In 2020, on the occasion of the 77\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the liberation of Donbas from German fascists, the song “Donbas is behind us” was heard for the first time. It received great acclaim on the official, i.e. regime-affiliated, Russian scene, won the Russian song festival on the 75\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Victory Day (\textit{Den Pobedy}), and began to be described by (pro-)Russian propagandists as the unofficial anthem of Donbas. In a song full of ambiguous metaphors and historical allusions, it is not entirely clear what era it is actually about. It speaks of a beast awakening in darkness, a leap year, a land that has not betrayed the memory of its forefathers, of Russian strength regained, of a Donbas backed by Russia and God, etc, etc. When speaking of the song, its composer, Mikhail Khokhlov, its lyricist, Vladimir Skobtsov, and its two young performers, Natalia Kachura and Margarita Lisovina from the Anatolii Solovianenko Donetsk State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre (\textit{Donetskii gosudarstvennyi akademicheskii teatr opery i baleta imeni A. B. Solovianenko}), made reference to current Russian-Ukrainian relations and emphasized the song’s popularity among Russian “militias” and other Donbas residents. They claimed it was helping to raise hopes for a new “liberation”, in this case from the Ukrainian “fascists”. A video of the song shot in 2021 pushed the historical comparison even further. It mixes images of the Second World War and the present and culminates in a scene in which a modern Russian militiaman and resident of Donbas shakes hands with a Red Army soldier of 1944.\footnote{The video clip of Donbass za nami is available on YouTube. It premiered on 11 May 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMj5qD0sJ6Q. [Accessed 2022-10-21]}
Songs, War Mythology, and the Politically Shaped Memory

Though “Donbas is behind us” may not have achieved the desired effect in Eastern Ukraine, in many ways it reflected trends that prevail in the official memory of the Second World War or the Great Patriotic War in modern Russia. These include the blurring of various spatiotemporal boundaries and contexts, such as that separating reality and fiction, the grim reality of war versus its glamorized retelling, and, above all, the return to the myth of the Great Patriotic War (Ve
likaia Otechestvennaia voina), with its central themes of heroism, collective sacrifice, unity and triumphant victory. While many authors claim this narrative was forged most intensively during Brezhnev’s reign, in fact, as the British historian Catherine Merridale shows in her book Ivan’s War, the propagandist image and myth of the Soviet war began to crystallize before Germany had even invaded the Soviet Union. By myth, Merridale means a purposefully created and maintained image of a victorious campaign of selfless, unprecedented Soviet heroism, unity of effort, an image purged of all internal contradictions, devoid of the terror, error, chaos, unnecessary losses, hopelessness, desertion, alcoholism, filth and the influence of the security forces, not to mention the political settlements of Stalin’s regime and the war crimes committed by the Red Army.

And thus, in modern Russia the opposite trend can be observed in relation to the Second World War from that which featured in Eastern and Central Europe after the fall of communism and the Soviet empire, when a major political break also

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2 Similar practices, in which an equivalence is drawn between a German Nazi or fascist and an alleged Ukrainian (neo-)Nazi, appear in other music videos and are a common feature of the multimedia spectacles organized around celebrations of Victory Day at the headquarters of the Night Wolves in Crimea (for more on the Night Wolves, see below).


4 MERRIDALE, Catherine: Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945. London – New York, Faber&Faber – Metropolitan Books 2005. This is not, of course, an exclusively Soviet or Russian phenomenon. For more on the mythification of modern wars, especially the First World War, see MOSSE, George L.: Fallen Soldiers? Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars. New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press 1990. There is a discussion to be had on how the myth of war is established in a particular society, how it is deployed politically, and how much space it leaves for alternative memories.
necessitated a reassessment of the past on many levels. This, however, was preceded by a relatively stormy process involving the diversification, reconstruction, rediscovery and clash of historical memories.\(^5\) Instead of the memory “games” and “wars” between different groups that ensued from the decentralization and pluralization of power,\(^6\) in Russia, in contrast, a single dominant narrative of the Great Patriotic War is once again reasserting its status as the central event of the national history in the twentieth century. This is undoubtedly related to efforts being made to fill the ideological void left by the collapse of the Soviet regime, to conceal the often negative experiences of post-communist development, and to create the foundations for a positive collective identity of a highly diverse Russian society – in the words of Raymond Aron, “to restore the moral unity” of the country.\(^7\) Notwithstanding the fact that this was not war-torn Germany, severely damaged by the First World War, but a Russia undermined by political, social and economic developments. Yet, in both cases the parameters of this “restoration” – by sheer coincidence also cultivating the myth of war – had disastrous consequences.

If the Great Patriotic War was to become, as indeed it did under Leonid Ilich Brezhnev, a source of collective pride, unity and celebrated virtues, the highly complex, internally contradictory, and potentially divisive central theme of victory over fascism had to be recast into a simple, universally acceptable and intelligible narrative, a kind of foundational myth. The idea was that by returning to it repeatedly, the Russian nation would consolidate its self-glorification,\(^8\) rather than interrogating its self-esteem and greatness by relativizing its memory and the virtues being recollected. Equally important to the constructivist approach as the symbolic codes of collective identity are the symbolic codes of difference relating to the delineation of mutual boundaries.\(^9\) From this perspective, the mass identi-

\(^{5}\) See, for example, BROSSAT, Alain – COMBE, Sonia – POTEL, Jean-Yves – SZUREK, Jean-Richard (eds.): À l’Est, la mémoire retrouvée. Paris, La Découverte 1990.


The Eternal Legacy of the Great Patriotic War?

A recognition with the victorious campaign against the fascists finds its reflection in the Russian imaginary of the foreign world as either threatening or inferior. There is much to suggest that memories of the Great Patriotic War, undoubtedly still vivid, have been assigned a nation- and identity-shaping role in contemporary Russia. This shifts us from considerations of the collective memory to considerations of nationalism, in which it is common for historical memory to engage in the service of the nation and for the criterion of truth to comprise not so much fact-based objectivity but the purported national interest. However, what is relevant in the case of Russia is that the direct mobilization of individuals through shared symbols and rituals in the name of patriotism has intersected with the state interest, or to be more precise, with the interest of Putin’s political regime. The result is that a certain version of the past acquires the status of official, incontrovertible truth, promoted and controlled by the state.

It is clear that President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin has once again turned the victory over fascism not only into a source of collective pride and the fulcrum of national identity, but also into an important pillar of domestic and international politics, and thus an object of power practices. Memories of the Second World War are once again the object of authoritarian interference, control, restriction and manipulation. A quasi-religious narrative has enclosed these memories within a sacred aura, and any rational efforts to revise the myth are denounced as representing a heretical distortion of the truth – the truth in this case being determined by state interests. This approach is reinforced by means of laws against the desecration of war memorials, disrespect being shown to the memory of war veterans, and the rehabilitation of fascism, while criminal sanctions can be imposed on those who would question the state’s promotion of the legacy of the Great Patriotic War. This policy is applied and manifest on many levels through the mobilization of traditional and modern instruments. The war with the Third Reich, or rather a certain image of it stripped of all traumatic details, has become ubiquitous again by means of commemorative events and

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programmes, ceremonies, awareness-raising and educational projects, museums, the state-controlled media, show business, and, most recently, social media.\textsuperscript{11} The purpose of this mobilization appears to be the preservation of a living link with the past even after the last survivors have passed away. In the words of the German cultural scholar Aleida Assmann, the aim is to create a selective “inhabited memory” that bridges the gap between past and present.\textsuperscript{12} The patriotic education of Russian children, like that of Soviet children (and the children of the former Soviet satellites), is based above all on socialization in the spirit of the myth of the Great Patriotic War.\textsuperscript{13} The return to myth means that contextualized information and facts are jettisoned in favour of images and emotions that are free to cross the boundaries of time and space (as in the song “Donbas is behind us” referred to above). Traditional heroes, such as Panfilov’s 28 or Timur’s boys, return to the scene,\textsuperscript{14} because the great tidings they bring are more

\textsuperscript{11} Television programmes combine Second World War-themed programmes with elements of reality TV, as, for instance, when people search for their fallen ancestors, the bodies of whom have never been found, with the help of television crews. See also OUSHAKINE, Sergei Alex [USHAKIN, Sergei Aleks]: Remembering in Public: On the Affective Management of History. In: Ab Imperio [online], Vol. 1 (2013), pp. 269–302. [Accessed 2022-10-21.] Available at: https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/oushakine/files/075-remembering_in_public_on_the_affective_management_of_history.pdf. Since 2019, a special television station called Victory (Pobeda), dedicated entirely to the Great Patriotic War, has broadcast non-stop in Russia. Modern social media allows images to be multiplied and merged into the entertainment industry.


\textsuperscript{13} Regarding the parallels between Soviet and contemporary Russian patriotic education in schools, see, for example, the following two texts, each dealing with a different, albeit similar, period: KONKKA, Olga: Teaching and Remembering the Great Patriotic War in Soviet Schools. In: HOFFMAN, D. L. (ed.): The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia, pp. 86–106; EFIMOV, Artiom: Uchebnik istorii [A History Textbook]. In: Signal Meduzy: Archiv [online]. (Signal, No. 50: Kak Kreml vruchnuuiu upravliaiet proshlym [How the Kremlin Manages the Past]), 11. 07. 2022. [Accessed 2022-10-21.] Available at: https://us10.campaign-archive.com/?u=ff4a009ba1f59d8665f0301f85&id=5ad10d7874. Signal is a podcast of the Russian-English independent online news channel Meduza.io, which operates abroad having closed down operations in its homeland.

\textsuperscript{14} Panfilov’s 28 was a platoon of twenty-eight Soviet guardsmen, named after their commander, General Ivan Vasilevich Panfilov, which allegedly held back the advance on Moscow of German troops in November 1941 at the cost of their own lives, destroying eighteen enemy tanks in the process. Two films have been made in the USSR and Russia based on the story, though some question its credibility. Timur’s boys is a reference to Arkadii Gaidar’s iconic 1940 children’s novel Timur i ego komanda [Timur and His Gang], which was made into a film in the
important than mere historical reality. As the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs pointed out, historiographic objectivity does not particularly serve the interests of a specific collective. Within the Czech context, where the ideologically inflated stories of Soviet wartime heroism on which entire generations (including my own) were raised were revised after 1989 as representing a relic of crude communist propaganda, this may seem hard to understand. The mythologization of wartime imagery, mixing memory and desire, physical and temporal facts with fiction, took on new dimensions with Russia’s annexation of Crimea, its intervention in Southeast Ukraine, and, most recently, with the current full-scale war against Ukraine, with such strategies intended to bolster Russian aggression and frame it as a continuation of the ancient struggle against fascism.

As Aleida Assmann argues, though affect is an integral part of memory and acts as a stabilizer, it is ambivalent in nature – it can be associated with both authenticity and duplicity. And so amongst the many ways of making the (Great Patriotic) War visible, songwriting stands out as the emotional medium par excellence. The anthropologist Sergei Ushakin speaks of the “affective management of emotions”, whereby participants in various memory activities are overwhelmed by emotions, while rational and cognitive processes are neglected. However,
even in the case of war songs, which are commonly deployed politically in modern Russia for patriotic poignancy and to support Putin himself, there has been an intertwining of the vividly personal and collective memory and the political project. The fact is that a revival of Soviet and modern war songs has been taking place since as far back as the mid-1990s. The boom in cover versions of old Soviet war songs and the production of new ones can be seen as representing both a response to and mutual reinforcement of audience demand, economic interest and political strategy. This has created a diverse scene in which military-themed songs are served up in all sorts of ways: bombastic concerts of Songs of Victory or Victory Day songs (9 May), often still accompanied by captivating documentary images from the war and, as the years go by, more and more unremitting commentaries, video clips, TV and YouTube channels, and selections of songs from old war movies. At the same time, old songs are recycled, sometimes with added military content that they did not originally possess, and new songs premiered. Traditional and modern war songs provide a musical accompaniment to the journeys and events of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club and the marches of the Immortal Regiment, both of which I discuss below. Let us not forget that Soviet war songs are being played during the current campaign in Ukraine. Indeed, the regime’s celebration in the Luzhniki Stadium, Moscow, in March 2022 to mark the anniversary of Crimea’s “reunification” with Russia turned into a political musical with blurred temporal boundaries. The symbols, decorations and references made by the speakers, who included Putin, brought together the myth of the Great Patriotic War, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing “special military operation” in Ukraine with war songs by pop stars from Putin’s entourage. It was no longer clear or even important as to whether

which can lead to the intermingling of different temporal and contextual levels. He also notes the creation of affective bonds through various objects, using the specific example of the Ribbon of Saint George and the modern tradition of its utilization in which it becomes, inter alia, a link between generations, both wartime and contemporary. (OUShAKINE, S. A.: Remembering in Public [online].)

