

Kremlin Glorifies Military, Ignores Social Decay

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The end of winter in Russia is marked by two holidays that, although major, are somewhat less prominent than New Year's. The first is Defender of the Fatherland Day on Feb. 23 and the second is International Women's Day on March 8.

Feb. 23 began as a day honoring military servicemen, but with Women's Day just a few weeks later, it gradually became a holiday devoted to men in general. On Feb. 23, women congratulate men, and on March 8, men present gifts and flowers to women. This show of mutual affection remains one of the few pleasant customs that every Russian continues to follow — including those people born after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It would seem that the events of 2014 add new luster to the Feb. 23 celebrations. Indeed, the "polite men in green" who were seen during Russia's recent annexation of Crimea appeared on the holiday posters adorning Moscow shops and offices on Feb. 23 — and no doubt by order of municipal officials. State-controlled television and radio put the holiday on a par with the 70th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany, with news anchors

somberly intoning, "In a world full of hot spots, Defender of the Fatherland Day takes on new meaning."

This year on Feb. 23, I rode the commuter train with my grandfather, who devoted 50 of his 84 years to service in the Soviet and Russian armies. As we sat, an endless stream of vendors peddled their wares to passengers, offering everything from shoe glue to crossword puzzles.

Those who ride commuter trains regularly have long since learned that the number of such vendors increases whenever the economy worsens. These days, they are as thick as flies.

Somewhere between the fellow hawking shoelaces and someone else selling children's alphabet books, there appeared before us a poorly dressed elderly woman with bad teeth. She was not begging, although she held a plastic bag with a few coins in her hand. "Dear passengers," she managed to shout above the noise of the train, "I would like to congratulate you on the holiday." She proceeded to sing, in a sometimes cracking but still youthful voice, a medley of Soviet military and patriotic songs.

My grandfather was a colonel in the Soviet engineer corps and helped in the Chernobyl cleanup effort. Even at 84, I would not call him an emotional person. But at this moment, his face began to twitch.

It was not the false pathos broadcast on television that elicited his response, but this woman, who sang her songs for the sake of a few coins on a loud and dirty commuter train. They were the same songs that their generation had traditionally heard performed by military brass bands on ceremonial parade grounds, and that voiced the meaning of life for my grandfather and millions of his compatriots.

No doubt every country with commuter trains has some version of this tottering and tattered singer, but this old woman with her ancient coat who sang "Katyusha" to all who would listen provided the perfect counterpoint to the glamorous, smiling singers who grace the commemorative telethons on state-controlled television.

She was a living symbol of the absolute falseness of all the clumsy official propaganda that attempts to foist new meaning on this venerable military holiday. She stood there, a sign of the collapse of the social welfare system and the dashed hopes of her generation. She was hard reality — a fact that no prime time glitter or pompous declarations could obscure.

Even the authors of the propagandistic television shows saw the obvious conundrum they faced. Would it be politically correct to congratulate the Russian soldiers fighting against the Ukrainian army near Donetsk? Or is it more appropriate to do that on the less conspicuous holiday of Feb. 15, the anniversary of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989? Or should Russia's servicemen simply congratulate each other, be happy with greetings from their wives and expect no recognition from their country because Russia does not officially admit to being a party in this conflict?

Oddly enough, there are certain limits beyond which even the hot, flowing lava of Russian propaganda will not pass. The memory of World War II is truly of great importance to Russians, and there is a powerful cultural phenomenon associated with those memories. In fact, it is not just a collective memory, but a certain political potential.

I think it is no exaggeration to say that President Vladimir Putin could tap into that potential and, quite literally, mobilize millions of people for military service.

For example, he could have returned from the talks in Minsk on Feb. 12 and addressed the country on national television, saying, "Damn it all. The West has tried to hold us down for 25 years and we cannot reach an agreement with them on anything. Maybe it is partly our fault, but now there is only one thing we can do: Once again, as we did in 1944, we must rally together and restore our real borders — that is, with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania for starters."

Anyone who thinks that millions of people in Russia and the near abroad would not respond to that call with unrestrained enthusiasm has a poor understanding of post-Soviet society.

However, Russian propaganda does not gush over that last boundary — not because modern politicians feel there are limits to how far they can go, or out of concern for the inevitable reaction of the outside world.

The reason is that the current form of propaganda sets out to achieve a mobilization in the exact opposite direction. After all, if a mass mobilization does occur, the first thing that the newly-awakened Russian people would see is the quality of the country's leadership. And they would take a closer look at the leaders themselves, people who spent billions of rubles celebrating the 70th anniversary of the victory in World War II even while old women in ragged dresses roamed commuter trains in hopes of earning 20 rubles for a loaf of bread.

That is precisely why the fighting in Ukraine will continue as a clandestine operation, and why the cynical ruling kleptocracy will continue staging a flashy show to divert the public's attention away from asking where all the money came from for such a display, and where the rest of it has gone.

The country continues to celebrate these twin holidays and for now, the country can go on ignoring the old woman on the commuter train singing "Katyusha." We can forget about all of them, until it turns out that the powerful country with the heroic past and gloriously festive present exists only on the television screen and nowhere else.

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