

Olympic Ceremony Without World War II

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Those who had become accustomed to viewing Russia through the prism of state propaganda got a surprise from the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics. As one observer wrote, "We unexpectedly saw Russia without Putin."

In Sochi, the world saw a cultured, civilized and vibrant country. There was no sign of babushkas wrapped in shawls giving the sign of the cross and wailing pseudo-folk songs, no Cossacks with whips, no socialist realism, no portrayal of Stalin as an "effective manager" and most amazingly — no reference to the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War. In short, we saw no sign of the very things President Vladimir Putin's regime has been carefully cultivating in an attempt to earn the devotion of the Russian people or else protect them from the harmful influence of the outside world.

The theme of the Soviet people as "liberators" was also conspicuously absent, although just days ago the Kremlin banned cable operators nationwide from broadcasting the Dozhd channel because it recently conducted a survey asking if Russia should have surrendered Leningrad to the Nazi forces in order "to save hundreds of thousands of lives."

Putin's propaganda machine has taken World War II as its main theme and declared 1945 as the Russian people's greatest victory. That is no surprise: with no significant accomplishments to point to from Putin's long years in power, the regime must look to the past to find them. But how did it happen that the great victory in World War II was entirely absent from the script of the opening ceremony?

Giving recent events, the very idea of purposely excluding it was so unthinkable that commentators have spent considerable time debating the question over the past few days.

The first theory, that foreigners scripted the entire opening ceremony for a foreign audience, was clearly impossible considering that nothing of significance happens in Russia without prior Kremlin approval. Many people liked the second theory, that Putin finally realized the futility of setting the "chosen" Russian people in opposition to the rest of the world and decided to place universal human values in the forefront. Unfortunately, that too was disproven.

In a couple of interviews, head of the Channel One and opening ceremony general producer Konstantin Ernst revealed that Russia had proposed the theme of the "Soviet soldier liberating the world from fascism," but that the International Olympic Committee had categorically rejected it in any form.

It turns out that the Russian organizers had been holding out until the very last moment for permission to declare a moment of silence right in the middle of the ceremony. The authors of that scenario proposed that all 40,000 people sitting in the stadium would have stood up and honored those who had died in a war that ended back in 1945. They were to have held up 40,000 individual portraits of fallen Soviet soldiers that had been previously placed on their chairs. The organizers did not worry about the fact that the guests would have spent the greater part of the ceremony sitting on the faces of those dead heroes, or that many portraits could have been trodden under foot or disrespectfully tossed in the trash as people left the stadium.

Fortunately, the IOC was adamant that there can be no war theme at the Olympics. The organizers had planned to make this extravaganza the culmination of the entire ceremony, but they were forced to delete it entirely.

It turns out that all the optimists were rejoicing in vain. The authorities will continue to torment us with reference to our "fallen forefathers," patriots will continue to write "looted" on BMW and Mercedes-Benz automobiles, war archives will remain closed to the public and the authorities will continue to persecute writers and artists who express the least doubt or make even a slightly ironic comment about the great victory of more than half a century past.

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