20 A popular theme of social media is “Putin’s tears”, an image of the president being moved to tears at a Songs of Victory concert. The impressions of a foreigner moved by one of the Soviet or Russian wartimes or pseudo-wartime songs is then shared in similar fashion. The Second World War clips shared on social media bring to mind Milan Kundera’s “tears shed over tears”.

21 Putin rounded off his speeches on the topic of Russia’s invincibility with traditional fantasies of bravery and comradeship in combat. Russian soldiers in Ukraine, he said, are fighting “side by side”, helping each other and willing to protect the other’s body from bullets as though they were brothers. (See “Prazdnichny kontsert v Luzhnikakh” [Celebration Concert in Luzhniki]. In: YouTube [online], 19. 03. 2022, channel user Sergei Polikov. [Accessed 2022-10-21.] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkCOkos2IUa.)
these were old Soviet war songs or new Russian war songs or what particular war was actually being sung about. The event included a rendition of “Donbas is behind us” and one of its singers.

And so, the video clip in which a modern-day Russian militiaman from Donbas shakes hands with a soldier from the Soviet Red Army is neither a hallucinatory trip nor a piece of crazy performance art, but a well thought out piece of propaganda and a typical example of Putin’s politics of memory. For the Czech viewer it is remarkable in at least another two respects. Firstly, Czechoslovakia experienced a similar cognitive dissonance brought about by the symbolic intermingling of historical figures after the military invasion by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968. Secondly, one version of the song “Donbas is behind us” on YouTube has Czech subtitles. There is thus a demonstrable interest in exporting the myth of the Great Patriotic War and its political upgrades, and there are resources and agents already actively involved in this project. Without wanting to draw far-reaching parallels or comparisons between widely differing contexts, I think it is instructive given the perverse political use and abuse of the Great Patriotic War myth to look back upon similar practices in our not too distant past, and to examine the channels through which the revived myth is being smuggled into Czech society, which up till now has accepted that subjecting said myth to critical review is a natural and necessary part of the process of distancing itself from the communist regime. In short, in this text I shall examine how the myth of the Great Patriotic War was manifest in the promotion of Brezhnev’s doctrine of limited sovereignty, and how it is being advanced in today’s pluralist democracy as one of the vehicles for the dissemination of the “Russian world”.

“**They Came in Time**”

When the Soviet army, along with other Warsaw Pact troops, invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968, it heavily relied for its legitimacy on the legacy of the Red Army as liberator from German fascist domination. The Soviet narrative claimed

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22 In the same way, the boundaries between culture or art and politics were blurred, especially since the performing artists also currently hold or have held various positions in the Russian presidential administration or actively supported Putin during the presidential elections.

23 See “Donbass je za námi a s námi Bůh”. In: YouTube [online], updated 11. 10. 2022, channel user Radmila Zemanová-Kopecká. [Accessed 2022-10-21.] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qaAXiQVhs.

24 In the context of Russian-Ukrainian relations, Tatiana Zhurzhenko speaks directly of “weaponization through memory” of the Great Patriotic War by Russia (ZHURZHENKO, T.: In the Shadow of Victory [online]).
the invasion was essential in order to quash alleged counter-revolutionary tendencies and drew on even older historical associations dating back to the early days of the building of the first communist state. However, Soviet officers enforced acceptance of these ideas by recalling and appropriating the unquestioned merits of the Red Army. Said merits had little or no chance of being subjected to a realistic assessment in communist Czechoslovakia after the war. Love and admiration for the Soviet Union, and for the Soviet liberators doubly so, was one of the main pillars of the regime’s ideological socialization of its citizenry, a process from which young children were not spared. As well as “explaining” the situation as it unfolded in 1968, Soviet politruks, i.e. political commissars or officers responsible for ideological education and organization, gave lectures on the liberation of 1945, Czechoslovak-Soviet military operations, and on the friendship that arose and was sealed with blood during the joint campaign against fascism. They presented themselves as the successors and “sons” of the liberators, and, in order to ratchet up the volume of their claims, they enlisted the services of veterans and others who had actually fought during the war. At the same time, they were forever reminding Czechoslovakia of the obligations linked with this friendship forged in the white-hot flame of combat, which would naturally be passed on to the descendants of the liberators. In the instructions they received regarding political education and propaganda, the Soviet political commissars were advised to establish friendly relations with the population and Czechoslovak soldiers by appealing to shared memories of the war. They were to show films and disseminate materials on liberation and the victorious hand-to-hand struggle against fascism and organize excursions to the “sites of battles that took place during the Second World War”.

Moreover, Soviet propaganda also took advantage of the fact that vivid images of liberation, often associated with the enthusiastic welcome given to the Red Army, still resonated in society and were later canonized in poems, photographs and documents. The deliberate conflation of historical levels and contexts, from which was to arise the figure of the eternal Soviet saviour and selfless friend, appears to have culminated on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the liberation in 1970. In an issue of Svět socialismu [The World of Socialism], the magazine of the Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship, devoted to the end of

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25 In addition to claims of “counter-revolution”, with its allusions to the events of 1956 in Hungary, the Soviets regularly used the phrase “white terror”, which was allegedly directed against local comrades and supporters of Soviet policy.

The front page of the May 8, 1970 issue of the Svět socialismu [World of Socialism] magazine with the emblematic title "They Came in Time", referring to the liberation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops on its twenty-fifth anniversary and, at the same time, to the Soviet army’s intervention against the alleged counter-revolution in August 1968.
the war and the Soviet liberators, featured a colour photograph on its front page of two modern-day Soviet soldiers with smiles on their faces, holding an accordion and engaged in convivial conversation with two small boys. The scene is framed by Prague Castle and accompanied by the caption “They Came in Time”. The editors thus succeeded in illustrating visually the verse with which the national poet Vítězslav Nezval became one of many to praise the soldiers of the Red Army in the immediate aftermath of the war: “They came in time, as legendary troops from ancient chronicles. They won! Now they sit huddled around accordions”. The image of the timeless Soviet soldier who selflessly came to the aid of the Czechoslovak people was hammered home in the media during the period of normalization with stories from “everyday life” and variations on the theme of “hard times will always reveal true friends”. Soviet soldiers became the personification of traditional virtues such as courage, selflessness, guilelessness, self-sacrifice, good-heartedness and so on. With their simple scenarios and flattened archetypes, these stories were reminiscent of traditional folktales, though also of the popular war epic Vasilii Terkin by Aleksandr Tvardovskii.

Music and singing were an important tool for strengthening the emotional bond with Soviet heroes. In the initial phase of the occupation, the political wing of the Soviet army was keen to arrange social meetings with different groups of the Czechoslovak population (including pre-school children). These gatherings would always combine the ideological (lectures and stories) with the emotional (music, song, dance and entertainment). The propaganda offensive included performances of music and dance by military ensembles and garrison bands, which featured, among other genres, a wide repertoire of wartime songs carefully attuned to the occasion and the audience. Following the example of the Alexandrov Ensemble (Ansambl Aleksandrova), the Central Group of Forces formed its own song and dance group at its headquarters in Milovice, Central Bohemia, in early 1969. It choreographed historical scenes from wartime Czechoslovakia, such as the Carpatho-Dukla Operation (a military campaign to liberate Czechoslovakia during the Second World War), the Prague Uprising, and the liberation of Prague by the Red Army.

27 NEZVAL, Vítězslav: Přišli včas. In: Rudé právo (17. 5. 1945), p. 1. The poem was later reprinted several times in collections of the author’s work and other anthologies.


29 The Central Group of Forces (Tsentralnaia gruppa voisk) was a formation of the Soviet Armed Forces used to incorporate Soviet troops in Central Europe on two occasions: in Austria and Hungary from 1945 to 1955 and troops stationed in Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring of 1968.
One aspect of political “normalization” in Czechoslovakia after 1968, during which the rigid conditions of the communist regime that had prevailed prior to the Prague Spring reform period were restored, involved acceptance of the Soviet version of said reforms and the Warsaw Pact invasion of the country in August 1968, and with it the “temporary” deployment of the Soviet army. In September 1969, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Ústřední výbor Komunistické strany Československa, ÚV KSČ) officially declared that the invasion by Warsaw Pact troops represented international assistance in the fight against the threat of counter-revolution. This stance was confirmed a little later by a canonical political pamphlet entitled *Poučení z krizového vývoje*[^30] (Lessons to Be Drawn from the Crisis) and the Fourteenth Communist Party Congress in 1971. Though dark mutterings of the threat of counter-revolution and August’s “fraternal assistance” acquired the status of officially sanctioned doctrine, the cult of August as an important communist milestone failed to take off. From around 1973 onwards, the Soviet army’s contribution to saving the country from a supposed counter-revolutionary coup ceased to be mentioned in the same breath as the invasion of 21 August, and references to it gradually died out altogether. More precisely, the opportunity to refer to said contribution remained, but was used haphazardly and sporadically. The normalization regime decided that discretion was the best form of valour as regards the circumstances of the Soviet army’s entry into Czechoslovakia, thus obscuring the origins of its presence from younger generations. By contrast, the cult of the Great Patriotic War and the fight against fascism shoulder-to-shoulder with the Soviet army, which appropriated and continued to cultivate the legacy of the Red Army as liberator, intensified after 1968 in Czechoslovakia and persisted until the end of 1989.[^31]

The main symbol of the revitalization of the cult of the Red Army was the magnificent Dukla Battle Memorial (*Památník bitvy na Dukle*), sometimes called the Memorial of Class Brotherhood (*Památník třídního bratrství*) or of Combat Brotherhood (*Památník bojového bratrství*), which the high command of the Central Group of Forces had built in 1971 in its grounds in Milovice-Mladá not far from Prague, even though both a monument and museum already existed at the site of the joint Czechoslovak-Soviet wartime operation in Slovakia. The main attraction of the Milovice memorial was a twenty-two-metre-wide and seven-metre-high

[^30]: The complete title is *Poučení z krizového vývoje ve straně a společnosti po XIII. sjezdu KSČ* [Lessons to be Learned from the Crisis Developments in the Party and Society after the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia]. Praha, Státní pedagogické nakladatelství 1972.

diorama of the Dukla battlefield featuring light and sound effects. The Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship (Svaz československo-sovětského přátelství) was responsible for organizing tours for worker, educational and other collectives, and in January 1977 they welcomed their quarter-millionth visitor. The significance of this iconic space was underlined by numerous accompanying events and ceremonies, such as the swearing of pioneer oaths, gatherings of friendly military units, and the honouring of socialist labour brigades. The transfer of the memorial site (including soil from the battleground itself) to Milovice created a spatial link between the honour paid to the Red Army liberators (including the emotional experience of the battles depicted in the diorama) and the Central Group of Forces. It was to this that crowds flocked to pay their respects and express their gratitude to the war heroes. It goes without saying that the significance of the operation itself was not to be thrown in doubt by any consideration of its strategic purpose or command tactics, and the propaganda effect was not to be undermined by any infelicitous reflections upon unnecessary casualties.

The myth of the Great Patriotic War enjoyed a new lease of life under the auspices of the Soviet army in Czechoslovakia, which upgraded its inviolability and in the process helped burnish its own positive image. Just as, following the events of August 1968, images of the Red Army as liberator and of friendship “sprinkled with blood” had concealed the reality of a hostile military invasion, so, during the subsequent period of normalization, the very same images were to provide an acceptable veneer to the unseemly conduct of the Soviet garrisons stationed in Czechoslovakia. The services provided by the normalization regime to the “temporarily resident” Soviet army in Czechoslovakia included the curtailment of its good name. Despite the very real problems caused by the presence of the Soviet garrisons and the havoc wreaked to their surroundings, as well as the increasing number of complaints from local residents and authorities,


33 These included extensive assistance in the financing and construction of residential buildings and storage space, the virtually unconditional fulfilment of Soviet demands regarding the provision of more and more buildings and land, the toleration of illegal practices by Soviet garrisons (arbitrary confiscation, illicit construction activities, etc.) and the subsequent legalization thereof, the clearing up of ecological and other damage at state expense, the provision of counter-intelligence protection of military facilities, and the provision of goods and services under unfavourable economic conditions. (See ibid.)

