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The "Wild Nineties": Youth Engagement, Memory and Continuities between Yeltsin's and Putin's Russia

The psychiatrist Vamık Volkan (2013) recognised three markers that contribute to the formation of large-group identity: the "otherness" of other groups, the role of charismatic leaders and the mythologisation of past events. In the following chapters, we unpack how Volkan's "mythologisation of past events" has played out in Russia since the collapse of the USSR by exploring memory of the victory in the Great Patriotic War and of the Soviet collapse as Russia's respective "chosen glory" and "chosen trauma".

Volkan's term "chosen glory" describes an event ritually remembered so that it becomes a dominant source of "pride and pleasure" for members of the group: "Past victories in battle and great accomplishments of a political or religious nature frequently appear as chosen glories. For example, large groups celebrate their independence days. Some chosen glories and heroic persons attached to them are often heavily mythologized over time." (Volkan 2013, 230) Volkan frames "chosen trauma", meanwhile, as "the shared mental representation of an event in a large group's history in which the group suffered catastrophic loss, humiliation, and helplessness at the hands of its enemies" (Volkan 2013, 231).[1] Both "chosen traumas" and "chosen glories" invoke history and memory yet inevitably cede ground to mythicised representations of the past. Duncan Bell argues that the resulting "mythscape" is the "discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people's memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly" (2003, 66).

In order for chosen glories and traumas to function as identity markers, Volkan argues, they must be passed from older to younger generations. Chosen glories are principally transmitted by parents, teachers and communal ceremonies (Volkan 2009, 211). Similarly, chosen traumas are confirmed when large-group members' "injured self-images associated with the mental representations of the shared traumatic event are 'deposited' into the developing self-representation of children in the next generation as if these children will be able to mourn the loss or reverse the humiliation" (Volkan 2001, 87–88).

Even when "transmitted" to new generations, Volkan observes, chosen traumas – and the identities they carry with them – are not necessarily immediately or always

1 Trauma as a cultural phenomenon has been extensively addressed also in sociology, where scholars reached similar conclusions as Volkan. See Alexander 2004; Eyerman 2019.

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active; the same could be inferred for chosen glories. Political, social, and cultural leaders, in fact, can call on elements of this mythscape to bolster group identity.[2]

Inculcating and invoking chosen traumas and chosen glories promote specific values – and effectively boost a regime's legitimacy. Such is the case in Soviet and post-Soviet space, where the Great Patriotic War has been promulgated as a "chosen glory" by Soviet and post-Soviet leaders (Malinova 2017, 45).[3] Memories of World War II have been recycled and revived to legitimise power and to justify present and future policy.

In the 75 years since 1945, however, there have been moments when narratives of the Great Patriotic War have been particularly susceptible to change. The most acute of these periods was the 1980s. When Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev introduced a number of democratising reforms (Tumarkin 1991, 1–2; Jacobsen 1995, 103), the veil on defence expenditure and war fatalities was lifted. In response, a new generation of writers began to question the purported "success" of the war (Renz 2005, 63; Cooper 2005, 136; Frank and Gillette 1992, 239; Mathers, 1995, 231).[4] Mikhail Meltyukhov's *Stalin's Missed Chance* (*Upushchennyy shans Stalina*, 2000) followed works by Gorkov and Danilov (1993) and Suvorov (1987), outlining the strategic failures of Stalin and the Soviet Army. These new historians were accused of blackening the history of the war and considered a threat to creating a new patriotic generation. By opening the chosen glory to contestation, *glasnost* had proved to be a major contributor to the delegitimisation of communist society and its past military victories.

In the early 1990s, nascent media outlets and educational forums competed for popularity in the new market-driven society (Renz 2005, 66; Brown 1992, 56). Writers, historians and broadcasters used these newly available discursive sites

2 Volkan cites the role of the Battle of Kosovo (1389) for Serbian collective identity as an example of a trauma, since it has been associated with feelings of lost greatness and victimhood. Although narratives of the military defeat changed over time, they retained their traumatic relevance until the end of World War II. It was not until Slobodan Milošević emerged as a force in Serbian politics in 1987 that the trauma of Kosovo Polje was reactivated and became a pillar of Serbian nationalism again, especially during the Yugoslav and Kosovan wars (Volkan 2001, 89–95).

