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WORLD WAR II MEMORY: BETWEEN RITUAL AND REALITY

- Abstract -

The article is dedicated to the matters of historical memory preservation at the individual and collective levels. The rituals of Soviet people, the creation of myths about the Great October Revolution and the Great Patriotic War have been analyzed. It has been scientifically proved that contemporary commemorative initiatives do not take into account the specifics of memorable stereotypes about the Second World War, but stir up conflict zones in society, which are skillfully used by external forces to destabilize the situation in Ukraine.

Keywords: memory, World War II, Soviet rituals, memorial structures.

The memory of the largest armed conflict events in the history of mankind seems at first glance only to be such a continuous canvas with negligible branches. In fact, it is only its official format, vested in the above-identified ceremonials and ideologically-minded clusters. This phenomenon is difficult to call a historical memory in the full understanding of this word, since it is artificially constructed from above and imposes the vision and evaluation of the hopes of the past from the loyalty point of views.

Actually, historical memory exists at the individual level and to the full extent at the corporate (group) one. In the latter case, one can also observe tangible deformations caused by considerations of community consolidation (or social cohorts) that are its bearers.

Both at the individual and corporate levels, there are significant and rather striking differences of historical reality perception. At least in modern Ukrainian

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society in the last quarter of the twentieth century not just a backlash, but confronting memory models were possible to observe.

Quite often, the memory of an individual does not coincide with the model of memory of the cohort he belongs to. So, mentality, values and political orientations are formed at the individual level under the influence of genetic keys, upbringing conditions, education, social relations, career trajectories, etc. It can be only explained by the fact that representatives of one social group reflect opposite memorial structures.

The democratization of society at the verge of the 20th and 21st centuries contributed to the gradual leveling of contradictions sharpness between antagonistic memorial spaces. But they have not disappeared altogether and go out to the surface when tectonic political and socio-economic changes take place (elections to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, “Maidan”, and others).

Some political forces have recently exploited memorable stereotypes with an electoral purpose.

Ultimately, antistate campaigns and Russia's hybrid war against our state, inspired in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, actualized a lot of rituals associated with World War II.

Most of the memories of those who survived the war have been pierced with pain for the dead and the extreme survival conditions.

After the death of relatives in battles and owing to illnesses, the most traumatic segment is connected with the hardship during the war years. Loss of property, constant source of the family budget replenishment, forced and compulsory migration have deprived people of a comfortable social environment and the most essential everyday items as well. But the widespread shortage of food was the most devastating. The priority task was the supply of the Soviet Armed Forces, however, the rest of the citizens found themselves in a difficult position and in a catastrophic situation.

On the other hand, the Soviet party bureaucratic establishment and the senior command staff of the Red Army, the Navy and the Air Force continued to enjoy material benefits, health promotion and other sphere profits. T. Kondratieva in the monograph “Feed and rule” shows how memorable reflections recorded the privileged position of the ruling bureaucracy: “The memory of the privileged and collective imagination directly related to food consumption is affected to such an extent, and confuses praise and nostalgia that the food seems fertile and coming from someone Almighty, who feeds his bureaucratic establishment servants with almost divine food.

Perhaps one of the reasons due to collective memory formed in the context of general poverty is so much concerned with nutrition and connected with asceticism and commonplace of the leaders' other aspects of life"¹.

The thesis of asceticism needs comments. Firstly, it was a matter of a higher echelon of power, which had everything necessary for comfortable life, even in conditions of military extremism and common hardship. Secondly, this so-called "asceticism" concerned external attributes: expensive furniture, jewelry, clothes, cars, household appliances and, first of all, behavioral patterns. T. Kondratyeva writes: "During Stalin period asceticism, discipline, harsh morals and manners were the rules. The leader of the country was wearing only one model of military service jacket. Stalin's milieu clothing was of good quality, but dark shades, badly sewn in one studio in about the same style. Respectable and ritualized events at the Bolshoi Theater or concerts on the occasion of the revolutionary holidays gathered around Stalin the monotonous elite without shine: in this environment even jewelry was forbidden to women. The harshness of the atmosphere and costume, conventional behavior, gestures, habits and speeches were called a regime."²

