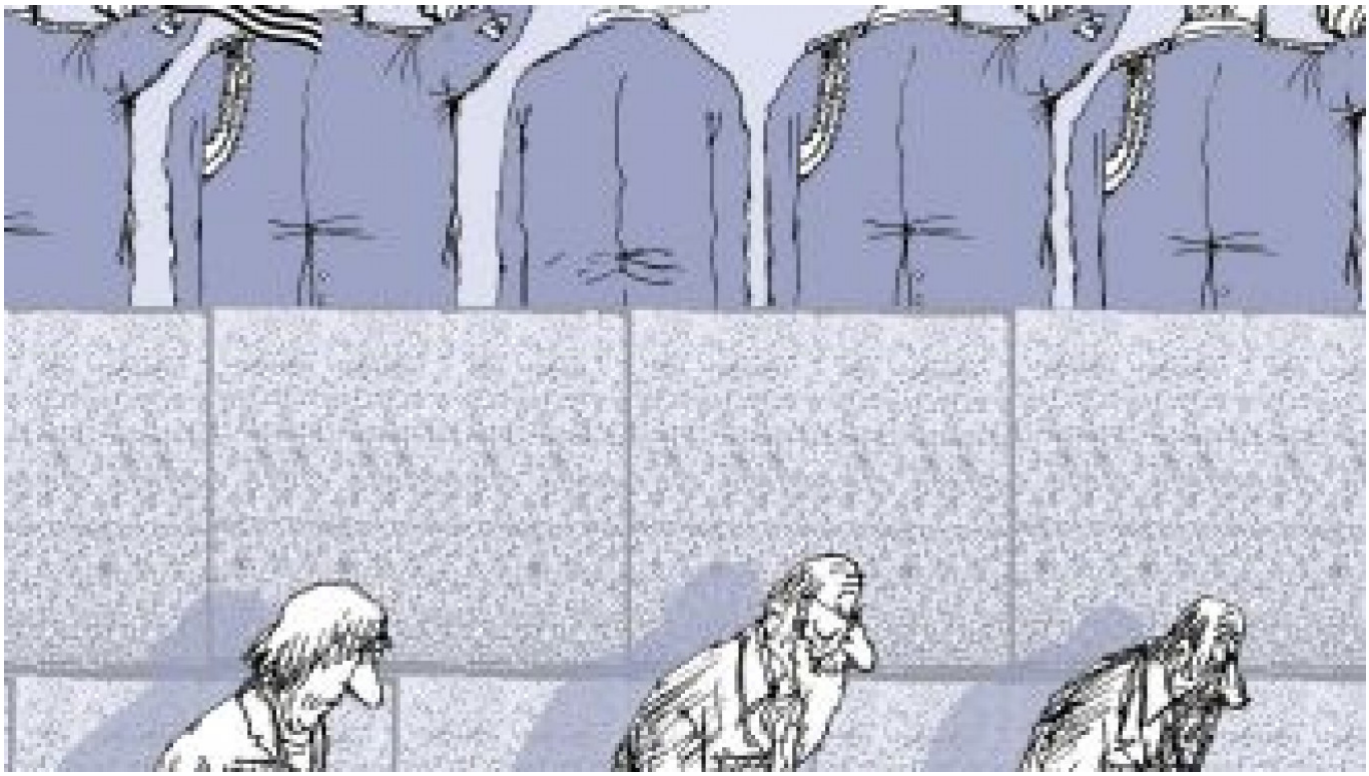
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

May 9 Photo Op

By Alexander Golts

May 05, 2011



Russians know that Victory Day is approaching not only because commemorative St. George ribbons are being handed out on sidewalks or because of the abundance of patriotic programs on television about legendary Soviet spy Max Otto von Stirlitz. Muscovites, in particular, know the holiday is coming since they endure horrendous traffic jams — worse than usual — during the rehearsals of the military parade that will be the top public event on May 9.

But few Russians will take pride in viewing the military weapons that will be paraded across Red Square. These systems were developed 20 years ago, and they are produced in miniscule quantities today.

Consider, for example, the S-400 air defense missile system. Although it is based on old designs, parade organizers are trying to spin it as new. Roughly the same can be said of other supposedly new military equipment such as the Iskander missile and the Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missile. As for the supposedly new T-90 tank, Ground Forces head Alexander Postnikov said it is the 17th upgrade of the T-72 tank that was first produced in the 1970s.

Perhaps the only new item we will see in this year's parade are the new berets that paratroopers, marines and all other soldiers will wear as part of their standard attire.

Despite the Potemkin aspects of the parade, Victory Day is truly Russia's only authentic holiday. May 9 is the only day that all Russians are truly united. It gives cause for everyone to celebrate — liberals, Communists, United Russia members and even citizens without any political affiliation whatsoever. Everyone over 30 in Russia (and the other former Soviet republics) remembers how his grandpa reverently showed off his war medals and recounted how the Germans bombed Moscow and how the women went out to dig trenches. Six decades later, the Great Patriotic War, which touched every Soviet family, is still a unifying force.

Victory Day remains a deeply emotional holiday. Surveys indicate that most Russians consider victory over Nazi Germany to be the greatest event of the 20th century. The hardships and deprivations that Russians experienced in the Great Patriotic War — in contrast to the horrors of the gulag, revolutions and civil war — were not in vain. The victory that Russians will mark on Monday defined the Soviet Union as a superpower. No other event inspires Russians with so much pride in their country.

The problem is that Victory Day has been co-opted by Russia's leaders. They take a purely utilitarian approach, looking ways to promote themselves, not the country or veterans. That is why Moscow became a besieged fortress in 2005 and effectively denied local residents access to the city center so that then-President Vladimir Putin could show off before the world leaders he invited to attend the celebration.

But this year does not mark a major anniversary of that victory, and no world leaders are expected to attend. That leaves Kremlin spin doctors in need of a suitable backdrop to make their bosses look good before the television cameras. Top officials are not too excited about photos next to old war veterans in their crumpled, musty suits from the 1970s. The hackneyed phrase that "nobody and nothing be forgotten" doesn't work anymore. Also passe — and degrading — are the holiday sausage-and-cheese food packages the government used to give out to veterans. What's more, they can't keep repeating the same Victory Day promise to provide housing for veterans year after year.

Instead, Russia's leaders prefer posing on the backdrop of sleek missiles, rows of goose-stepping soldiers marching under the blaring music of old war songs and drawn-out cries of "Hurrah!" Kremlin officials hope that they will look patriotic and mighty— at least for a day or so.

Vladimir Kozhin, head of the Office for Presidential Affairs, mentioned last year that this year's Victory Day parade might be canceled to carry out repairs on Red Square. But this is an election year, and the Kremlin needs every patriotic PR opportunity it can get its hands on. Needless to say, Kozhin's idea was quickly killed.

About $43 million will be spent by the Defense Ministry and cities across the country on Victory Day celebrations. The government would be better off using these funds instead to improve the lives of veterans, many of whom have lived in poverty without the apartments they were promised for decades.

As a result, Victory Day has been transformed from a demonstration of national unity into a

hollow display of cheap patriotism and militarism.

Alexander Golts is deputy editor of the online newspaper Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/05/05/may-9-photo-op-a6789