34 This included the contamination of soil, surface and groundwater with oil and chemicals, the destruction of forests, which were often illegally sequestered for military training, the rash, unrestricted movement of heavy combat materiel, excessive noise from aeroplanes and helicopters, illicit commerce, and increased levels of crime in the vicinity of Soviet garrisons and military training areas. (Ibid.)
The Eternal Legacy of the Great Patriotic War?

A media omertà consisting of strictly censored, manipulated or outright false information was enforced around the Soviet army in Czechoslovakia right up until the end of 1989. This manipulation included the image of the “sons” and even “grandsons” of the liberators, who, it was claimed, were defending peace on the western border of the socialist world. The task of the normalization regime was to stand guard over and further cultivate both this manipulation and the cult of the Great Patriotic War and Soviet wartime heroism, a task it continued to perform right up to its dying breath.

The “Russian World” in the Czech Republic

Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the Soviet army stationed in Czechoslovakia, along with the whole of the cult of the Great Patriotic War, lost the support of the regime. Soviet troops were soon withdrawn from Czechoslovakia, and the system of ideological education and communist indoctrination fell apart. Schoolchildren no longer had to learn Russian, compete as to who knew more about life in the Soviet Union, recite Soviet and Russian poems, attend screenings of Soviet war films, read stories about Soviet superheroes, sing Soviet songs, and stand around dressed in pioneer costumes shivering by the side of war memorials. Many topics that had up till then been taboo were opened up for discussion in the academic and wider environment, including the Second World War, which finally began to be more about history and less about ideology. The current reconstruction of the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War that we see going on in Putin’s Russia is encountering an incomparably more hostile reception in the Czech Republic than it did in socialist Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, attempts are being made to insinuate it into our democratic system. This is taking place with the aid of more general procedures, means and actor networks mobilized to spread the “Russian world”, i.e. what many would call hybrid warfare.

With the concept of the Russian world (russkii mir), I return to my introductory remarks regarding the construction of Russian identity and the political deployment of the memory of the Great Patriotic War, albeit this time from a somewhat broader perspective. The original philosophical and messianic conception of the 1990s sought a place for Russia and its culture on the world stage under a transformed geopolitical situation after the loss of the country’s status as one of the Great Powers. Reflections on Russian identity and Russianness emphasized the Russian language as a common discursive denominator, Russian culture, Orthodoxy and a collective historical memory. As several authors have pointed out, it was only under Putin that theory found its way into real-world political and geopolitical considerations. The “Russian world” became something of
a political marketing brand, operating within and without Russian society. What this meant in practice was that philosophical considerations became intertwined with the technology of power, and this served to blur the contours of the concept. Within the framework of the “Russian world”, the country’s language and culture – both high and low – are promoted, the Russian Orthodox Church is supported, state and economic interests are pursued, and Russian influence is leveraged abroad. However, Crimea can be occupied and war waged with Ukraine also in the name of the Russian world.35

I look at how certain practices of the Russian world, and, more specifically, the myth of the Great Patriotic War, are manifest in the Czech Republic through a wide range of media. These range from old-fashioned daily newspapers, via Russian-language compatriot outlets, social media such as YouTube, individual websites such as that of the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots (Koordinační rada ruských krajanů – KRRK), to the social networks formed around Russian compatriot associations or pro-Russian platforms and their offshoots. Individual media differ in respect of logic and rationality. They pursue different goals and set themselves different missions. They have different authorization criteria, place different demands on professionalism and accountability, objectivity and impartiality, and appeal to different audiences. Though the Russian-language expatriate press, such as the weekly Pražskii Ekspress [The Prague Express], through the mouth of its editor-in-chief nominally respects accepted journalistic principles, it can by no means be considered an impartial medium offering objective information to its readership. Both the choice and treatment of subject matter – especially since the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in 2014 – reflect the interests of the Russian state far more than they meet high journalistic benchmarks. Pro-Russian social platforms such as the Facebook group “Hej, občané!” (“Hey, Citizens!”) and the private Raptor-TV station linked to it, with their prioritization of alternative truth over what they call the mendacity of the public media and the establishment as a whole, evade accusations of manipulation by appealing to “experts” and objectivity. In addition to disseminating what is often subversive information, truths and opinions, these media perform a mobilizing role: they call for action, most often demonstrations, marches, commemorations or participation at lectures and discussion

forums. They also provide links to similar platforms. Bitter experience has proven conclusively that the democratization and decentralization of social media, now with the potential to spread an unprecedented range of subjectivities and showcase a diversity of marginalized voices in the public square, can also be used to promote completely centralized interests and goals.\textsuperscript{36} In the case of pro-Russian platforms, this ambivalence is also reflected in the way they oscillate between Czech and Russian audiences. It is obvious that part of their content is taken up by official Russian media and presented in a calculated fashion to their own public. Despite the problematic, misleading handling of reality, both Russian compatriot and pro-Russian media in the Czech Republic report on certain events,

\textsuperscript{36} See, for example, POMERANTSEV, Peter: \textit{This is Not Propaganda. Adventures in the War Against Reality}. London, Faber & Faber 2020.
and sometimes initiate or participate in them themselves, something that would otherwise remain below the radar of the public media. However, the flipside of ease of accessibility is the potential instability and transience of internet media and its openness to retroactive interference in its content, which makes this valuable source of up-to-date information highly unreliable over the long term. With these reservations in mind, I shall attempt to combine the widest range of materials available online and supplement them with traditional print media.

Compatriots

An important role in the dissemination of the “Russian world”, which includes the legacy of the Great Patriotic War, is played by Russian expatriate communities in the Czech Republic: more specifically, those that are connected to Russian embassies and state structures through their organizations and associations. In practice, this reflects the importance granted in the conceptualization of the Russian world to the Russian diaspora as an extension of that world and as a potential source of Russianness or as a transnational world community replacing Russia’s geopolitical losses after the end of the Cold War. Whatever the case, the idea that expatriate communities abroad might be shaped in some way and used to promote Russian culture and language, as well as to exert political influence in their respective countries, has long been accepted and actuated by Putin’s government.\(^{37}\)

|\(^{37}\) In this context, the role played by Russian compatriots in destabilizing the political scene in the country’s neighbours and advancing Russian interests in its traditional sphere of interests is highlighted. (See, for example, LUTSEVYCH, Orysia: Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood. London, Chatham House 2016.) |
was declared the Year of the Russian Language – was firmly linked to the expansion of Russian-language news services and thus to the dissemination of the Russian symbolic world.

In the somewhat unclear definition of who can be understood as a “compatriot”, more specifically a “Russian” compatriot, the maintenance of ties with the Russian state and its organizations is an important identifier. The international structure of Russian compatriot associations and their coordination, from the national via the regional all the way to the global level, which is overseen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the good offices of the Federation Agency Rossotrudnichestvo (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), the Moscow Compatriot House (Moskovskii dom sootechestvennika) and the Government Commission on Compatriots Living Abroad (Pravitelstvennaja komissija po delam sootechestvennikov). Plans were hatched at this level for state policy measures relating to the Russian diaspora, including the coordination of commemorative activities. In other words, from the perspective of the Russian state, a Russian compatriot is someone who maintains relations with the Russian embassy and participates in projects coordinated, and sometimes financed, by the Russian state through a structure of selected compatriot organizations, platforms, and specific individuals. This, therefore, is the political definition of compatriotism I adhere to in my text.

A hierarchical system of coordinating councils began to emerge in 2006 under the leadership of the World Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots, or WCCRC (Vsemirnyi koordinatsionnyi sovet rossiiskikh sootechestvennikov). Global congresses of Russian compatriots were held regularly with the participation of top representatives of the Russian state, as well as regional (e.g. European) and

38 In 2007, the Russian World Fund (Fond Russkii mir) was established to support the activities of Russian compatriot associations, offering a range of state and private funding.


40 The representation of the Russian community in the Czech Republic, which numbers around thirty-five thousand members, has long been divided in its relationship to Putin’s Russia and its compatriot institutions. In this text I am not interested in the Russian community as such, but rather in the implementation of the interests of the Russian state through narrowly defined compatriot subjects. Just as not all Russians in the Czech Republic are compatriots, so not all those who act through compatriot structures are Russian or come from the countries of the former Soviet Union. We also find people who present as Czechs in relation to Czech society.
national conferences. Thematically oriented meetings were held in parallel with the compatriot press, compatriot youth, etc. The Russian Federation’s interest in compatriots living abroad was reflected in its Constitution, which in 2020 had a section added offering support and protection of their cultural identity. In this respect the Russian diaspora is seen to play a dual role: expanding Russia’s spiritual space and acting as a platform on which the Russian state “can rely”.

The Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in the Czech Republic (Koordinatsionnyi sovet rossiiskikh sootechestvennikov v Chekhii) was established in 2008. Since then, there has been considerable staff turnover and the associations the council represents have often changed, too. The council is currently in liquidation, and apart from maintaining a website, it displays no other signs of life. The local “Russian world” of compatriot associations is backed up by Russian-language media, newspapers and websites, such as the weeklies Prazhskii Ekspress [The Prague Express] and Prazhskii telegraf [The Prague Telegraph]. In 2010, the state-controlled Russia Today began broadcasting in the Czech Republic. These entities were loosely linked by individuals, such as businesspeople willing to finance certain “patriotic” activities and journalists. What is important is a certain coalescence around particular strategic themes, mutual support, promotion, and the complementarity of individuals and their links to the Russian embassy. The boundaries of the diaspora thus mobilized are not sharp and overlap with mainstream society by means of persons with often unclear or mixed national (Czech and Russian) identities or through family ties. There is an intermingling of primarily cultural, folkloristic and philological interests with more explicit political themes, linking associations whose origins reach back to the 1990s with modern special-interest projects emerging only with the mobilization of the Russian compatriot world or after the annexation of Crimea.

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41 Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia Today was banned from broadcasting in the European Union.

42 In 2018, members of the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in the Czech Republic included the Angel advertising agency, the writer, translator and journalist Andrei Fozikosh, and the opera singer Takhira Menazhdinova. (See Koordinatsionnyi sovet rossiiskikh sootechestvennikov v Chekhii [online]. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: http://ksros.eu/o-nas/.)

43 Long-standing members of the Coordinating Council include the Russian Cultural Awareness Society in Morava, the Ostrava Russian House, the International Cultural Institute Klíč, the Association of Russian Speaking Students and their Supporters – Artek, and the Slavic Folk Ensemble Legia (see ibid.).

44 This is so in the case of the Leningrad Blockade Memorial Association in the Czech Republic, the AFGANVET Association and the Czech-Russian Friendship Society (see ibid.). The Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, founded in 2013, became known even within mainstream society
practice, this reflects the conceptual vagueness of the very idea of a “Russian world”, in which an interest in cultural or folk traditions is intertwined with the geopolitical interests of the Russian state, and educational, social and awareness-raising activities with the exercise of political influence. The important thing is that, despite possible personnel changes and internal contradictions, this is not an environment characterized by lively discussion and ideological differences, but rather a project whose main purpose is the smooth reproduction and implementation of Russian state-sanctioned ideas. The successes achieved by such initiatives are signs more of their close connection to the Russian Federation rather than any grassroots enthusiasm and interests.

As I have noted, one of Russia’s interests is in mobilizing the compatriot community around the official memory of the Great Patriotic War and the victory over fascism, and the reproduction and protection of these themes. Linked to this is the fight against what is termed the “revisionism” or “distortion” of history. When, in April 2012, plans for Victory Day celebrations were discussed at the Russian Embassy in Prague, the author of an article in the Russian-language Prazhskii Ekspress welcomed these developments, writing: “here, far from our native culture and language, much more effort is required to preserve the memory of the heroic past”. These efforts focused primarily on the more or less traditional ceremonies and activities associated with the May anniversary of the end of the war, plus newer traditions such as the distribution of the Ribbon of Saint George. In another article, the same author recommended that his readers wear the ribbon during the celebrations themselves. As a symbol of cross-generational relations, the Ribbon of Saint George (Georgievskaja lentochka) also

for its pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western positions and activism, and quickly attracted the attention of security analysts and journalists. Its chairwoman, Radmila Zemanová-Kopecká, was also vice-chairwoman of the entire Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in the Czech Republic and editor of the Russian-language newspaper Prazhskii Ekspress. Nevertheless, she appears as a Czech in her dealings with Czech society. Incidentally, it is she who provided the subtitles to some versions of the song “Donbas is behind us”.