The daughter of the editor-in-chief of the Pravda newspaper Natalia Zimianina in an interview with T. Kondratyeva said that her family's life was ritualized, "and how! The rules of the enterprises, called «regime», was fully applied to us; my father, my mother, all family members were regarded as «regime» people. All, including children. Harsh clothes, ties, silent voices, formulas of courtesy ... " The researcher notes that in one form or another the ritual was present in everyday life of all Soviet citizens. The ideological content of the rituals that sanctified the political, social and economic system in the USSR played an important role in the legitimization of the totalitarian regime. Foreign scholars point out that, whereas in other industrial societies such events played a secondary, marginal role, Bolshevik rituals became an effective mobilization tool. So, in various spheres of public and private life in the USSR Christel Lan distinguishes the ritual component in the following forms: family (birth, baptism, funeral), admission to collective life (reception in the ranks of pioneers, komsomol members, Communists), civilian matters (obtaining passports, recruiting to the army), the cult of war, labor and nature, revolutionary holidays etc. The researcher defines all this as "political religion". In this case, it doesn't imply a religion in the conventional sense, but a purely secular order, which completely took off from ideological attitudes. Since "a civil religion" in the United States and France only structurally arranged sociological relations, in the USSR "it has always been aimed at a comprehensive

¹Kondratev, T., *Kormit i pravit. O vlasti v Rossii XVI–XX vv.*, ROSSPEN, Moscow, 2009, p.145.

² Ibidem, p.146.

philosophy of existence and needed exclusively faithfulness. The Soviet ritual was a two-way one: both religious and secular³.

P. Kyrydon noted in his work “The ruling nomenclature of the USSR (1945-1964)” that “the tradition of implying, molding manners, behavior, even the habits of political leaders has developed amongst the managers since the Stalin era”⁴.

Models of behavior professed by the Bolshevik rulers after the revolution were quickly transformed into traditions, and they, in turn, were overgrown with appropriate rituals. The latter ones were called to form mental cliches that cloned the consciousness of those who provided the Soviet party apparatus with “unanimous” support, ironically formulated by the wits as “endorsement”.

The pivotal concept of ideological treatment of mass consciousness and the formation of necessary ranks of collective memory clusters in the interwar years became the “Great October Socialist Revolution” that gave rise to the Bolshevik regime. It was supplemented by smaller state holidays: May 1, March 8, the anniversary of the USSR formation and the Stalin Constitution (1936), anniversaries of prominent figures of the labour and communist movement, anniversaries of the Communist Party, the Komsomol, the Red Army, and many others, which were mostly political.

The pathos of revolutionary transformation of the world, “the liberation of labour people,” “universal freedom, equality and brotherhood combined all forms of holiday celebration and historical events of this scale.” It should be noticed that slogans, speeches, and executive directives on the occasion of these holidays were permeated with declarative statements, which further distanced themselves from the real affairs in the state. Therefore, the ruling elite solved the twofold task: firstly, deceiving the society, inspired to believe in the only possible and correct course that the authorities professed; and, secondly, used holidays to mobilize ordinary citizens to perform the above-identified “top” tasks.

Commemoration of the events with the status of public holidays was massive and total as well: both by the covered number of citizens and by the methods of their organization. Extremely popular parades, solemn gatherings, party forums became the means of a continuous zombification of society and the establishment of new customs and traditions that were eventually canonized and overgrown with various forms of glorification. Given the almost complete lack of individual or even family-related cultural leisure (except for censored literature reading), the authorities turned massive festivities and recreational landscapes into

³ C. Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society. The Soviet Case*, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 36–41, 252.

⁴ Kiridon, P., *Pravlyacha nomenklatura UkraYinskoYi RSR (1945 – 1946 rr.)*, TOV «ASMI», Poltava, 2012, p.156.

an area of ideological influence. Entertainments, lectures, concerts in the Palaces of culture and clubs, theatrical performances, other activities, along with leisure components contained expressive elements of mental invasion. Periodical and frequent repetition of these actions vested them with ideological and behavioral constants and archetypes.

There were several rituals directed personally by J. Stalin. One of them is connected with the functioning of higher echelon of power and management. For the closest milieu, the leader suggested two types of meetings: a late working dinner, where the most important issues of the country's life were discussed, or the protracted drunken feasts, during which Stalin put his psychological experiments on subordinates.

