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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Stages Huge Parade to Mark Victory Day

By The Moscow Times

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Russian jets form the number 70 during the Victory Day parade in Moscow

Thousands of Russian troops marched across Red Square, tanks rumbled through the streets and jets screamed overhead on Saturday in a huge military parade marking the 70th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany.

Western leaders boycotted the parade over Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis but President Vladimir Putin was joined under the Kremlin's walls by about 30 foreign leaders, including Chinese President Xi Jinping, sitting on his right-hand side.

In a sign of closer ties between Russia and China, a column of Chinese troops took part in the events. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was also among those watching.

Among the armor on display was the Armata T-14, which will be Russia's first new battle tank to be deployed for 40 years, as soldiers, some wearing World War II uniforms, filed past

the Kremlin under blue skies and bright sunshine.

War veterans watched from the grandstand, their chests bristling with medals, while crowds of people choked the sidestreets around the Kremlin, cheering and shouting as fighter jets roared over Moscow's city center.

"Victory day is the most important holiday for Russia. In practically every Russian family, someone has died fighting for this country," said 43-year-old former marine Alexander Smolkin.

"My own grandfather died defending Russia, this is our day to remember them," he said, adjusting his light-blue beret, medals and military fatigues.

Putin has used the anniversary to whip up patriotism and fuel anti-Western sentiment, warning that fascism could be on the rise again and suggesting other countries are rewriting history to play down Moscow's role in winning the war.

"The basic principles of international cooperation have been ignored more often in the last decades. The principles which were hard won by humankind following the global hardships of the war," he told rows of soldiers standing to attention.

"We've seen attempts to create a unipolar world," he said, echoing a speech in 2007 when he lambasted the West and Washington's world view.

Many Russians regarded the West's boycotting of the parade as disrespect. An estimated 27 million Soviet citizens were killed during the 1941-45 war.

"I heard that some people say our parade is about displaying a military threat," Smolkin said. "But it is not about that. This is for us Russian people, it shows that we are a strong and great country."

The guest list at the anniversary events in Russia, including major Asian allies India and China, former Soviet republics and communist-era allies such as Cuba, has underlined Russia's role as an outcast in Europe.

For the first time in 70 years, Ukraine also joined most of Europe on Friday in marking the end of the war a day ahead of Russia, which it has accused of exploiting the anniversary to display its military might.

More than 6,100 people have been killed in fighting between pro-Russian separatists and government forces in eastern Ukraine which Kiev says has been stoked by Russia, which annexed the Crimea peninsula from Ukraine last year. Moscow accused the West of orchestrating the events that led to the Ukrainian uprising.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel skipped the parade, as did U.S. President Barack Obama and the French and British leaders, but will attend a wreath-laying ceremony in Moscow on Sunday.

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