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An American Longs for Past Victory Days

By Peter Zwack

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With the 70th anniversary of Victory Day rapidly approaching, I thought I would offer a short personal retrospective of that memorable day in Moscow. Now a retired citizen, I was the U.S. senior military attache to the Russian Federation from 2012 to 2014. During that time I witnessed two Victory Day celebrations and the troubling downturn of our overall relations over that tumultuous two-year period.

I fully participated in the 68th Victory Day celebration in 2013. With many other international attaches I sat among well-decorated Soviet-era veterans in Red Square's reviewing stands giving us a birds-eye view of the impressive military parade.

We wore the patriotic gold and black striped St. George's ribbon that reminded of great victories over Napoleon and Hitler's Germany, and partook in friendly conversation with those around us. Often that day with Russian veterans, we toasted with vodka to a better future.

The parade itself was something imposing to behold. Thousands of well-synchronized troops marched by President Vladimir Putin and his entourage in perfect goosestep, with colorful

banners flying in the wind, followed by a seemingly endless and impressive array of the most modern Russian military vehicles. Overhead flew sorties of helicopters, fighters, bombers and transports in carefully orchestrated aerial formations that enthralled the appreciative audience.

After the parade I walked with my family through the festive Moscow streets. As Americans, even with the diplomatic challenges of my position, we thoroughly enjoyed our time, travels and the people we met within Russia. We then took the remarkably efficient metro to Gorky Park that was thronged with citizens enjoying the balmy spring weather.

If I were Russian that day I would have been incredibly proud of my country and its greatest achievement, namely bearing the main brunt of the war, ultimately destroying Nazi Germany.

In my many travels across Russia and the former Soviet Union, seeing the poignant flower-bedecked remembrances of this terrible existential struggle in every single village, town and city I visited was eye-opening. I think our mainstream population in the West never fully realized the extent of the Soviet Union's sacrifice during World War II.

Whatever the politics dividing us, how does one comprehend such a loss of life to a nation over a four-year period? What does the recollection of this do to the psyche of a nation, that had already been scarred by several gruesome decades including a prior World War that toppled a long-seated monarchy, followed by a bitter, divisive revolution and civil war, and later famines and repressions self-inflicted by Stalin's regime in which every Russian and Soviet family lost loved ones?

Is this one visceral reason, among several, including the sour memory of the Cold War and the Soviet Union's break-up that even today, 70 years later, Russia still views the West with such suspicion and distrust?

This, in my opinion, does not excuse, but may help explain the egregious, opportunistically reactive behaviors that Russia instigated after the fall of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine. How do we get past this deep-rooted psychological baggage stoked by an incendiary Russian media that paints the West with its modern military and liberal ideals as a mortal existential threat?

In markedly different circumstances I saw last year's 69th anniversary parade from the Garden Ring Road in front of the U.S. Embassy. We had stopped wearing the St. George's ribbon as it had become part of the nationalist Russian separatist imagery in Ukraine. Some of the armored vehicles that passed us en route to Red Square flew small pennants of Crimea and the Donbass.

I know that many Russians feel snubbed that numerous world leaders and diplomatic missions declined Victory Day participation last year, with even more boycotting this upcoming 70th. I can say that we don't derive any pleasure in doing so. No one wants to diminish the well-earned recognition of Russia's incredibly worthy veterans.

Most Russians, insulated by a well-spun press, simply don't understand that we don't want to be associated with such a robust martial pageantry that has seemingly strayed far from its World War II roots.

How could we sit in Red Square watching a modern military parade applauding units and personnel that flagrantly violated international laws and treaties leading to Crimea's illegal annexation and ongoing proxy aggression within eastern Ukraine?

Perhaps most importantly, what is the most important educational value of Victory Day for Russia's youth today; the lessons of that terrible war, or of the modern glory, power and perceived successes of the current Russian military? One grizzled World War II combat veteran mused about the youthful enthusiasm; "I worry about our [Russian] youth, as they do not understand the horrors of war."

I want to strongly and passionately emphasize that the West, including NATO, is not an offensive threat to Russia. I served as a US and NATO officer for many years and can say this with conviction. No one, no country in the West including the United States, wants confrontation and conflict with the Russian Federation.

NATO is a defensive alliance and has also been for decades a major source of stability within a large European region that used to be rent asunder by chaos and wars. As such, it is no surprise, that many nations, especially in Eastern Europe, wanted to be part of NATO.

NATO will unambiguously protect those countries already in the alliance and strongly advocate for its partners. Russians should fully understand and respect this fact, and realize that NATO's reassured allies, if left alone, can bring calm, stability, and via the EU, economic prosperity to Russian borders. NATO must not be seen as a zero-sum threat by Russian leaders.

I would like to return to Russia one day, and again wearing the St. George's ribbon, observe the Victory Day parade for the reasons it was originally created. Until then, a lot can happen including more conflict, or preferably, a peaceful resolution with Ukraine. The world will be watching.

Whatever happens, I can only hope, implore, that our leaders recommit as they did late in the Cold War to dialogue, to bridge their critical trust and perception gap. The fate of our nations and children depends on them.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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