

## The Victory Myth and Russia's Identity

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### Abstract

The Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany is again a central tenet of Russian national identity. The Russian government sees the dissemination of the victory's "true," uncritical interpretation, particularly among the youth, as a crucial task, in which it is being supported by "patriotic" youth organizations such as *Nashi*. While these groups seem to be rather successful domestically, their efforts cause resistance in the non-Russian post-Soviet space. The victory myth, as well as the demand for a powerful Russia that goes along with it, contributes to a consolidation of Russian identity. Simultaneously, the country finds itself caught up in numerous bitter disputes over history with its neighbors.

### Nashi and Russian History

For large parts of the Russian population, the victory of Soviet forces over Nazi Germany has once more become a keystone of the country's identity. Since a wave of "Color" Revolutions swept through the former USSR, the Russian government has increased its efforts to defend and promote the "correct" interpretation of history. Challenges to its view in the countries of the former USSR are condemned as anti-Russian, possibly "fascist" and detrimental to Russian national interests. The establishment of a presidential commission in May 2009 to counter attempts at the "falsification" of history to damage Russia illustrates that the leading politicians in Russia see control over the correct view of history as a government task and as essential to the country's national interests.

To broaden the scope of the fight against "falsification," various actors within those parts of Russian "civil society" that is loyal to the Kremlin join in to support the dissemination of the official version of history, particularly among the younger generation. One of the most prominent is the "Democratic Antifascist Youth Organization Nashi."

### A New Elite

Founded in late February 2005, *Nashi's (Ours)* stated goal, according to its 2005 manifesto, was to become the kernel of a new, patriotic elite that would help Russia reclaim its rightful place in the world as a great power. *Nashi* vows to support Vladimir Putin against all enemies, internal and external, since he has consolidated the country and thus laid the groundwork for future greatness. Considering that Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin-mastermind and ideological father of the "Sovereign Democracy" concept, played an important role in the foundation of the youth organization, its loyalty to those in power is not surprising. *Nashi* promis-

es its members an active role in building a Russia that is politically powerful and economically competitive. Some of the leaders of the organization today work for the government, others have received loans to jumpstart their business projects.

The combination of material promises and a blueprint for a shared identity appealed to a large number of youth who would like to be upwardly mobile, yet have few chances for economic success in the current system, where good personal ties are essential. Although the organization has been downsized considerably in the past two years, it maintains its presence in the media. The summer camp it organized in 2009 was visited by Vladimir Putin and attracted 40,000 young people from 83 regions in Russia. *Nashi* claimed to have had 120,000 supporters in 2007, as well as 20,000 active members – so-called "commissars". Today, the number of "commissars" has decreased to about 2,000.

This identification with Soviet times is not accidental. *Nashi* makes ample use of historical symbols: It not only uses the suffix ".su" (Soviet Union) for its website, but also marches under a red and white banner (instead of the white and blue Andreevskiy flag, symbol of the Russian fleet since Petrine times): "Red is the color of our heroic past, while the white cross points to a future in freedom", states the organization. *Nashi* has thus shown itself to be quite adept at using historical symbolism for the creation of a consolidated Russian identity. The most important symbol it uses is the Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War.

### Defending Russia

In spite of the organization's insistence on modernizing Russia, the Great Patriotic War has been *Nashi's* central point of reference since its inception. The war not only shapes the organization's worldview of a powerful Russia that is surrounded by enemies but also serves as

an important mobilizing device. The first time a broader public became aware of *Nashi's* existence was on 15 May 2005. On that day, 60,000 young people marched through downtown Moscow in matching t-shirts. At the end of their route, they met up with thousands of veterans from the war. The soldiers handed the marchers bullet shells from 1940 with the inscription "Remember the war, defend the fatherland". Finally, the commissars swore an oath: "I take the homeland from the hands of the older generation. Yesterday, you fought at the front for freedom, independence and a happy life. (...) Today I continue this fight – wherever my country needs me."

