Romanians and half of

all Germans bent their knees to Russia. It was not conquest by invasion, according to the Russians, but the consequence of self-defense.

Many Russians saw the collapse of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to become Western. To others, it was an embarrassment. Russia was not in their eyes the land of the heroes of World War II but a land of weakness. It had proved wanting. The land of Gen. Georgy Zhukov, the great commander of World War II, was now in the hands of shifty oligarchs.

The idea that the Russians had done this to themselves through corruption and weakness was as unbearable as such a fate might be to other countries. It was even worse since Russia had defeated Hitler and Napoleon. Russians saved Moscow because of the great distance they put between their capital and Europe. Now that distance was gone. They saw the United States as the dominant force in Ukraine, which now bordered Russia. For many Russians, it was nothing less than a national catastrophe.

There are those who blame their former ally and fellow superpower in the U.S. for the fall of the Soviet Union. To them, the idea that the heroes of World War II lost their country was less palatable than the idea that it had been torn down by America – an enemy they saw as worthy of the crime. The presence of the U.S. in Poland, a country they had once conquered and ruled, is for Russia not just a cruel trick of history but a carefully laid out American plot.

I think about cultural traditions like these as the Ukraine war drags on. I will not lay out the United States' defense, but I invite you to consider the nightmare Russia went through from 1945 and how many of the places of battle and war are still spoken of with pride and bitterness by Russians today. I am an American, and I know where Fulda Gap was, but in facing a nation that is actually an enemy, it is useful to understand the nightmares and compare them to ours.

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