3 See also Gudkov, Lev. "The Fetters of Victory: How the War provides Russia with its Identity." *Eurozine*, 03 May 2005, https://www.eurozine.com/the-fetters-of-victory/ (3 April 2019).

4 Viktor Suvorov's *Icebreaker: Who Started World War II* (*Ledokol: Kto nachal vtoruyu mirovuyu voynu?*, 1989) initiated debate on the claims that the Soviet Union planned an offensive attack on Nazi Germany in 1941. Gorkov and Danilov (1993) later published a study on this planned attack, titled *Was Stalin Preparing a Preemptive Strike against Hitler in 1941?* (*Gotovil li Stalin uprezhdayushchiy udar protiv Gitlera v 1941g?*, 1993). In addition, the arrival of NGOs like Memorial (founded in 1989) saw the launch of a number of educational studies that sought to uncover and perpetuate the histories of political repression relating to the Soviet period.

to re-understand Russia's past, which impacted heavily on the government's use of the victory for its own political goals. However, historical discourse reverted to the Soviet narrative in 1995. Then Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov's words are emblematic of the time: "In the history of the twentieth century, there is no more significant and memorable event than the victory of the Soviet people and their allies over Hitler's fascism in the Great Patriotic War."[5] Despite emerging stories of Soviet cruelty, crimes and errors, veterans' organisations made calls to recognise the real "truth" or, as Vladimir Putin has recently framed it, "pure truth".[6] The Soviet Union, goes the dominant narrative, bore the brunt of and led the fight against fascism.[7] Russia's "chosen glory", the Great Patriotic War, has proven resilient despite occasional challenges.

Russia seems spoiled for choice when it comes to selecting a "chosen trauma". Scholars of cultural trauma have usually highlighted the Soviet Union's collapse as the event that created widespread disorientation in daily life and Russians' perceptions of themselves and their society (Sztompka 2004). Nonetheless, Piotr Sztompka notes that the collective was not quick to acknowledge the collapse of communism as traumatic. In order for this to happen, "a set of conditions or situations, perceived as pernicious, dangerous or threatening" – that is, "precipitating factors" – had to coalesce (Sztompka 2004, 164). In other words, the "pain of transition", which encompasses the difficulties of social, political and economic transformation, catalyses societal trauma. Indeed, scholars have started to focus their attention on the 1990s, when the full effects of the "pain of transition" came to be felt, as particularly traumatic. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has recently defined the so-called "wild nineties", the decade of Boris Yeltsin's rule, as Russia's "chosen trauma" (2020, 105–132). We contend that the "wild nineties" have indeed become the chosen trauma to mirror World War II as Russia's chosen glory.

1 The traumatic frame of the "wild nineties"

Much work has already explored the Kremlin's role in consolidating the public's negative memories of the Yeltsin era. Olga Malinova, for instance, has shown how

5 "Dokumenty po voprosam, svyazannym s prazdnovaniyem 50-letiya Pobedy v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne (v t.ch. ob ob'yavlenii amnistii) (proyekty postanovleniy Gosudarstvennoy Dumy, obrashcheniya, zayavleniya, informatsii i dr.)" F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, Gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Moscow, February–March 1995.

6 "Victory 75: Military Parades on Moscow's Red Square." *Russia Today*, 24 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4pFnlr0zck (14 September 2020).

7 F. 10100, Op. 1 d. 1003, l. 29–30, GARF, February–March 1995; also footnote 3.

the negative framing of the Yeltsin era has boosted the Putin regime's legitimacy, highlighting Putin's personal role in creating a narrative contrast between the 1990s and 2000s (2011, 112–115; 2018; 2021). Sharafutdinova noted the frequency with which Putin referred to the 1990s in his televised "Direct Line" (*Pryamaya liniya*) press conferences between 2001 and 2017. Malinova and Sharafutdinova agree that the president continually seeks to oppose weakness and strength, instability and stability, and highlights the population's suffering in the Yeltsin years (Malinova 2018, 53–60; Sharafutdinova 2020, 124). Finally, Belmonte and Rochlitz (2019) provide empirical evidence of the success of the government's mass media influence, especially in Russia's provinces.