46 GERBEIEV, Konstantin: Prazdnik, kotoryi vsegda s nami [A Celebration that is Always with Us]. In: Ibid., No. 18 (03. 05. 2012).
47
lent its name to a veterans’ event in 2011. As in Russia, the interest of compatriots turned to the heroes of the victorious war campaign, both the living and the dead. Survivors were tracked down, their medals published and interviews with them reprinted by the Russian-language media, though these contained nothing more than confirmation of the traditional narrative of Soviet heroism. Whenever possible, associations and schools organized meetings with veterans, and kindergarten children painted pictures for them. Respect for war veterans was expressed in the form of official thanks and awards from the highest Russian circles, often directly from the president, via the Russian Embassy. The bond with the homeland was reinforced by trips to Russia, also organized by the Russian Embassy.\footnote{Most common are the honorary visits of international delegations hosted by various state and local authorities on the occasion of Victory Day. In 2012, two representatives from the Czech Republic visited the May Day celebrations in St. Petersburg as part of the “Compatriots Blockaders” programme. (See Dva blokadnika iz Chekhii posetili gorod v Den Pobedy [Two Czech Blockade Survivors Visit the City on Victory Day]. In: \textit{Ibid.}, No. 20 (17. 05. 2012).}

Belonging to the “Russian world” and community of compatriots was further promoted through various social programmes, which provided material assistance and access to Russian-language information sources. The social projects included collections organized by compatriot associations and media allowing veterans to enjoy free subscriptions to Russian newspapers. As time passed and the last surviving participants and witnesses of the war dwindled, the interest of the Russian world turned more and more to the dead.

“Mobilization of the Dead”

A trend that Julie Fedor has described as the “mobilization of the dead”\footnote{FEDOR, Julie: Memory, Kinship, and the Mobilization of the Dead: The Russian State and the “Immortal Regiment” Movement. In: FEDOR, J. – KANGASPURO, M. – LASSILA, J. – ZHURZHENKO, T.: \textit{War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus}, pp. 307–345.} in connection with marches of what is called the Immortal Regiment can also be seen in the newly cultivated interest of the Russian state in the fallen citizens of the Soviet Union, their remains, graves, monuments and memorials. The state programmes and structures established in 2008 by the Ministry of Defence and tasked with looking after burial grounds and the memory of the fallen have spread abroad
by means of Russian embassies. In the Czech Republic, too, a Council for the Affairs of Military Memory (Sovet po voenno-memorialnoi rabote) has begun operations under the aegis of the Russian Embassy in Prague.

Since around 2010, the “mobilization of the dead” in the minds of local Russian compatriots has focused on burial grounds, graves and monuments traditionally associated with Victory Day ceremonies. Again, embassy-organized activities went hand in hand with personal compatriot initiatives, in which individual levels, including the media, enhanced and supported each other. The compatriot press published articles that illustrated the systematic interest that the Russian state and its representative bodies took in Soviet and Russian war graves. This interest was legitimized by the creation of the post of representative of the Ministry of Defence at the Russian Embassy. On the other hand, the press published personal accounts in which the Victory Day celebrations were naturally associated with visits to the burial sites of fallen Soviet soldiers, and the upkeep of the graves themselves presented as an intimate, spontaneously cultivated tradition. The work brigades (subotniki) promoted by the Russian press, in which members of the Russian compatriot community cleaned the graves of Soviet soldiers and, as though incidentally, spread news of commemorative events connected with Victory Day or the liberation of this or that place by the Red Army to other parts of the Czech Republic, could thus appear to be a spontaneous, bottom-up initiative. This despite the fact that the ceremonies were often attended by officials from Russia or the Russian Embassy.

The significance of Soviet war burial sites, graves and monuments as traditional commemorative sites, official ceremonies, and communitarian, family or personal rituals, has been revived, as in Russia, by an increased interest in those who were actually lain to rest in them. In a sense, the “search movement” has arrived in the Czech Republic. Associations of volunteers spread across Russia to search for and identify the remains of fallen, often missing, Soviet soldiers who have not been given a proper burial. Initially, this was a grassroots initiative with a relatively long tradition stretching back to Soviet times and driven primarily by a desire to repay the debt to the millions of “nameless” victims of the insane war machinery who, for all the propaganda, pomp and ceremony surrounding veterans, and the respect nominally paid to them, had faded from memory. However, it was gradually appropriated by the Russian state, which proceeded to invest it with new content. In 2006, Putin signed a degree on the commemoration

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of fallen Soviet soldiers, under which the power to search for and identify their remains was in the hands of the Russian Ministry of Defence. The same decree also regulated the activities of civic associations. In 2013, a state-sponsored civic organization, called the Search Movement of the Russian Federation (Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossiiskoi Federatsii), was created, which brought together existing groups of searchers, received regular financial support and became involved in other patriotic programmes. In the end, as sociologists Natalia Goncharova and Iskender Iasaveev show, even these forgotten souls were co-opted into the traditional myth of Soviet heroism and patriotism in order to amplify the greatness of the Soviet victory over fascism. Instead of focusing on the personal tragedies involved, Putin again preferred to hammer home a collective triumph that could be used to foster national pride and intimidate the outside world. Along with a rebranding of victims as glorious defenders of the homeland, he heaped praise upon the “searchers”, calling them “true patriots”.

The ceremonies accompanying the official burial of discovered remains are often used by Russian dignitaries to warn against the “distortion” and “falsification” of history, and to make ambiguous allusions to the alleged rise of contemporary fascism or to inveigh against the hostile West.

In the Czech Republic, too, the Russian state’s intention, stemming from a need to keep the heroic past visible and to maintain a generational bond, this time round by personalizing long-dead soldiers, could be linked to the natural desire of the survivors to learn of the final resting place of their loved ones or to a simple thirst for knowledge on the part of researchers. The domain within which this personal and political interest in the remains of Soviet soldiers can be explored is, of course, incomparably smaller in the Czech Republic, though not inconsiderable. For all the long-cultivated official reverence for Soviet graves and monuments, for more than sixty years after the war a large number of the alleged 50,000 registered remains were still unidentified. Here, too, space was

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created for contact with generations of family members and for statesmanlike speeches during the burial ceremonies of newly discovered remains or the presentation of renovated burial sites and monuments, often accompanied by the names or even the photographs of hitherto unknown soldiers. Russian Embassy and consulate officials exploited these opportunities to the full, as well as urging all-round care for the dead. In 2014, the compatriots’ efforts to express their support for various commemorative activities related to the Great Patriotic War culminated in the creation of the Prague Civic Council (*Prazhskii grazhdanskii sovet*), which, in addition to promoting Russian language and culture, undertook to sponsor social projects focusing on war veterans, the repair and maintenance of burial grounds and graves, as well as research activities in this sphere, such as the planned cataloguing of all significant memorial sites in the Czech Republic associated with the liberation of the country by the Red Army.53

This community of shared interest in veterans and dead Soviet soldiers could, of course, welcome into its midst the right kind of Czechs, such as those who tended Soviet graves in their own place of residence. In 1999, a Czech military history club was formed in Brno specializing in the Red Army. Like other such clubs, it concentrated on the reconstructions of Second World War battles in southern Moravia. In 2006, it merged with what was then the newly created Russian Cultural Awareness Society in Moravia (*Ruský kulturně osvětový spolek na Moravě*), through the good offices of which it came under the auspices of the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in the Czech Republic. The Russian-language media began to report on enthusiasts from the Red Army Club who selflessly devoted their free time to the search for and identification of fallen Soviet soldiers, using Ministry of Defence databases, local chronicles and archives, and communicating with both Russian and Czech institutions and with Russian citizens, whose loved ones they succeeded in identifying.54 At the same time, club members gradually became a firm part of the “Russian world”, a fact confirmed by the regular awards and honourable mentions they received both at the Russian Consulate in Brno and in Moscow. In 2012, one of the club members, Soňa Holečková, received the recently created Russian National Award for Outstanding Achievements in Charitable Work (*Za blagodelanie*) from President Putin.


himself. Among other things, involvement in the “Russian world” of the compatriots expanded the club’s activities to include participation in various commemorative and memorial events, for which club members – dressed in the uniforms of the Red Army – provided a suitable backdrop. In this case, too, the current trend for increasing the visibility of the Red Army’s noble deeds by means of historical reconstructions and more frequent occasions on which to parade around in Soviet war uniforms is clear.

In the concept of the “Russian world”, the compatriot community represents hope, potential and a cross-border amplification of Russian values and identity. However, it also risks becoming alienated from its own civilizational roots and therefore needs looking after carefully. This is doubly true of the children of the

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55 EADEM: Ia chustvuiu tot samyi russkii dukh [I Can Feel That Russian Spirit]. In: Ibid. [online], 15. 09. 2012. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://czechtoday.eu/den-pobedy/2012/sonya-golechkova-ya-chuvstvu-yot-samyj-russkij-duh/. The Russian Consulate in Brno provided the association with more than merely symbolic support. Among other things, it contributed to its publications, which were subsequently awarded further prizes within the Russian compatriot world, and to its equipment. Probably also thanks to its close contacts with Russian embassies, the association had the status of foreign event organizer and was regularly invited to battle re-enactments in Eastern European countries, including Russia. And so, in 2020, during a recruitment event, it was able to offer potential applicants free membership, the opportunity to explore Eastern European countries “for a song”, and the chance to learn Russian. (See the Facebook page of the Red Army Club in Brno: https://www.facebook.com/krapalava.)

56 For more on the utilization of historical reconstructions as propaganda and the involvement of the formerly historical reconstruction Red Army clubs in the current military operation in eastern Ukraine, see ZHURZHENKO, T.: Russia’s Never-Ending War Against “Fascism” [online]. It would not be appropriate to ascribe such intentions to the Czech association. Nevertheless, both by creating a contemporary backdrop for the political manifestos of official Russian positions, and by more or less actively supporting them and drawing on Russian resources, its activities are increasingly moving away from the innocent game of presenting historical events. This is all the more so as it attempts to socialize the next generation into the Russian world. In 2020, the Red Army Club in Brno created a Military History Youth Club, where 14 year olds were introduced to wartime walkie-talkies and given first-aid courses, took trips retracing the footsteps of Red Army battles, marched in full combat gear, slept in military bunkers, wore Soviet military uniforms, learned to speak Russian, shoot guns, acquired sword skills, learned how to disassemble, clean and reassemble a gun, set up military camp and decamp, cook shashlik, brew tea in a samovar, etc. (See the Facebook page of the Red Army in Brno: https://www.facebook.com/krapalava.)

57 This “dressing-up game” can of course have various levels. In the most extreme cases, in the blurred boundaries and contexts that is by no means infrequent in the Russian world, such quasi-soldiers become not only experts, but de facto Red Army soldiers themselves, conveying to the audience not only information, but also the experiences of “eyewitnesses” to the events being recreated.
The task of retaining the children of the Russian diaspora within the sphere of the Russian world is to be performed by means of their involvement in memory projects. Providing them with the proper patriotic education, ensuring contact with veterans and participation at ceremonies, and awakening an interest in Soviet soldiers killed on Czech and Slovak territory has best been achieved through traditional educational institutions, namely, Russian-language nurseries and schools. These build on the wealth of experience enjoyed by the Soviet education system in inculcating the “correct” image of the Great Patriotic War and Soviet/Russian heroism from early childhood. For pupils attending Russian schools, embassy-led memory work included reciprocal visits with veterans, recitation and art competitions featuring the theme of war, singing military songs, showing war films, and the creation of halls of fame showcasing the Russian martial arts, all of which are tried-and-tested methods of ideologically socializing children. Students in the upper grades of the school at the Russian Embassy in Prague-Bubeneč were also involved in tending Soviet military graves and in research into the fate of the fallen and their identification. Like their Czech counterparts, they were subsequently honoured for these activities and invited to the Russian Embassy.

However, support for the Russian world abroad is not restricted to the creation of expatriate networks. It also functions within broader Czech society. Many cultural, linguistic and commemorative activities reach out to the Czech public and seek to involve Czech schools in children’s competitions and other projects via compliant Russian-language teachers. The latter are paid special attention within the Russian world. As the Ukrainian scholar Tatiana Zhurzhenko points out, as in the immediate aftermath of the war, Soviet war graves and memorials abroad play an important geopolitical role from Russia’s perspective (which took over their administration after the collapse of the Soviet Union). Just as they clearly marked a sphere of influence during the Soviet era, these days they serve as tangible, incontrovertible evidence of the scale and magnitude of the Soviet anti-fascist campaign, which Russia has commandeered for itself and upon which it has based its own domestic and foreign policy. It is for this reason that any attempt to interrogate the past by intervening in Soviet monuments provokes

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58 See, for example, GERBEIEV, K.: 67 let nashei istoricheskoi pamiati.

