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Russia's Unfinished War

By Alexei Bayer

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World War II is only a vague recollection in the rest of the world. Three years ago, my wife's cousin, a heroic U.S. fighter pilot and former prisoner of war, was invited to a ceremony in Great Britain marking the 65th anniversary of victory. But most people no longer remember the date of Nazi Germany's surrender. It is as distant as the Napoleonic Wars were in the early 1880s or the U.S. Civil War was in the 1930s.

Not so in Russia, where Victory Day is still marked by a grandiose parade in Red Square reminiscent of the Soviet flexing of the military muscle, patriotic films and the ubiquitous

display of black and yellow St. George's bunting, the symbol of Russian battlefield valor. One part of the nation gets teary-eyed thanking the dwindling number of veterans for the great victory, while the other, smaller part of Russia wonders why Russians are the only people on Earth for whom the war doesn't seem to have ended.

Pompous victory celebrations have been revived more recently, acquiring a certain in-your-face quality, after a hiatus in the late Soviet period, when ordinary Russians had grown deaf to the state's nonstop harping on the debt the rest of the world owed to the Soviet Union for defeating the greatest evil in history. Already in the 1980s, Communist propaganda felt embarrassed to be dusting off the war. It developed a formula which went like this: "The more time passes after the victory, the better we understand what an extraordinary accomplishment it was."

With history's hindsight, the two conflicts of the first half of the 20th century can be seen as a single war with a long truce in-between, in which the West fought to curb the rising power of Germany.

But the conflict involved another rising power, Russia, which always was, at best, a reluctant ally of the West and was often closer to Germany. Germany helped the Bolsheviks seize power in 1917 and recover from the Civil War. The two countries signed the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922 and their militaries cooperated in secret. Having fallen out with Hitler in 1933, the Soviet Union then fought alongside Nazi Germany and supplied it with raw materials in 1939-41, while Germany invaded France and bombed Britain.

The world over, World War II began in 1939 and ended in Europe on May 8, 1945. In Russia, it was the Great Patriotic War, which began in 1941 and ended on May 9, 1945. Actually, it didn't end, but turned into a Cold War against the West. Communist ideologues called the postwar period "peaceful coexistence".

Germany eventually found its place in modern, democratic Europe. But even after the collapse of the Russian and Soviet empires in the 20th century and several rearrangements of the European political geography, Russia's place in the world is as elusive as ever. Russia, with its symbol of a two-headed eagle spanning East and West, seems to have fallen between two chairs. The economic revival in Asia has bypassed it. Meanwhile, it constantly turns a resentful, scowling face to Europe and the United States, even as its ruling elites buy up foreign real estate and acquire residency permits.

Russia's extended war has now lasted 99 years with no resolution in sight. When Russia once again waved its St. George's ribbons and rolled its rocket launchers on Red Square on Thursday, it should be kept in mind that it was merely marking another anniversary of an armed truce.

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