The carefully staged ceremony sought to emphasize the continuity of generations, as well as the historical continuity between the defenders of the Soviet Union and those of Russia. Moreover, whereas the veterans defended the USSR against fascist Germany, *Nashi* claims in its manifesto to have taken on the task of defending Russia against today's "fascists": "Napoleon and Hitler dreamt of conquering Russia. Today, the US on one hand and international terrorism on the other strive to control Eurasia. They have their eye on Russia." For *Nashi*, being "antifascist" means the same as being an opponent of Russia's enemies.

Terrorism/separatism and the hegemonic ambitions of the United States are for *Nashi* the main threats to Russia. Conceptualizing the United States as an immediate military threat to Russia, however, requires some clever rhetorical manipulation. In his 2006 essay "Sovereignty is the Political Synonym of Competitiveness," Surkov develops the concept of "soft absorption" (*myagkoe pogloshchenie*) to make the US threat palpable. According to Surkov, this absorption proceeds by way of "weakening values, declaring the state as inefficient and provoking internal conflicts." A prime example in his view is the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, which official discourse in Russia presents as a coup d'état that replaced the Russophile elite with one friendly to the West.

The Russian government did not miss the role that youth movements such as *Pora* played in the "Orange Revolution". Thus, in addition to *Nashi*, the Kremlin supported the establishment of several youth organizations loyal to various factions within the country's political elite in 2005; these included *Mestnye (Locals)*, *Molodaya Gvardiya (Young Guard)*, and *Rossiya Molodaya (Young Russia)*, to mention only a few. All of them were used to mobilize Russian youth in support of the government and infuse them with "patriotic values" to counter the threat of a "soft absorption". On a practical level, the large demonstrations they held were

a clear sign to any potential "orange" sympathizers that the "patriotic" forces were in control and ready to counter any street protests if they should appear.

### Challenged Identities

Considering Russia's history during the last two decades, one suspects that the problem may be less the "weakening" of pre-existent values, but rather the fact that Russia is still struggling to conceptualize its identity. The Russian sociologist Boris Dubin diagnoses a "poverty of symbols" in today's Russian society, since Soviet concepts and tokens of identity are still present but can no longer be integrated into a post-Soviet identity. Moreover, the fact that the seemingly homogenous political community of the USSR has ceased to exist and been replaced by 15 states and numerous contested areas, not to mention the millions of ethnic Russians living outside of Russia, leads to insecurity concerning the mental and geographic borders of the current Russian community.

The Russian government has sponsored a number of programs that are meant to promote "patriotic values." Two federal five-year-programs for the "Patriotic Education of the Citizens of the Russian Federation" in 2001 and 2006 sought to focus these efforts. They emphasize two interconnected pillars of Russian identity: The millennium-old history of one and the same Russian state and the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War. Hence an attack on either of these two is seen as equivalent to an attack on Russian identity and thus, potentially, on Russia itself.

### Defense of a Myth

A large body of journalistic and academic writing in Russia claims that an international campaign is under way that aims at soiling the great history of Russia. Even the "liberal" president Dmitry Medvedev claimed in his Victory Day blog in 2009: "We are increasingly confronted by (...) historical falsification. These attempts at falsifying history are becoming increasingly acrimonious, vicious and aggressive". The defense of the historical "truth" is considered tantamount to a defense of the Russian identity. *Nashi* considers itself a part of the effort to protect this identity.

The organization thus contributes to the dissemination of a version of history that Vladimir Putin fully developed in his Victory Day speech marking the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nazi defeat in 2005: He spoke of a "sacred" victory and developed a narrative according to which an innocent Soviet Union was brutally assaulted by an inhuman aggressor. In spite of huge materi-

al and human losses, however, the Red Army stood its ground and went on to liberate Europe and ultimately humankind: “Good triumphed over evil and freedom over tyranny.” Victory thereby attains a mythical status. Through this mythical lens emerges a powerful, united country that attained the greatest victory in history.