59 For instance, in the summer of 2014, the Russian Civil Council, tasked with financing compatriot projects, presented a cheque to the cultural and linguistic organization Klíč, so that it could organize a trip for school children from the town of Králíky in the east of the Czech Republic to the Pushkin Festival in Prague. (See SITNIKOVA, Elena: Dobrota spasiot mir: Memorandum podpisali v Den zashchity detei.)

a counter-offensive from Russian officials, which then results in a series of coordinated retaliatory measures.61

The military attaché in charge of remembrance ceremonies at the Russian Embassy also oversaw how the Czech state, local authorities and citizenry related to these matters. He attempted to solicit an interest in Soviet and Russian fallen soldiers, sought funding for repair work to cemeteries, graves and memorials, and, where necessary, procured money from other sources. He was prepared to intervene directly in cases he deemed unsatisfactory in respect of Russian interests. In 2010, the Russian side closely monitored attacks on the symbols of the hammer, sickle and star, which ever since the Velvet Revolution have commonly been associated with the totalitarian communist regime, on the Memorial to the Red Army’s Victory over Fascism in Brno. When local councillors finally decided to remove the first two symbols and leave only the star, the Russian Embassy called this a “falsification of history” and the Russian-language newspaper Prazhskii Ekspress was quick to allude to the fate of Tallinn’s “bronze soldier”, the relocation of which had so inflamed tensions between Russia and Estonia a few years earlier.62 Colonel-General Dmitrii Nikolaevich Bulgakov, a Russian Defence Ministry official who carried out an inspection of Soviet war memorials in the Czech Republic lasting several days, was heard saying that he disagreed fundamentally with any alterations: “History cannot be rewritten – it is what it is”. He rounded off his argument with a personal appeal: “As someone whose grandfathers both died in the war, I am categorically against any changes.”63 In a 2011 interview with the Russian-language news server Portal novostei “Chekhiia segodnia” [Czechia Today], Anatolii Tomnikov, first secretary at the Russian Embassy in Prague in charge of Soviet memorials and graves, remarked that he carried a map with him at all times, with which he could prove to any doubters that the

61 The events surrounding the removal of the statue of the Soviet Red Army Soldier (the Bronze Soldier) from the centre of Tallinn in 2007 are considered a major milestone of the “monument wars”, including the paralyzing cyber-attacks against the Estonian state and other forms of harassment associated with Russian mobilization of the compatriot community. (For more details, see Bronze Soldier in Tallinn. In: Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia [online], updated on 22. 10. 2022. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronze_Soldier_of_Tallinn.)


The vast majority of the territory of the former Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Soviet army, which suffered incomparably higher losses than the Americans.\textsuperscript{64}

Czech Friends

The 2014 political coup in Ukraine, the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russia, the interventions in the east and southeast of the country that led to a protracted military conflict between the new government of Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists – all of this had a huge impact on the world of Russian compatriots in the Czech Republic. The work that had gone on until then with the legacy or myth of the Great Patriotic War also underwent qualitative changes. The overwhelmingly critical response that Russia’s actions in Ukraine elicited in the Czech media, the chattering classes and society at large, provoked a counter-offensive amongst representatives of the Russian world.\textsuperscript{65} Forces, networks, actors and practices were mobilized in an effort to neutralize, unsettle, interrogate and confuse the criticism by highlighting the merits, past and present, of the Soviet Union and Russia. Just as the Soviets swept the military aggression that followed the events of 1968 under the carpet by systematically referencing the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army, so, following its attack on Ukraine, the Russians increasingly drew on the Great Patriotic War. Just as Soviet officials once countered all criticism by accusing their opponents of anti-Sovietism, so the term “Russophobia” began to be deployed strategically. Again, this was a weapon with which all criticism of Russia was reflected back on the critics themselves, resulting in accusations of dishonest intentions, bad faith, prejudice, stereotypical thinking, and manipulation by sinister higher forces. This would include, for example, two conferences on contemporary “myths about Russia” held in the Czech Republic.


\textsuperscript{65} According to some analysts, a sense of grievance and a feeling that the world is constantly picking on Russia has long been one of the constitutive elements of Putin’s foreign policy. The Russia state systematically cultivates ideas of a “Russophobic” West. For example, the French historian Françoise Thom refers to the political training given by the pro-Putin youth movement \textit{Nashi} (Ours), founded by the politician and ideologist Vladislav Surkov, whose members were taught that Europe regards Russians to be the enemy and that in this respect Russians can be seen as “the Jews of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century”. See THOM, Françoise: \textit{Jak chápat putinismus}. Praha, Pulchra 2021, p. 99. (Czech translation of the Frech original: \textit{Comprendre le poutinisme}. Paris, Desclée De Brouwer 2018.)
Parliament in 2014 and 2016, and a conference that took place in 2017 entitled “Russophobia – the Anti-Semitism of the Twenty-First Century?” In the same vein, accusations of the “distortion” or “falsification” of history, activated in parallel with the perpetuation of the myth of the Great Patriotic War, resound ever more strongly in compatriot circles. One part of the World Congress of Com patriots in Moscow in 2015, which was attended by three representatives from the Czech Republic, was devoted to the struggle against the “distortion of history.” Like the Soviets before it, the Russian side needed the memory of the Great Patriotic War in the form of traditional Soviet myth untarnished by additional revisions that, in its eyes, diminish its authority and therefore its potential as political capital.

However, unlike Czechoslovakia after 1968, the modern Czech state was reluctant to act as guarantor of this myth. The struggle was therefore waged both along the lines of an information war regarding events in Ukraine, and a war of memory that could sometimes appear somewhat bizarre to the non-aligned observer. The Russian compatriot community focused more on influencing Czech

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66 The conference was organized by the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies in cooperation with the Russian newspaper *Pražskii Ekspress* under the auspices of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM) and the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (Strana přímé demokracie, SPD). Contributions focused on all sorts of allegedly unfair and negative stereotypes being used against Russia and the harmful role of the media in creating a misleading distorted image. See [Anonymous]: O mifakh, Rossii i Chekhii: Unikalnaia konferentsia proshla v parlamente [On Myths, Russia and the Czech Republic: A Unique Conference Was Held in Parliament.]. In: *Pražskii Ekspress*, Vol. 16, No.10 (06. 03. 2014).

67 The title of the conference, which became a test of the applicability of Surkov’s ideological concept in the Czech Republic, provoked considerable controversy. When several of the participants refused to attend because of the flagrant manipulation of supposed parallels, the Russian side and its supporters took this as further proof of its undemocratic and discriminatory approach. The organizers sought refuge in a quote by the first president of Czechoslovakia, T. G. Masaryk, who said that “democracy is discussion”. See [Anonymous]: V Prage govorili o russofobii: Provokatsionnaia tema vyzvala i interes, i skandal [Prague Talks About Russophobia: A Provocative Topic Has Caused Both Interest and Scandal]. In: *Ibid.*, Vol. 19, No. 23 (09. 11. 2017).

68 V Vsemirnyi congress [online], 05. 11. 2015. [Accessed 2022-12-12.] Available at: https://vk-srs.com/vsemirnyy-kongress/kongress/v-vsemirnyy-kongress/. In addition to President Putin, speakers at the congress included Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinski, and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church. Among other things, the compatriots were praised for the support they gave Russia in respect of the “reunification” of Crimea.

69 See, for example, the question that *Pražskii Ekspress* raised in several of its articles as to whether the end of the war should not be celebrated once again in the Czech Republic.
mainstream society, while its media became highly politicized. It made a point of covering the Russian take on the hot topics of the day, such as the political situation in Ukraine after the Maidan Uprising, the annexation of Crimea or the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Donbas, in addition to promoting Russian Orthodoxy and decrying the supposed spread of Russophobia and what it called anti-Russian hysteria.70

The commemoration of the cult of Victory increased in intensity while becoming a platform for contemporary denunciations, criticism and threats.71 The promotion and aggressive defence of the myth of the Great Patriotic War and the deployment of disinformation regarding events taking place in Ukraine entered what was in many respects a symbiotic relationship. This in turn meant that the respect shown to Soviet soldiers by the shrieking defenders of the Russian cause took on something of a vulgar hue. The new trend was to seek out and engage more strongly with allied Czech actors, who would advocate for and spread Russian state interests amongst the wider Czech population. At a meeting of the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in the Czech Republic in May 2014, at which a new leadership was elected, Jiří Vyvadil, former politician and founder of the Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic Facebook group, was one of the

on 9 May. Developments since the early 1990s, when both the date of the celebrations was changed from the original 9 May to the 8 May, and the official designation of the holiday, was deemed to be unacceptable revisionism. See NESTEROVÁ, Marina: Ten Pobedy: Chekhhiia ometila svoie osvobozhdenie [Shadow of Victory: Czechia Celebrates Its Liberation]. In: Prazhski Ekspress, Vol. 16, No. 10 (15. 05. 2014).

70 In 2015, at the world congress of the Russian compatriot press, Prazhskii Ekspress was given an honorary mention by the Russian government for its contribution to the development of the Russian language and culture and the consolidation of the Russian community. The award was received by its editor-in-chief Irina Shults from the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. See [Anonymous:] Nezavisimost v pochote: Gazeta Prazhskii Ekspress udostoielas Pochotnoi gramoty pravitelstva RF [Independence in Honour: The Prague Express Was Awarded a Certificate of Honour by the Russian Government]. In: Ibid., Vol. 17, No. 25 (18. 06. 2015).

71 There are many examples, of which I will cite the following: in February 2015, on the occasion of the Defender of the Fatherland Day (formerly the Soviet Army Day), Czech compatriot and affiliated organizations in Moravia held a wreath-laying ceremony at the Red Army Monument in Brno. The Russian compatriot press treated the event as a joint initiative of Czech and Russian women, who honoured Russian men with red carnations and expressed their wish that they "would not have to go to war again". The Russian Consul General Andrei Sharashkin recalled how the day is celebrated in Russia, saying that without "victory over fascism in 1945, there would be no Czech Republic or Slavic nations today". He stressed that young people must be encouraged to reject "neo-fascism and neo-Nazism". See [Anonymous:] Kak moravane otmetili 23 fevralia: Neskolkio klubov sobralis na vstrechu s konsulom, a zhenschiny vozlozhili cvety [How Moravians Celebrated 23 February: A Number of Clubs Gathered for a Meeting with the Consul, and Women Lit Candles.] In: Ibid., Vol. 17, No. 9 (26. 02. 2015).
speakers. He declared that the group’s main task was to protest against the attitude of the Czech media, which portrayed Russia as the guilty party in respect to the crisis in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{72}

These motley “friends of Russia” provided similar services to Russian politics as Russian state-sponsored, “non-governmental” organizations. This was clear, for instance, in the case of the statue of Marshal Ivan Stepanovich Konev in Prague, the removal of which in 2020 was accompanied by a targeted campaign that was closely monitored, to say the least, by the Russian Embassy. The hyperbolic comments and melodramatic gestures of the activists involved, the attempt to argue that whoever removes a statue of a military leader who fought fascism is themselves a fascist, the aggressive verbal attacks on the officials responsible, and the publication of their phone numbers and calls for their harassment are all reminiscent of the bullying experienced by people at the hands of the state-controlled \textit{Nashi} youth movement in Russia. These actions also created the backdrop for open threats by Russian officials themselves.\textsuperscript{73}

Of course, one can only speculate about the degree to which particular individuals were linked to the Russian state: this is a question more for the security services or investigative journalism. The fluid and evasive pro-Russian sphere included newly formed associations and platforms whose names referenced Putin directly or alluded to “friendship” with Russia, or that concealed their intentions by appeals to a vague, all-encompassing Slavism. It included political figures from the left and right nationalist ends of the spectrum, as well as sun-dry “independent” media involved in bringing together and consolidating various anti-systemic, subversive, ultra-conservative, anti-European tendencies and critics of global capitalism, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European integration. The Russians wooed allies from traditional social organizations still wallowing in nostalgia for communism, such as the Czech Borderland Club (\textit{Klub českého pohraničí}), the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters (\textit{Svaz protifašistických bojovníků}), and the Left-wing Women’s Clubs (\textit{Levicové kluby žen}). Overall, this pro-Russian environment displays the characteristics of what the French expert in Russian affairs Françoise Thom calls a “modern Comintern”.