The work of the apparatus of the Central Committee of the CPSU (Bolsheviks), CPC and the Supreme Soviet of the USSR was organized on the basis of another principle. One of the former high-ranking officials Y. Koroliyov recalled that ordinary employees of the Presidium of the Verkhovna Rada went home after 19:00, while their leaders worked on another schedule. "They began their working day at 11:00 – 11:30 a.m., then went to lunch at 3 and returned to work at 6 – 7 p.m. The main affairs were postponed exactly in the evening and lasted until 10 – 11 p.m. And then the most uncertain time came. In the Kremlin, they looked at the windows of the RCP building, where Stalin's rooms were located on the second floor, and they were guided by the windows' illumination: if he had been there, or he had left." Koroliyov acknowledges the night work until 1 – 2 a.m. was really a waste of time. "Everyone called in with each other, the high-ranking officials checked the presence of ordinary employees, and the ordinary employees – the low-ranking ones. Being absent at the service was considered a violation of the order"⁵.

Along with the rituals of carnival content, there were two other varieties: purely political, and repressive and legal as well. The first one includes the party congresses and meetings, information events (lectures, readings, and interviews), meetings of the Soviet party activists, gatherings, conferences, etc. The second included mass events concerning the "witch hunt", so-called "enemies of the people". The open trials of all kinds of "pests", "saboteurs", oppositionists, "spies of many intelligence" and hostile agents, as well as the gathering of labour collectives whose directors sought unanimous approval of sentences for many innocent people, actually turned citizens into collective hostages of those, who concentrated power in their hands and tried to overthrow the wrong decisions and failures on imaginary "anti-Soviet elements".

⁵ Korolyov, Yu., *KremlYovskiy sovetnik*, Olimp, Moscow, 1995, pp.47-48.

Negative marking of all those who were arbitrarily attributed to the top of the “controlling elements”, “opponents of the Soviet government”, took place in such a way as if the masses themselves judged and punished death their enemies. All displays of loyalty also acquired the character of the ritual form and formed the basis of reverse legal actions.

Such an algorithm of the “Great Patriotic War” myth immediately within its beginning and completion in a certain ritual form became indispensable, an inherent means of legitimizing the Bolshevik regime.

The documentary and especially art fiction about Stalin were ritualized down to the limit. Their pivotal concept was formed with several “refreshments”:

a) Stalin is the embodiment of collective will, mind and ability to solve epoch-making tasks;

b) Stalin is an indisputable leader of the international communist movement, who defended the interests of labour people;

c) finally, Stalin is a loving “father of the nation” who is concerned about national fate and prosperity, close to the people, simple and even a little shy in communication.

The official image of the leader drawn by ideologues and artists was reproduced by all possible means: literature, cinema, creolized products, fine arts. Particular weight was attached to the monumental propaganda addressed to the future generations. In some cities and towns of Ukraine monuments and busts to the omnipotent Lord had stood until the mid-1950s although the process of de-Stalinization had already lasted for several years.

A special place in the mobilized tools of the Kremlin was the leader’s vocabulary. The ritual nature of Stalin’s speeches, in addition to the external entourage and obligatory attributes, was intended to strengthen the people’s faith in the fact that the most brilliant leader of the country generates fateful ideas. The extraordinary, sacred status of the head of state, by definition, did not assume a deviation from the course he outlined in foreign and domestic politics. This symbolic connection of the articulated concepts and practical steps towards their implementation was supported by means of total control and repression of those who actively or passively opposed them.

Let’s cite some examples of how the first person in the country tested and brought up the party-state apparatus and society with certain directions of the political “party line”.

On May 5 1941 a reception for graduates of military academies took place in Moscow. While speaking to the military elite of the state, Stalin voiced the core of the Soviet military doctrine, the concept of an offensive war. In order to clarify it should be noted that the aggressor was expected to be given a worthy rebuff after

attack, and the offensive to go on and extend on the enemy's territory until its complete defeat. After the solemn part the speaker personally made remarks to the speakers, who demonstrated an inaccurate understanding of his postulates.

