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Pain of World War II Is Passed On to Children

By Marilyn Murray

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Saturday marks the 70th anniversary of the end of the 200-day nightmare of the Battle of Stalingrad in World War II. This horrific battle was one of the bloodiest in the history of warfare.

If I were to ask a group of Russians what words come to mind when they hear the name Stalingrad, they would probably answer: courage, victory, sacrifice, heroism, persistence and other words describing exceptional valor and tenacity. But this battle also left a legacy of pain, suffering, alcoholism and shattered minds and spirits.

During my advanced classes, the participants share how World War II, which they call the Great Patriotic War, affected their families and the entire population of the Soviet Union.

When the battle for Stalingrad first started, the average life expectancy was 24 hours for a Soviet soldier and 3 days for an officer. According to government statistics, 478,741 military and civilian lives were sacrificed in the defense of the city named in honor of Josef Stalin.

Other sources say the combined Soviet and German deaths reached nearly 2 million. To put this in perspective, the U.S. lost 418,500 men and women in all of World War II, both in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters — that is, less than the Red Army lost in this one battle.

The Soviet Union lost 13 percent of its population from 1941 to 1945. Almost every family lost at least one member, and survivors were often wounded or imprisoned. The consistent bombing and artillery fire on many cities resulted in vast destruction of residential areas in addition to military and industrial sites. Families were crowded into one small room and were fortunate if there was food and clean water.

Normal daily routines like going to work or to school were largely suspended because the entire country concentrated on fighting the enemy and simply trying to stay alive. Virtually everyone, barring infants and the infirm, joined the military effort. Even children so young they had to stand on boxes worked alongside adults in factories producing equipment for the war effort.

Famine became a very real problem as entire cities were surrounded by the German army and cut off from food supplies. Agricultural sites were bombed and crops destroyed. Most of the food that was accessible was being sent to the front lines to keep Soviet soldiers nourished enough to fight. To make matters worse, main roads had been bombed, so shipping food from the villages to the cities was extremely problematic.

Starvation became an appalling reality. Experiencing a famine is one of the most traumatic events a person can endure. Morality fades away in the face of watching your child starve. Stealing, sleeping with the enemy and even cannibalism were not uncommon.

How do people retain their sanity in times of constant threat, hunger and horror? What inner defense keeps them functioning?

A person's innate survival and defense mechanisms are activated and deployed in numerous ways. When a person is subjected to physical trauma, his body innately goes into shock and often doesn't feel physical pain for a period of time. This allows him to seek help and not be distracted by intense pain. Every person also has an innate emotional shock defense that activates and keeps the person from feeling the full intensity of the trauma he is experiencing.

This defense mechanism is meant to be temporary, not lifelong. It uses several factors as a protector: repression, anesthetizers (food, nicotine, alcohol, drugs or sex) and diversionary tactics, such as work, school, sports, entertainment or humor.

In times of war, soldiers have to repress their feelings of terror and anger to function in the midst of battle. At the end of a particular military encounter when the soldier is attempting to rest, his repression often abates and allows fear, rage and many other emotions to come roaring to the surface. Then anesthetizers come into play.

During World War II, vodka and cigarettes were a standard part of every soldier's rations. As the battles intensified, if available, the vodka allotment for each man increased. For many, vodka was the only way to numb their fear and continue to fight.

For a Russian soldier, diversionary tactics often were humor and music. Caring for others also

kept their minds off their own pain. Officers kept busy organizing and strategizing, which was an effective defense against troublesome emotions.

Unfortunately, there are people who can't withstand the intensity and pressure of a battle such as Stalingrad. They may survive physically, but the horror of war leaves them damaged emotionally and mentally. Their rational minds become shattered by the reality of what they experienced.

In addition, there is a phenomenon that is now labeled post-traumatic stress disorder. This can be caused by any type of trauma but was first studied as it related to war veterans. Some of the symptoms are:

- Flashbacks, nightmares, a sense of reliving events
- Numbness, inability to express emotions except perhaps anger and fear
- Hyperalertness, anticipation of danger, constant wariness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Depression, hopelessness
- Difficulty in relationships

When the war ended and the soldiers who survived returned home, they were no longer the young recruits who had been eager to defend their motherland. Their lives had been radically changed. What they experienced was seared into their hearts and spirits, and they would never be the same.

Many experienced the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, but in the 1940s, knowledge regarding effective treatment of this disorder was very limited. When screaming nightmares invaded small apartments, the entire family was affected. Children would awaken and see their father huddled in the corner clutching a gun, or a wife would attempt to coax her husband back to bed as he raged from room to room searching for the enemy.

Alcohol use also increased. Many of my students said their fathers or grandfathers had not been alcoholics before they went to fight in the war, but they returned — often minus a limb — dependent on vodka. One of my students related, "My father became belligerent and abusive. He beat my mother and me and my little sister. It was such a tragedy because we remembered the loving young father in 1941 who tearfully kissed us as he left to report for duty."

Even though seven decades have passed, the impact of World War II on families still exists. Not only in the pride of the veterans marching on May 9 but also in the former Soviet citizens who still carry their parents' pain.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray

Method," was recently released in English and Russian.

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