\textsuperscript{72} NEZOVI\v{B}ATKO, Olga – SHULTS, Irina: Byt sootechestvennikom: Chto proiskhodit v ofitsialnoi diaspore? [Life as a Compatriot: What Is Going on in the Official Diaspora?] In: \textit{Ibid.}, Vol. 16, No. 18 (01. 05. 2014). See the profile of Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic (\textit{Přátelé Ruska v České republice}) on their official Facebook page available at: https://cs-cz.facebook.com/groups/pratele.ruska.v.cr/. [Accessed 2022-12-12.]

\textsuperscript{73} Regarding the controversy surrounding the removal of the Statue of Ivan Konev, see Pomník maršála Koněva v Praze. In: \textit{Wikipedia: Otevřená encyklopedie} [online], updated on 15. 08. 2022. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomn%C3%ADk_mar%C5%A1%C3%A1la_Kon%C4%9Bva_v_Praze.
which, within the context of Russia’s civilizational war against the West, makes creative use of anything and everything that undermines the basic pillars of Western identity.\textsuperscript{74}

Carefully chosen “experts” also gave voice to Russian political interests, and their questionable expertise was given space in Russian-language media, pro-Russian platforms and at special conferences and roundtables, where they spoke out against “Russophobia”, the alleged distortion and falsification of history, and the current situation in Ukraine. Their practice was to refer to what they call the rise of fascism in Ukraine, lay the blame on Western forces for the Maidan uprising in Kyiv, point to crimes allegedly committed against the Russian population of Ukraine, and stress the legality and legitimacy of the annexation of Crimea by Russia. These were often controversial figures operating on the fringes or beyond the boundaries of humanities and social science disciplines such as history or political science, or fourth-estate columnists passing themselves off as specialists.\textsuperscript{75}

Regardless of the ulterior motives driving this support, which may of course be many and varied, as well as the degree to which it is conscious and calculated, the “Czech friends” adopted the Russian political agenda, its themes and obsessions, thus creating the impression that these were voices sounding from below, the voices of ordinary Czech folk. Pro-Russian activists thus positioned themselves as spokespersons for vibrant currents of opinion that, without them and their platforms, would never have enjoyed public expression in the allegedly Russophobic media and political environment. They framed themselves as giving voice to an alternative political viewpoint systematically suppressed by the media and did not shy away from comparing themselves to “dissidents” operating within an unfavourable, even threatening environment. They of course included a defence of the legacy of the Great Patriotic War, which in their retelling became almost a manifestation of said dissidence. The pro-Russian activists took it upon themselves to stand guard over and cultivate respect for the living and

\textsuperscript{74} THOM, F.: \textit{Jak chápat putinismus}, pp. 209–219. For reflections upon the pro-Russian scene in the Czech Republic, see also SMOLEŇOVÁ, Ivana – CHRZOVÁ, Barbora (eds.): \textit{United We Stand, Divided We Fall: The Kremlin’s Leverage in the Visegrad Countries}. Prague, Prague Security Studies Institute 2017.

\textsuperscript{75} These “experts” included Oskar Krejčí, a former collaborator with the communist State Security (\textit{Státní bezpečnost}, StB) and special advisor to the last communist prime minister Ladislav Adamec. See his commentary on Ukraine: KREJČÍ, Oskar: Ukrainskii vopros: V schvatke na Ukrajine vinovaty ES, SShA i SMI [Ukrainian Issue: The EU, the US and the Media Are to Blame for the Scandal in Ukraine]. In: \textit{Prazhskii Ekspres}, Vol. 16, No. 5 (30. 01. 2014); KREJČÍ, Oskar: Nes chastnaia Ukraina: Edinstvennoe reshenie – federalizatsiia strany [Unhappy Ukraine: The Only Solution is to Federalize the Country]. In: \textit{Ibid.}, Vol. 16, No. 10 (06. 03. 2014). It is by no means unusual to find former employees of or collaborators with the communist StB active within pro-Russian networks.
the dead participants in the anti-fascist coalition, by means of which they interpolated themselves into the Russian struggle against the “falsification of history”.

Just as important as the experts who disseminated alternative Russian truths from the position of their supposed erudition were the “ordinary people” who gave voice to such truths in the public square. For example, in April 2014, Prazhskii Ekspress wrote an article about Zdeněk Kratochvíl, just a “regular guy”, who had taken exception to the “Russophobia” allegedly being fostered by the Czech media and certain state officials, and who had been prompted by events in Ukraine to organize a rally in support of Russia in the centre of Prague. Kratochvíl also deplored the fact that Victory Day was no longer being celebrated so enthusiastically and invited all “people of goodwill” to the square in front of Prague Castle on 8 May, in order to commemorate the Soviet soldiers killed during the Second World War. His aim was to make public the fact that Russia had friends in the Czech Republic who “refused to believe every lie” spread by the media. Over the months and years that followed, this “regular guy” organized several other street rallies and pro-Russian demonstrations and roundtables and gave interviews to sympathetic media outlets in which he brought together all of the themes mentioned above. He also appeared on Russian state television several times. In doing so, he cast himself as a “modern dissident” who could no longer remain silent in the face of what he called lies and injustice.

Since 2016, Kratochvíl has helped Russian compatriot organizations in Prague and other towns and cities to organize Immortal Regiment Marches.

76 This is not a traditional site for ceremonies commemorating the Second World War. However, for several years, on the anniversary of the end of the war, Russian and Czech children’s ensembles regularly performed here and included traditional Soviet war songs in their repertoires. The event was organized by a Russian compatriot association with the financial support of Russian and Czech firms, including ROSATOM, a Russian state corporation headquartered in Moscow, which was interested in constructing a nuclear power plant in the Czech Republic. Moreover, in one of the courtyards of Prague Castle stands a statue of St George that visitors to the event, who were given the Ribbon of Saint George, had the opportunity to view. Kratochvíl’s activities can be viewed as an attempt to create another “memory site” devoted to the Soviet victory in Czech public space.


78 For example, on the anniversary of the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany, Kratochvíl organized an “anti-war” demonstration in support of Russia and Putin (ZEMANOVA-KOPETSKAIA, R.: 22 iiunia rovno v 4 chasa: Chekhii organizovali miting protiv voiny [June 22 at 4 p. m. Sharp: The Czechs Organized a Rally against the War]. In: Ibid. (26. 06. 2014).

The Transmission of Modern Traditions – the Night Wolves

The emphasis on the Soviet contribution to the fight against Nazism, accelerated by the conflict in Ukraine, was manifest in several ways in the intersecting world of Russian compatriots and Czech pro-Soviet activists. In addition to a performative obeisance to the Victory Day public holiday, which was accompanied by the convening of supporters on social media with below-the-line comments, there was a Russian-style interest in Czech war memorials to veterans and significant events in both Soviet and Czechoslovak history dating back to the Second World War. Moreover, this interconnected network was instrumental in transferring a range of modern commemorative practices to the Czech Republic.

One of the most visible of these practices involves the oldest Russian motorcycle club in existence, the Night Wolves (Nochnye volki), founded in 1989 in what was still the Soviet Union. The club promotes a muscular patriotism linked to the legacy of the Great Patriotic War. In 2015, the club’s plan to travel to Berlin along the “Victory Road” (Doroga Pobedy), while taking in Czech sites commemorating liberation by the Red Army, provoked widespread confusion and criticism. Critics pointed to the involvement of the Night Wolves in Ukraine and to the fact that their leader, Aleksandr Zaldastanov, is on a list of Russians subject to international sanctions. Individual groups of Night Wolves who managed to cross the border were welcomed by the All-Cossacks’ Union of the Czech Lands and Slovakia (Vsekozachii soiuz cheshskikh zemlii i Slovaki), the Czech motorcycle club Red Eyed Crüe, and several Czech politicians. Everyone concerned

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80 See the official Night Wolves website at: https://nightwolves.ru/nw/. [Accessed 2022-12-12.]
81 The Russian-language newspaper Prazhskii Ekspress carried an interview with the ataman of the All-Cossacks’ Union, Mikhail Dziuba, regarding preparations for the event. On the one hand, Dziuba denied that the event was being politicized and said that people had same rights as any other to attend as long as they did not break the law. On the other, he quoted Zaldastanov’s words regarding Polish opponents of the parade, to the effect that they were probably the descendants of people who had “worked as policemen and guards in European ghettos”. He also let slip that such actions were necessary because history must not be forgotten. SHULTS, Irina: Volkov boiasia? Chto zhdot rossiiskikh baikerov v Chekhii? In: Prazhskii Ekspress, Vol. 17, No. 16 (16. 04. 2015.)
82 The Czech motorcycle club Red Eyed Crüe has enjoyed “fraternal links” with the Russian Night Wolves since 2004, when it was founded with the latter’s support. In 2014, an agreement on exclusive cooperation was signed between the two clubs, and what had hitherto been basically a private matter moved up a notch to become the highly public “Victory Road”, along which the Night Wolves travelled through the Czech Republic in 2015. The link to events in Ukraine was not only reflected in the timing of this initiative, but also in the speeches that accompanied it given by Czechs: condemnation of Maidan, recognition of Putin, references to the alleged rise of fascism in Ukraine, approval of the annexation of Crimea, etc. (See [Anonymous:]}
vehemently denied there was anything politically controversial about the journey being taken by the Night Wolves, while at the same time polishing its political credentials with references to the alleged rise of fascist tendencies in Ukraine and elsewhere in Europe. The Night Wolves, like the Soviet soldiers in Czechoslovakia a few decades earlier, were publicly referred to as the direct descendants of the heroes who had liberated Europe.

Over the next few years, come May the Czech countryside was traversed by a multinational motorcycle convoy comprising the Night Wolves and their European allies, all with red flags on their machines. Rugged men in leather jackets knelt down and laid wreaths at war memorials to the accompaniment of Soviet songs. At the main destination of their Czech pilgrimage, Prague’s Olšany Cemetery with its mounds of fallen Soviet soldiers, they were regularly confronted by an equally large group of protestors. This modern custom, a disconcerting amalgam of reverence, machismo and attacks by supporters of the Night Wolves on their opponents, was quite possibly dismissed by mainstream society as a fairly harmless foreign eccentricity. Nevertheless, the Night Wolves created a firm footing for the event and expanded its reach thanks to local support. The next time their motorcade drove through the Czech Republic, more and more commemorative sites located all around the country were added to its programme, and it was received by the Russian Embassy in Prague.

The influence of the Night Wolves was given a further boost by the internationalization of the club itself. Beginning in 2016, chapters began to spring up in a number of different countries, and in 2018, a Czech chapter was officially registered. The international cooperation of various national chapters with the Russian Night Wolves was reinforced through invitations to Russia. Visitors were invited to look behind the scenes of the organization of the “Victory Road”, to take a ride along its Russian section, and to participate in other events, above all international meetings and biker shows in Sevastopol, where the Night Wolves rented a large plot of land on highly favourable terms after the annexation of Crimea. These bombastic patriotic shows, said to have been created by Aleksandr...
Zaldastanov himself,\textsuperscript{84} attracted not only hordes of fans, but also the attention of journalists and critical commentators.\textsuperscript{85} During instructional trips to Russia and the occupied Crimea, foreigners were introduced to the broader mission of motorcycling under the banner of the Night Wolves. As Marek Radkovič, vice-president of the Czech chapter of Night Wolves Europe and someone who, in his own words, had always wanted to have his own motorbike club, put it at an interna-

\textsuperscript{84} In addition to being on the international sanctions list, Aleksandr Zaldastanov is also the recipient of several Russian state commendations and decorations for his support for international cooperation, the liberation of Crimea and Sevastopol, the fight against terrorism, and for his active contribution to the patriotic education of young people and the commemoration of the fallen defenders of the homeland.