On July 3 1941, in two weeks after the start of the war, the leader spoke on the radio addressing to the Soviet citizens: “Brothers and sisters!” And on November 7 1941, on the 24th anniversary of the October Revolution parade, he outlined an expanded version of the analysis of the Red Army’s defeat causes. The official version of events and their assessment were laid in various ritual forms of the mass consciousness. Consequently, the causes of the disaster (not recognized, of course), were submitted in the following factors:

- Wehrmacht mobilization on the USSR border when the Soviet Union consistently adhered to neutrality;
- Soviet tanks and planes were better than German (according to some indicators and models it was true), but they were much less than the enemy’s;
- Wehrmacht movement on the USSR territory caused a loss of 4.5 million killed and wounded.

This refrain in several leader’s speeches was intended to affirm the image of the USSR as a peace-loving state, a victim of aggression, and to mobilize Soviet people to repel the enemy⁶.

On May 24, 1945 Stalin made a famous toast for the “Russian people”: he outlined his own vision of the hierarchy of peoples and the nature of the relations between the people and the ruling elite. Having analyzed the toast, G. Bordiugov and V. Bukhariev have expressed the thesis that this toast “forms a certain mythological space”, in which the leading place “is occupied by ethno-cultural, not socio-cultural factors”⁷.

Immediately after the war the new forms of ritual officialese including Victory Day (May 9) emerged. But soon, under the influence of the apparent disproportion between what the winners really received, and proclaimed by the authorities, this holiday was eliminated from the register of official annual ceremonies. But as soon as the country had healed the scars of war, the myth of the Great Patriotic War gained new momentum. Since 1965, it has been resuscitated and indoctrinated into mass consciousness through the war glorification and romanticism, on the one hand, and by the fall into oblivion both public opinion, and scientific discourse, that are inconvenient and trivial pages of this epic.

⁶ Solonin, Mark, 22 *iyunya. Anatomiya katastrofy*, “Yauza”, “Eksmo”, Moscow, 2009, pp.6–7.

⁷ Bordyugov, G., Buharaev, V., *Natsionalnyie istorii v revolyutsiyah i konfliktah sovetskoy epohi*, Seriya “AIRO – nauchnyie doklady i diskussii. Temyi dlya XXI veka”, Moscow, Vyip. 5, 1999, pp.33–34.

It would be an exaggeration to assert that human losses have been forgotten. They just did not accentuate the attention, although the sacrifice of Soviet people in the fight against the enemy became one of the supporting structures of the great myth of the war.

The official commemorative format focused on traditional values: the role of the Communist Party, mass heroism of front soldiers, “nationwide” resistance to the enemy on the occupied territories, victory of the rear workers.

At the same time, according to the tradition that began with the October Revolution, the outpost of the struggle against “Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism” was based on discrediting, forming the image of “enemies of the people” around the participants of the Ukrainian independent movement, policemen, soldiers of the SS Division Galicia. By mixing “all the eggs in one basket,” the ideologues put an equal sign between those who swore allegiance to Stalin and the party, and those who never burdened themselves with such obligations.

Nevertheless, the authorities managed to impose a black and white matrix on the war memory.

But there had already been a watershed between the official mnemonic template and individual memory. In small towns and villages which had its own memorials, fraternal graves and other memorial places, May 9 didn’t sound a bravura march, but tumultuous songs and requiem for the fallen. People gathered for meetings, but the atmosphere of sorrow and honoring the relatives taken away by the war started rulers was dominated over the stage, scenic action.

According to our belief, unlike official commemorations, local memorable practices required decommunization procedures at least. Moreover, touching on very delicate personal feelings, the above-imposed algorithm of “breaking” from the Soviet past wasn’t accustomed among those who connected the Stalinist totalitarian regime with the “Victory”, but with the people contribution to enemy destruction and the victims put on this altar sacrificially.

Civilization values professed by a significant (if not the largest) part of Ukrainian society are poorly corrected to the satisfaction of the current politicians. Deep rooted, hardened in trials, legitimized by historical retrospective and prospect they crystallize the mental core of the modern Ukrainian political nation, hinder its bringing into misleading points, and allow vanguards of consonant progress, freedom and democracy to be kept.

Those who “play in war” in the East of Ukraine today, haven’t drawn anything from history lessons. It is well known that the lovely Clio punishes for it rigorously.

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