The "wild nineties" trope, however, is not the Kremlin's political creation. Pop culture and mass media had long ago introduced the public to the era. Indeed, films, TV series and literature have consistently explored the topics of criminality, violence and "bespredel" – the chaotic and criminal lack of restraints in late and post-Soviet Russia[8] – since the 1990s. Cultural producers used history in particular to establish parallels between the 1990s and various other difficult historical periods (Norris 2012; Wijermars 2018). Indeed, it was the mass media that popularised the "wild nineties" moniker (Bonch-Osmolovaskaya 2018, 130–131).[9] Moreover, many Russians lived through and still remember what were very real difficulties for swathes of the population during the 1990s (Gudkov 2014, 192). Those living memories have facilitated the spread and a critical reception of the "wild nineties". All these causalities coalesce to encourage the older generation to pass on the traumatic memory of the 1990s to the younger generation.

Whatever its origin, the negative myth of the 1990s has – especially since Putin's third term began in 2012 – been a useful tool to promote conservative and patriotic values. Political rhetoric contrasts the Yeltsin era with present-day Russia. The contrast highlights the destructive sociocultural and security effects of lacking patriotism and of embracing western liberalism. While young Russians generally do not question the narrative of the "wild nineties", they are less likely than their parents' generations to hold conservative and patriotic values.[10] As a result, the

8 For a discussion on this term, its origins and use, see Borenstein 2008, 197–200.

9 See also "'Likhiye' ili 'raznyye': pochemu v Rossii snova sporyat o 90-kh?" *BBC Russkaya sluzhba*, 24 September 2015, https://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2015/09/150924_90s_argument_russia (17 October 2018).

10 A 2018 ZOiS report shows that the Russian youth seems to support a liberal understanding of nationalism (Krawatzek and Sasse 2018, 15–16). On patriotism, Omelchenko et al. (2015, 34) observe that "young people feel much less patriotic than elderly people, especially those who have unstable civic identification. Their representations, based on information, propagated by official educational institutions and mass-media mismatch their self-image as citizens and patriots."

Kremlin and its media have taken a particular interest in targeting young Russians, attempting to transmit the "chosen trauma" to them and shielding them from other sources of influence. Any attempts to revisit the Yeltsin era or to challenge the dominant narrative are bulldozed by the state's rhetorical power.

2 Cultural militarisation in 1990s Russia

The cultural reach of military ritual tradition remains remarkably absent from research on the Russian 1990s (which is itself a generally under-researched period). Only the physical dimensions of the military institution and its apparently diminished status have received any real attention.[11] Scholars of Russian militarism in tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and under Vladimir Putin, however, note a continued physical, bureaucratic and military prioritisation. Scholars have explored the prominence of military-patriotic education, the large number of former military and security figures in elite political roles, and the high portion of state budgets allotted to the armed forces (Keep 1983; Pipes 1980; Odom 1976; Golts 2018; Trenin 2016; Renz 2006).[12]

The scholarly consensus is that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a break in the militarisation of society, while Putin's ascension to power marked the beginning of a new period of remilitarisation. In a sense, these scholars are correct. The "wild nineties" was a period of political, economic and military chaos. However, no clean "break" with the militarised past ever occurred. Militarised themes and tropes never receded from prominence in Russia's cultural arena. In particular, the image of the Great Patriotic War, and the Soviet role in that war – that is to say, the nation's "chosen glory" – contained great affective power and prominence in the commemorative and educational landscape.

The end of Soviet-era Victory Day parades after the collapse of the USSR was short-lived. The traditions and rituals of the annual May 9 holiday were revived for the fiftieth anniversary of victory in 1995, when a pair of parades in Moscow – one on Poklonnaya Gora and the other on Red Square – were choreographed to resemble the Soviet Victory Day parades.[13] Music and Soviet symbols were an

11 When we say physical here, we refer to the size and make-up of the armed forces.

12 See also Trenin, Dmitri. "The Revival of the Russian Military." *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2016-04-18/revival-russian-military (25 September 2019).