\textsuperscript{85} A characteristic feature of visionary performances working with elements of Soviet war history and the Ukrainian present is the blurring of the temporal and spatial levels, the past merging seamlessly into the present, thus mythologizing and perpetuating the “struggle against fascism”. (See, for example, the recording of a performance from 2014: Baik-shou [Bike Show] 2014 Sevastopol. In: YouTube [online], 09.08.2014, channel user Radek Hotový. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPnb97ybiU.) What is more, several observers claim the Russian army is recruiting soldiers in the area.
tional gathering in Sevastopol in August 2019: “young people today know bugger all. In schools they are not taught [about the Second World War] and what horrors took place. We try to remind them of these things and make sure that nobody is distorting history.” Peter Marček, a former member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, in turn shed light on the “deeper political meaning” of the show and why it was being held in Crimea. He took issue with the term “annexation” and claimed that there had been no violence, but only a supremely democratic act and the free expression of the will of the population of the peninsula. The Czech and Slovak Night Wolves then paid joint tribute to fallen Soviet soldiers at one of the Crimean memorials.  

When, in 2020, the coronavirus pandemic prevented the Russian Night Wolves from travelling to Central Europe, local chapters stepped up to the plate. In the words of Marek Radkovič, the Czech wolves visited “around sixty to eighty monuments” in early May. He announced this on the pro-Russian private channel Raptor-TV, which also carried reports from the locations visited. Radkovič said that it had been “a wonderful learning experience” and urged that we remember not only the fallen Soviet soldiers, but also local citizens “who experienced the horrors of war for themselves”, adding that their stories “should be heard more often in the media”. He asked everyone not to forget “that terrible time”. In contrast, in 2021, with the pandemic still raging, European Night Wolves set off in the opposite direction along the “Victory Road” to join the parade in Moscow’s Red Square (Krasnaia ploschad) on 9 May. In a report broadcast on Russian state television, which referred to the operation as “The Road Home”, Czech and Slovak representatives confided in broken Russian that they considered it their solemn duty to pay tribute to all those who had lost their lives during the war and to the whole of Russia. The same year, the Night Wolves carried portraits of Czech heroes of the anti-fascist struggle and resistance on their motorcycles, thus linking arms with another modern Russian tradition, which has also managed to spread abroad over the past few years.

86 See “Sevastopol – Motoklub Noční vlci slaví 30 let”. In: Regionalnitelevize.cz [online], 26.08.2019. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0nk5KVJkJUs&t=5s.


The Immortal Regiment

The March of the Immortal Regiment (*Bessmertnyi polk*), in which Russians take to the streets on Victory Day carrying a picture of a relative who is a veteran of the Second World War, was initiated in 2012 by a group of local journalists in Tomsk, in central Russia, as a counterpoint to the pomp and ceremony of official celebrations and military parades. The organizers’ main goal was to call attention to the more intimate nature of the tragedy of war and to honour its human sacrifices through family stories: the obverse of the military triumphalism and abstract heroism lauded by the state. To this end, they created a set of simple principles for the rapidly growing movement: it was to operate on a voluntary basis, eschew political affiliation, and involve people carrying nothing but portraits of their relatives on Victory Day. The movement’s emblem was a flying crane within a five-pointed star, which then became the logo of a web platform offering profiles of war veterans.\(^89\)

However, this event, with its huge emotional potential and growing support among ordinary people, was gradually appropriated by the Russian state. A parallel organization was created known as the Immortal Regiment of Russia (*Bessmertnyi polk Rossiia*), with its own structure and local branches, website, logo, and, most importantly, its own approach to the cause.\(^90\) In 2015, President Putin was already seen marching across Red Square in Moscow carrying a photograph of his father at the head of a parade numbering many thousands of people. The official media waxed lyrical about national unity, community, a family (with Putin at its head) linked by blood ties to its fallen ancestors. The blood of the fallen became the spiritual cement binding the national community, the erosion of which Putin had been bemoaning.\(^91\) Instead of cherished family bonds and the suffering of the individual, once again it became the invincibility of the Russian nation and its victory over fascism that was trumpeted forth. Moreover, given political events taking place, this triumphalism acquired an added dimension and the fallen Soviet ancestors and defenders of the motherland became part of what was called the “universal anti-fascist mission”. The participants on the March of the Immortal Regiment could now be framed as a community re-joining its ancestors and the (universal) campaign against fascism. Accompanying activities

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\(^{89}\) See the web platforms *Bessmertnyi polk* [Immortal Regiment] [online] [Accessed 2022-10-22.], available at: https://bessmertnyj-polk.ru and *Moy polk* [My Regiment] [online] [Accessed 2022-10-22.], available at: https://www.moypolk.ru

\(^{90}\) See the web platform *Bessmertnyi polk Rossiia* [Immortal Regiment of Russia] [online] [Accessed 2022-10-22.], available at: https://polkrf.ru

\(^{91}\) See FEDOR, J.: Memory, Kinship, and the Mobilization of the Dead.
gradually sprang up. The Immortal Regiment of Russia became a brand encompassing a variety of state-sponsored projects designed to spread the traditional myth of the Great Patriotic War, encourage a patriotic education, and participate in the struggle against the “distortion” of history and what was deemed to be modern fascism.\textsuperscript{92} In February 2022, the movement lent its support to the “special military operation” in Ukraine, citing both the official state explanation (the “genocide” of the local Russian population, the uncontrollable rise of nationalist sentiment, the arming of the country by the West, etc.) and the lessons of the past, according to which Russia was, and still is, said to be facing down the forces of fascism on its own.\textsuperscript{93}

In the spring of 2022, a combination of étatisme, politicization, and the wilful misrepresentation of the original meaning and intention behind the Immortal Regiment\textsuperscript{94} led its founders in Tomsk to distance themselves publicly from the movement’s activities.\textsuperscript{95} In the meantime, however, the Russian authorities had managed to install and spread this new tradition not only within its borders, but beyond, something it achieved through the agency \textit{Rossotrudnichestvo}, Russian compatriot organizations, and local pro-Russian activists. The organizational structure of the movement, controlled by the state, was replicated at an

\textsuperscript{92} Portraits of fallen “defenders” from Donbas, allegedly fighting Ukrainian “fascists”, began to appear in parades of the Immortal Regiment of Russia in the separatist territories of Ukraine and Russia. See, for example, BALDOVIN, Maria: Russia: Il “Reggimento immortale”: La memoria collettiva a servizio della propaganda? In: \textit{East Journal} [online], 12.05.2017. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/83750.


\textsuperscript{94} See, for example, “Bessmertnyi polk” popal v okruzhhenie: Andrei Kozenko – o tom, kak ONF prisvol sebe obschestvennuiu initsiativu tomichei [The Immortal Regiment Has Been Encircled: Andrei Kozenko on How the ONF Has Appropriated the Public Initiative of Tomsk Residents]. In: \textit{Meduza} [online], 30.04.2015. Available at: https://meduza.io/feature/2015/04/30/bessmertnyy-polk-popal-v-okruzhhenie; CHIRIN, Vladislav: “Bessmertnyi polk” nachinalsia kak narodnaia aktsia, no teper na ee organizatsii vliaiat chinovniki: Chto seichas proiskhodit s shestviem i kak ono izmenilos v Peterburge [The Immortal Regiment began as a People’s Action, but Now Officials are Influencing its Organization. What is Happening to the March Now and how has it Changed in St. Petersburg]. In: \textit{Bumaga} [online], 08.05.2019. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://paperpaper.ru/bessmertnyj-polk-nachinalsya-kak-nar.

international level, though in other countries, too, the Immortal Regiment continued to profile itself as a civic initiative. The national coordinators met regularly at international conferences. In November 2021, an international forum called “Memory of the Victors” took place in Belgrade, attended by a hundred representatives from forty countries “near and far”. The event was sponsored by Rossoztrudnichestvo and the Russian Duma, which ensured a disciplined approach, even though the organizers chose to refer to the movement’s “bottom-up” origins. This international initiative is tasked with defending “historical truth” against “revisionism” or “falsification”, the word “truth” here referring to the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War.96

In the Czech Republic, the organization of these marches began soon after they had been appropriated by the Russian state. In 2015, the Russian Civic Association for a European Multicultural Society (Obshchestvennoe obedinenie za evropeiskoe multikultunoe obshchestvo) had already signed up to organize the 2016

March of the Immortal Regiment in Prague. On that occasion, its chair, Olga Kondrashina, expressed her wish that not only members of the Russian-speaking community, but also Czech citizens “who honour the memory of their heroic ancestors”, should lend their support. The Russian-language weekly *Prazhskii telegraf* invited readers to send in stories and photographs of any of their relatives who had been veterans of the Second World War, which it then published in a special supplement.97

As far back as 2016, the Czech Republic had joined several dozen other countries in which parades of the Immortal Regiment were organized as part of celebrations of the end of the Second World War, acting as one more pebble in the colourful mosaic of respect for the Soviet conquerors of fascism. The message carried from both within and without Russian society was by now quite clear: celebrations of the Soviet liberators had become a global phenomenon, a graphic incarnation of Putin’s quasi-Messianic vision of Soviet soldiers who had shed their blood in order that present and future generations might live in peace. This also vibrated in harmony with the increasingly promoted slogan claiming that Soviet soldiers had saved “the entire world” from fascism.98 In Prague, a small parade singing Soviet songs, including “Den Pobedy”, passed by Prague Castle. One of the organizers described the main goal: to honour the memory of the “generation that triumphed over fascism”.99 The event organized by the Association of Russian Compatriots was held with the help of pro-Russian activists and their social networks. The association’s Facebook page, entitled “Hej, občané!” (Hey Citizens!), advertised the event as follows: “Our participation will make it abundantly clear

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98 One of the projects of the Immortal Regiment of Russia announced in 2021 is called “A Soviet Soldier Saved the World” (Mir spas sovetskii soldat). Short propaganda clips recall the crucial role of the Red Army in the liberation of one or other country and the post-war aid provided by the Soviet Union. A variety of data and figures are utilized though scant regard is paid to their accuracy. In the clip about Czechoslovakia, for example, it is claimed that the Red Army played a part in the liberation of the entire territory. See Novyi interaktivnyi proiekt “Mir spas sovetskii soldat” [A New Interactive Project “A Soviet Soldier Saved the World”]. In: *Polk.press* [online], 22.06.2021. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://polk.press/articles/mir-spas-sovetskij-soldat.

that we reject the rewriting of history we are witnessing at present”.

Russian state television informed its viewers that the Prague marchers were greeted by none other than the President of the Republic, Miloš Zeman.

Although various compatriot platforms would often use the symbol of the original movement from Tomsk in their references to events featuring the Immortal Regiment, it was obvious that they had no intention of respecting its stated principles and that they based their activities more on structures linked to the Russian state. In July 2016, a meeting of the organizers of the Immortal Regiment in the Czech Republic and Russia was held at the Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Prague (Rossiiskii tsentr nauki i kultury v Pragne / Ruské středisko vědy a kultury v Praze), at which mutual cooperation and the fight against “fascism” and “Nazism” were discussed, and an emphasis placed on the importance of a historical awareness of the Second World War. An agreement on cooperation was signed by a representative of the Immortal Regiment in the Czech Republic and Nikolai Zemtsov, one of its top officials in Russia. Since 2017, the parades and marches have spread to other towns and cities (Brno, Ostrava, Teplice and Karlovy Vary). The organizers, numbers involved and the exact course of the event differ depending on location. However, every march has involved representatives of the Russian compatriot community and affiliated Czech associations and individuals, the aim being to draw attention to the merits of the Red Army and Russia’s subsequent role in combating what it claims is contemporary fascism. The composition of the participants at the marches themselves, which

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103 In Ostrava, for example, twelve people gathered at the Red Army Memorial in the city gardens in May 2016 on the anniversary of the end of the war on the initiative of the Russian House in Ostrava and the local branch of the Czech-Russian Society. The number of associations and participants involved gradually rose from single figures to the low hundreds. Since 2017, the Ostrava Immortal Regiment has regularly marched through the city. In Karlovy Vary, a spa town with a significant Russian minority, over the past few years events involving
include both Russian speaking members from the local area and further afield, as well as Czech citizens either with Russian roots or relatives, is also based on these interconnected networks. Photographs show several veterans of Soviet origin who may or may not be related to someone participating in the march, Soviet and Czech participants in war operations within the territory of Czechoslovakia, or simply well-known figures of the Czech anti-fascist resistance.

