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This Is Not Stalingrad's Generation

By Mark Galeotti

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Outsiders hold are all kinds of abiding memes about Russians. Some are negative caricatures, such as the assumption that they are all vodka-swilling louts. Others, though, are much more positive, not least the dour and dogged determination of the Russian defending the Motherland. This is an image repeatedly raised in Russia and abroad, and even has a degree of traction in the interconnected worlds of policy and punditry. There is, for example, a school of thought that says sanctions, even expanded sectoral ones of the kind that would hit the economy as a whole, are futile simply because when push comes to shove, the doughty "muzhik" will always push back. In the defense of the Motherland, these voices claim, ordinary Russians are willing to make whatever sacrifices are needful to endure and prevail.

Since Russians have become accustomed to consumerism and comfort, they will be less willing to endure a drop in living standards resulting from economic sanctions.

Well, maybe, but I am not so sure. Have Russians demonstrated a quite extraordinary resolve in vanquishing foreign enemies in the past? Of course, and it is certainly true that in the final analysis of World War II was won and lost on the Eastern Front. No one can take that triumph away from Russia — and let us not forget from Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan and all the other Soviet republics whose people also fought, starved and died to defeat the Nazis.

But the jump from Stalingrad to sanctions is a formidable one, and for all kinds of reasons I do not believe that today's Russians would be quite so willing and able to mobilize for some future economic conflict.

First of all, today's Russians are different. They have become accustomed to consumerism and comfort compared with their grandfathers' generation. Just as modern Russians are far less willing to accept the human casualties of war — the first Chechen war sparked a real public outrage, even though the fewer than 6,000 dead or missing Russian soldiers represented less than a week's toll for the siege of Leningrad — so, too, are they likely to be less tolerant of the economic costs.

This is a generation that has become accustomed to imported household goods, their package holidays in Turkey and Egypt and the prospect of having their children educated abroad. Besides, Russians have also come to see this as part of their new social contract. Let the Kremlin run the country, let the oligarchs and bureaucrats live their gilded lives of privilege and corruption, so long as their lives also get slowly but appreciably better.

Of course, this does not mean that Russians would not be willing to make sacrifices in the name of saving the nation, but this leads to the second key distinction: Today's threat is very different. World War II — the Great Patriotic War — was a genuine existential fight for the survival not just of the Soviet Union, or even Russia, but the Slavic peoples themselves, facing a future of slavery at best and extermination at worst. Whatever the more rabid propagandists may think — and the more rabid Kremlin apologists in the West may say — the aim of sanctions is not to humble Russia or make it into an impoverished pariah. Instead, it is to counter a neo-imperialist adventure in Ukraine and, implicitly, to prevent further hegemonic aggression elsewhere along Russia's border.

It is easier to preach patriotic privation when you can hear the rumble of the enemies' guns and when everyone faces a common threat. Given that no one expects Russia's rich and powerful to curb their lifestyles, and considering that a sinking ruble does not quite have the same dramatic impact as a blitzkrieg, whipping up a suitably masochistic commitment to the struggle will be difficult.

Finally, we have to acknowledge the thorny issue of the Stalinist state. The bloody-minded resistance of the Soviet people was in part a product of the bloody-handed determination of the Stalinist murder-machine. Just as British mythologies of the war dwell on the "blitz spirit" of cheery resolution, glossing over the documented cases of looting, profiteering and defeatism, so, too, the Russian narrative overlooks the extent to which the Stalinist stage deployed every vicious tactic at its disposal to keep the people fighting.

Hence women and children were not evacuated from Leningrad to stiffen its defenders' sinews. Penal battalions mustered from the gulags were thrown into battle with NKVD machine-gun battalions behind them to mow down any who hesitated. The infamous "Not

One Step Back'' Order No. 227 threatened commanders who retreated with tribunals and either field execution or a place of their own in the penal battalions. Sometimes people held their ground not because they did not fear the enemy, but because they feared their own government even more.

President Vladimir Putin is no Stalin, though. Jail a whistle-blower, close down a critical broadcaster, spin the news until it is positively whirling? Of course. But this is not a regime which can or will resort to methods such as were commonplace in Uncle Joe's grim prison of nations.

History is sometimes one of the best tools we have for predicting the future, but it is one we need to use with care as it can easily mislead. I do not know if sectoral sanctions would work in undermining the support for the Kremlin and thus encourage a change in policy. Much depends on how much economic misery Europe is willing to suffer in the name of sanctions, as well as how the Russians can articulate their dismay.

The Kremlin may believe that the sanctions will be bearable and short-lived. After all, in the past the West has not been able to maintain its outrage for more than a few months. But as we try to gauge the future morale of the Russian people as a whole, I am sure that we cannot find much useful guidance in the trenches of the Great Patriotic War.

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