

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Victory Day in Moscow

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Q1: What does the Victory Day parade tell us about where Russia is today?

A1: Vladimir Putin has presided over project “restore Russia,” and the May 9 military parade with tanks and bombers passing through Red Square is but one in a vast array of Kremlin efforts to both manage public perceptions and nurture Soviet nostalgia. Inside Russia, the desire for these symbols seems genuine; majorities of even young Russians believe that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century,” which is hard for outsiders to fathom, given that literally millions of Russians died in World War II and millions more in the Gulag. To outsiders, the military parade seems part of the politics of distraction and the rewriting of history, an important characteristic of the Putin, and now Dimitry Medvedev, Kremlin style.

What will not be discussed tomorrow is that young Russian men continue to sacrifice. Eight years after Vladimir Putin became president, the Russian army is still underfed, undertrained, and committing crimes against its own young recruits. Labor trafficking inside the Russian army is said to be pervasive. A brutal form of hazing, *dedovschina*, continues to this day, despite the fact that it is illegal and overwhelming majorities of all Russians want those officers that tolerate hazing to be prosecuted. One of the metrics to gage whether or not President Medvedev is a reformer is whether this situation inside the armed forces changes. In the eight years under President Putin it did not.

The last time tanks rolled through Red Square the Soviet Union still existed, and somehow, I found myself part of the parade. That was Revolution Day, November 1990. I was in Moscow researching a book on the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. That day, a few hapless friends and I could not stay away from Red Square. We did a pretty good job at playing the clueless tourist card and talked our way through barricade after barricade, down the main street of Moscow where no ordinary civilians, let alone foreigners, were meant to pass until finally, we somehow landed in the middle of the columns of hundreds of “volunteers” that had been recruited to walk through Red Square and cheer behind the tanks—an unlikely spot for a critic of the Soviet Union. Sitting in Washington today, I am struck that those governing Russia—Dmitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin—also believe, like their Soviet predecessors, that tanks and guns are *the* important symbols of Russia’s greatness. Sadly, I suspect many Russians would agree.

Q2: Is the impending expulsion of two U.S. military officers from Moscow linked to the parade?

A2: We need to know more about it, but this tit for tat occurs occasionally. While researching U.S.-Russian military relations back in summer 2001, I interviewed U.S. military officers in Moscow who had just been informed they would be expelled. These expulsions come with the territory and have nothing to do with the work of a specific officer. So an explanation that is linked to the Victory Day parade and Russian nationalism seems overdetermined. Certainly, there is plenty of evidence of Russian nationalism, and even support for Joseph Stalin. But this expulsion is but one sign among many that U.S.-Russian relations are far from cozy 17 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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