The shift in emphasis from intimate recollections of the suffering of a specific family member to the heroization of a generation of victors over fascism has made it easier for those Czechs with an interest in such matters to choose sides. Given that historical circumstances mean that many of them have no relatives who participated in fighting during the Second World War, they resort to a kind of situational bricolage. One of the Czech participants in the 2017 Ostrava march brought a sign with her with the name of her classmate’s father from what used to be Leningrad, who had participated in the liberation of the region. Others resorted to well-known heroes of the communist resistance (such as Julius Fučík or Jožka Jabůrková). A portrait of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin was also to be seen in the parade. The wishes of the original founders of the movement to commemorate the war by means of their own fallen relatives, and to accompany them spiritually to the celebration, was turned on its head. Uppermost in the minds of the organizers was the desire to make a political point: only then did they give a thought as to whom they might chaperone.

The significance of the march was underlined by its various accompanying programmes, which further played on collective emotions. In 2019, in Prague, children’s ensembles performed on an improvised stage in the historic centre of the city, while traditional Soviet songs such as *Vstavai strana ogromnaia!* [Arise, Great Country!] and *Den Pobedy* [Victory Day] were performed as part of a concert the Immortal Regiment have seen several hundred people gather with more red carnations and balloons in the colours of the Russian Federation than portraits of war victims, walking through the streets singing Soviet military songs and chanting “Hurrah!” and “Russia, Russia”. This has provoked criticism from some Czechs, who point out that the city had not in fact been liberated by the Soviets. (See, for example, DOLANSKÁ, Jitka: Rusové si pochod Nesmrtelného pluku připomněli své hrdiny, Češi protestovali. In: *iDNES.cz* [online], 08.05.2019. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://www.idnes.cz/karlovy-vary/zpravy/karlovy-vary-nesmrtelny-pluk-rusove-cesi-protesty.A190508_183224_vary-zpravy_lesa.)

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105 This of course does not exclude the possibility that people who wanted to honour their own relatives in this way may have taken part in the procession.
entitled *Pust vsegda budet mir!* [May There Always Be Peace!]. The link back to herioc ancestors was underscored by the activities on offer, with participants able symbolically to send letters to them at the front, look them up in databases using computers available on site for this purpose, or take to the stage and share their story with the rest. President Miloš Zeman wrote a letter welcoming the participants and Andrei Konchakov, director of the Russian Centre for Science and Culture, turned up at the event in person.\(^1\)

As in Russia, the March of the Immoral Regiment was adapted to the new political environment in the Czech Republic as well. It was common for the Ribbon of Saint George to be distributed during the march, and the event became an opportunity to denounce the alleged distortion of history, to extol the merits of the Soviet Union and Russia, and to highlight the current threat of “fascism” in Ukraine. In addition to speeches, the organizers in Ostrava drew up written declarations for the city’s inhabitants, which, given a certain frostiness on the part of the city council, could only be published on platforms sympathetic to the cause. In 2017, they drew attention to the fact that freedom had arrived in Czechoslovakia from the East and warned against efforts to distort what they called this “historical truth”. They also offered their take on present events, “when the brown plague of fascism is once again rearing its head, whose bloody claws are even now being experienced first-hand by our Slavic brothers in eastern Ukraine […] Once again, contemporary Russia is being threatened and NATO troops stationed along its borders.”\(^2\)

The Immortal Regiment became an international platform by means of which events organized and promoted in Russia could be transmitted to the world. In 2020, for example, this involved a social media competition in which children and adolescents recited poems about the war. Following the example of Russia, the international structure of the Immortal Regiment was not restricted to the organization of the march, but gradually oversaw a range of commemorative projects and activities, including the “search movement” and the upkeep of graves. In this way, the memory of the Great Patriotic War acquired an important


\(^2\) The statement was published, for example, on the website of the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in the Czech Republic. See Bessmertnyi polk v Ostrove: Den pobedy v Chehii 2017 [Immortal Regiment in Ostrava: Victory Day in the Czech Republic 2017]. In: Koordinatorssionnyi sovet rossiiskikh sootechestvennikov v Chekhii [Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in the Czech Republic] [online], 09.05.2017. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: http://ksros.eu/bessmertniyi-polk-v-ostrove-den-pobedyi-v-chehii-nesmrtelny-pluk-2017-ostrava/.
coordinator at an international level. The aim now is to funnel disparate elements in a single direction and shape a historical consciousness through both commemorative events and educational projects. In the Czech Republic, for instance, a series of documentary films entitled *Cena vítězství* [The Price of Victory] was shot under the auspices of the Immortal Regiment. Three of these documentaries – on the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the German occupiers, villages razed to the ground by the Nazis, and the concentration camps – were screened at a primary school in Ostrava in collaboration with Russian compatriot organizations as part of Russian language classes being taught by the chairwoman of the Russian House compatriot organization in Ostrava. The films feature commentaries by “experts and eyewitnesses”, though the role of expert in the film on the liberation of Czechoslovakia is played by relatives and acquaintances of participants in the military campaign, such as Tatiana Eremenko, daughter of General Andrei Ivanovich Eremenko, and Miroslav Klusák, great-grandson of Czechoslovak General Ludvík Svoboda, who read extracts from the latter’s memoirs. In terms of the strategic objective to spread the “Russian world”, this is a remarkable attempt to break into the educational process and distort its standards by substituting emotions for facts. It fits into a broader trend involving the “expertization” of the descendants of famous participants in the Great Patriotic War. On one hand, these speak through the mouths of their famous relatives as if to convey the emotions of “eyewitness” experiences. On the other, they “objectify” their narratives with hand-picked facts. In a similar way, for example, in May 2021, the daughters of the three Soviet leaders who liberated Czechoslovakia – Natalia Koneva, Natalia Malinovska and Tatiana Eremenko – took to social media with their Victory Day message. As they see it, the Immortal Regiment is “a riposte to all of our enemies in Russia and abroad” that confronts their scepticism by reviving the memory of magnificent deeds. As we well know, the symbolic mobilization of the Immortal Regiments of the mythical Red Army was by no means the end of the matter.

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109 A video containing this message was placed on YouTube with Czech subtitles. See: Docheri marshalov pozdravliaju s Dnem Pobedy / Dcery maršálů blahopřejí ke Dni vítězství [Daughters of Marshals Congratulate on Victory Day]. In: YouTube [online], 08.05.2021, channel user Nesmrtelný pluk Česko/Bessmertnyi polk Chekhiia [Immortal Regiment Czechia]. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AofkQ5aKsmA.
In conclusion... War

Let us return to the song that began this article. In March 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the singers Natalia Kachura and Margarita Lisovina gave a concert in a military hospital. This was for the “defenders of the Republic”, as the headlines put it. The video posted on YouTube captures the end of the event: two young women in the prime of life, one of them pregnant, singing the song “Donbas is behind us.” The long-cultivated fantasy of the mythic struggle against fascism has become a real-world tragedy. The defenders of the Russian interpretation of events resort to a shameless manipulation of the facts, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and to the realm of mythologized abstraction. All of these approaches make it possible to bypass the disturbing details of the war and avoid the emotions so lavishly squandered elsewhere. In the comments below the video, orchestrated into a shared enthusiasm, we learn that Margarita has now given birth to a baby, a “future defender of Donbas”, while the real “defenders” are left out of the picture. This, too, belongs to what is known as “emotion management”. Controlling who and what people are offended and moved by has always been an integral part of any political struggle, and things are unlikely to change in this respect.

One of the first restrictions that came into force after the military occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was a ban on expressing anger about the occupation and on using the word “occupation” at all. Rage was to be replaced by admiration and gratitude for the Red Army. The period of normalization saw the political establishment accept this manipulation and elevate it to the level of state doctrine. The Soviets demanded both its acceptance and its internalization by means of a range of formalized expressions of loyalty. When the communist regime finally fell and people were able to give vent to feelings that had long been suppressed, Soviet officers were highly indignant when someone dared to label them as occupiers. At present, the Russian state and its local fan club tell us not to weep over Ukrainian civilians, but over fallen Soviet soldiers, Russian children in Donbas, or the Serbian victims of bombing by NATO. All of this once again boils down to the mythologized story of the Soviet/Russian guardian of the fortress against the (fascist) threat from – where else? – the West.

Putin’s government uses the “sanctity” of the legacy of the Great Patriotic War and the lives of those who died fighting fascism as a shield. It has appropriated and turned this “holy legacy” into a geopolitical tool for the assertion

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110 M. Lisovina i N. Kachura: “Donbas za nami”. Koncert v gospitale [Concert in a Hospital]. In: YouTube [online], 29.03.2022, channel user Mikhail Khokhlov, kompozitor [composer]. [Accessed 2022-10-22.] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWCdzT2Rbe0.
of its own influence and is at present committing war crimes in its name. Following the events of August 1968, the cultivation of the myth of the Great Patriotic War was monopolized and weaponized by the Czechoslovak state. However, under the conditions pertaining at present in the Czech Republic, this task has been taken over (more or less intentionally) by a minority pro-Russian claque. This group is turning a decent respect for Soviet soldiers into cheap political trash, all the while relativizing Russian war crimes. It is clear that after February 2022, any friendship with Russia – hitherto manifest, inter alia, by an ostentatious nurturing and worshipping of the myth of the Great Patriotic War – will be severely tested. As with previous important milestones in Russian politics (internal and external), there will once again be evolution and a restructuring of the Russian compatriot world and its local allies. Russia's open aggression against Ukraine was a blow whose longer-term consequences for the development of what is admittedly a minority subversive current – albeit one, as I have tried to show, which is establishing more and more of a foothold for itself – have yet to become clear. (There is also the question of the fate that awaits the politically abused legacy of the Second World War in Russia itself.) Behind the silent waiting and tacit withdrawal from the scene on the part of many hitherto active actors, a realignment of forces seems the most likely prospect for the time being. This is true of both Russian compatriots and activists. This was evident in the most recent celebrations of the end of the Second World War in early May 2022. There were no high-profile trips taken by European, let alone Russian, Night Wolves across the country, nor was the modern “tradition” of marches of the Immortal Regiment, interrupted by the coronavirus epidemic, renewed. The groups that gathered to honour fallen Soviet soldiers were thin on the ground. However, the participants themselves, their reckless approach to chronology and their regular references to the “distortion” of history show that an interest in local support through the cultivation of the legacy, or rather the myth, of the Great Patriotic War, has not waned, nor has the willingness of some to welcome it with open arms.

Abstract
Theoretically grounded in memory studies, this article reconstructs how the official Soviet-Russian myth of the Great Patriotic War has been politically instrumentalized and abused to promote and legitimize the Kremlin’s power intentions. It examines the forms, mechanisms and actors of this systematically applied politics of history and memory. First in the context of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the justification of the subsequent Soviet army’s stay in the country, then in the context of the propaganda activities of (pro)Russian activists.
The Eternal Legacy of the Great Patriotic War?

in the Czech Republic and the current Russian aggression against Ukraine. By the myth of the Great Patriotic War, the author understands the purposefully created, maintained and idealized image of the victorious campaign of the Red Army between 1941 and 1945, the selfless and unprecedented Soviet heroism that saved European nations from German fascism. This sacralized narrative, which suppresses other historical narratives, is monopolized in contemporary Russian state policy as an important tool to shape the historical memory of Russian society and to unite it against new and presumably hostile threats. The author demonstrates the strategy in which during the normalization of the 1970s and 1980s the soldiers of the Soviet army, who allegedly provided “fraternal assistance” in the suppression of the counter-revolution in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, were presented as the successors and “sons” of the heroic liberators of 1945 and shows how they themselves used and participated in this cult in their “comradeship” with Czech society. After the collapse of the communist regime, this official narrative lost its weight, but the “Russian world” (russkii mir) as a conglomerate of ideas linking segments of Russian culture, Orthodoxy and shared historical memory has penetrated the Czech Republic, serving as a “marketing brand” to spread Russia’s geopolitical influence during Putin’s rule. Through the Russian-language press, web platforms and social media, the author maps the actors and forms of the “Russian world” in the Czech Republic, whose background consists of part of the local Russian minority and local pro-Russian associations or initiatives. She pays particular attention to the nationalist motorcycle club Nochnye volki (Night Wolves) and the originally civic, but gradually becoming a state movement Immortal Regiment (Bessmertnyi polk), which revive and promote the myth of the Great Patriotic War in line with the Kremlin’s intentions and which establish their branches beyond the borders of Russia, including the Czech Republic.

Keywords:
Great Patriotic War; Second World War; Russia; Soviet Union; Czech Republic; Czechoslovakia; historical memory; politics of history; propaganda; Soviet army; war in Ukraine; “Russian world”; Russian compatriot communities; fascism; Night Wolves; Immortal Regiment; commemorations; Vladimir Putin

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