13 It was at Moscow's Poklonnaya Gora that the Patriotic War of 1812 turned in favour of Russia. Since 1995, Poklonnaya Gora has been home to Victory Park and the Great Patriotic War Museum. Plans to build a victory complex had been made in the 1960s, but did not come to fruition until 1995.

integral part of the celebratory parade. The government and a number of civil associations (including, for example, the All-Russian Veterans' Union) organised dinners, meetings and award ceremonies to celebrate veterans. In addition to the recreation of old practices, new monuments and commemorative spaces – such as a monument to Marshal Zhukov and the Great Patriotic War Museum in Moscow – were unveiled.

During this period, the role of the youth in the continued transmission of Russia's history became a topic of interest. Discussions in the State Duma and among veterans' organisations centred on connecting young people with veterans in the hopes of passing on key patriotic values. Now, veterans' organisations outlined plans for youth-veteran activities, for young people's involvement in memorial cleaning. These organisations further stressed young people's responsibility to perpetuate the memory of the war victors.

The trauma of the 1990s, and especially emerging narratives that challenged the picture of Soviet sacrifice and heroism, accelerated concerns about the Great Patriotic War receding into the past. Yeltsin-era political and state actors recognised that the perpetuation of a glorious history by Russian youth would be important for maintaining a positive image of the Great Patriotic War in Russian society, which led to a recreation of Soviet commemorative practices in 1995. Yeltsin's government, however, also added new traditions. The rituals (re)established by Yeltsin have formed the basis for Vladimir Putin's twenty-first-century militarisation project. While much has been said about how the Putin government has attempted to distance itself from its predecessors' personalities and policies, the militarisation efforts of the Putin era build on the foundations revived and cultivated during the Yeltsin period.

3 The use of history in post-Soviet Russia and the relevance of historical narratives

Russia's chosen trauma and glory play a role in forging a sense of nationhood and in strengthening certain values at the expense of others.[14] History, then, has an active role to play in the present. James Liu and Denis Hilton explain that history "provides us with narratives that tell us who we are, where we came from

14 Regarding the Russian case, see among others Gjerde 2015; Vázquez Liñán 2010; Zajda 2010.

and where we should be going" (2005, 537). Based on this observation, the two scholars have developed the concept of a "historical charter", defined as "[a] central part of a group's representation of its history [. . .], an account of its origin and historical mission, which will have been amended and renegotiated over time to reflect changing circumstances, and frame its responses to new challenges" (Liu and Hilton 2005, 538). Historical narratives "communicate symbolic and practical meaning over and above the 'bare facts' of history", which need to be based on "narrative features – time, plot, characters, perspective, narrative intentions, and evaluation" in order to be successful (Liu and László 2007, 87).

Such representations amplify group-wide emotions, both positive (e.g. pride) and negative (e.g. guilt or shame), as the case of Russia's chosen glory and trauma suggests. Indeed, as János László puts it, "life trajectory", "personal identity", and national history are strongly linked (2014, 69). This emotional link means that contesting chosen traumas and glories is almost impossible. Such phenomena function as "anchors" that "'make familiar the unfamiliar', interpreting, shaping debate and ultimately integrating new information into historical representations [New information from public debate] will be absorbed into existing categories and at most slightly modify the existing system of understanding" (Liu et al. 2014, 59–60).

Post-Soviet Russian leaders have used the chosen traumas and glories of the post-Soviet period to maintain legitimacy and establish discourses of military glory and patriotism in society. As the following chapters show, the tactic seems to have paid off in some regards – but not in every way. Roberto Rabbia discusses the role played by youth as recipient of the trope, as well as the over-the-top reaction of pro-Kremlin media to any positive perspective on the 1990s. However, as Allyson Edwards shows, the gaps between the Yeltsin and Putin era highlighted in official and public discourse are much less significant than often thought. Greater links between Yeltsin's and Putin's Russia comes clear by considering the economic and political continuities – again, fiercely denied by pro-Kremlin commentators – but even more interestingly, by focussing on the connections between patriotism and the victory in the Great Patriotic War or Russia's "chosen glory".

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