Now, official, state-sponsored versions of history tend to simplify and glorify the deeds of the nation and the army in countries around the world. What is different in Russia, though, is the thoroughness with which the official narrative excludes and combats all competing versions of history, of which there are many: The official discourse refuses to even address the question of how the Hitler-Stalin Pact may have contributed to the beginning of the war. It remains equally silent about Katyn, the annexation of the Baltic States, crimes committed by the Soviet state against its own and other populations and the tightening of the repressive Stalinist system after the war. Violations of this code of silence are interpreted as an attack on Russia’s interests by forces hostile to it. The establishment in May 2009 of the presidential commission, consisting to a large extent of generals, Federal Security Service officials and “patriotic” historians, is presented as the only adequate countermeasure.

### Past and Present

It is precisely this link between historical “truth” and the national interests of the current Russian state that turns the myth of victory into a factor for Russia’s domestic and foreign policy. The myth appears to provide a basis for the identity of Russian society, yet the political community that attained victory was Soviet, not Russian. However, since ethnic Russians played a leading role in the victorious Soviet community, the historic outcome in this interpretation legitimates Russian demands for close cooperation in the post-Soviet space under its leadership. A challenge to the myth of victory thus amounts to a challenge of Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space today. This mindset has contributed to the diplomatic tensions between Russia and its neighbors. Each time, *Nashi* was involved.

When the Estonian government removed the monument to the Soviet soldiers who had fallen in the Great Patriotic War from downtown Tallinn in 2007, *Nashi* picketed the country’s embassy in Moscow for an entire week. The activists called Estonia a “fascist” state and equated the Estonian police’s violent suppression of ethnic Russians’ protest against the removal in Tallinn to the methods of National Socialism. After activists of the organization assaulted the Estonian ambassa-

dor Marina Kalyurand during a press conference, she was forced to leave the country, which *Nashi* celebrated as “Our victory.”

The events provoked an international diplomatic incident. German chancellor Angela Merkel called Putin and reminded him of Russia’s obligation to protect diplomats. Shortly thereafter, the picketing ended. *Nashi*’s actions were condemned almost unanimously outside of Russia. The government’s tacit support for the protesters did little to improve relations between the EU and Russia. Domestically, however, the protests were popular.

A second, more recent example of the struggle over memory took place in Georgia. Georgia once was part of the “core” of the USSR. Even today, one often hears in Russia, how closely connected the two peoples once were and still are. Since Saakashvili came to power after the “Rose Revolution,” however, the country has followed a distinctively pro-Western, pro-American and anti-Russian course. At the same time, there are efforts in Georgia to articulate a national identity and history distinct from the Soviet one: A case in point was the construction of a “Museum of the Soviet Occupation” in Tbilisi in 2006. For the Russian government, Saakashvili’s policies represent a challenge to its version of history, and his policies a threat to the geopolitical interests of the Russian state.

The peak of tensions in the realm of identity politics was reached in December 2009, when the Georgian government detonated a monument to Soviet soldiers in the city of Kutaisi. The Georgian government declared that it wanted to make way for a new parliament building, as part of an effort to revive the depressed economy in the region. However, it appears clear that the monument’s removal was also intended to be a political statement. The demonstration of strength backfired when a poorly executed blast on 19 December killed a woman and her eight-year-old daughter and injured another two bystanders.

The actions of the government immediately sparked protests and demonstrations in Russia and Georgia. Vladimir Putin said on 22 December: “This is only the most recent attempt to efface from the peoples of the former Soviet Union’s historical memory the recollection of our common past.” The foreign ministry condemned the action as “state vandalism” and “sacrilegious.” The fact that both the Prime Minister and the foreign ministry commented on the blast underscores that the Russian government saw the “attack” on the monument as an attack against the interests of the Russian state.

Again, *Nashi* picketed the embassy and released statements that almost word for word matched those of the government. Again, the organization linked past and present by accusing Saakashvili of acting against his own people. Through his war “with the heroic past of his country (...) people that are alive today had to die.”

*Nashi*, as bearers of an official discourse, skillfully used the struggle over the monument in Kutaisi to portray the blast as a war against the Georgians’ own past and thus against their own people. This argument is linked with the demand for the removal of the Georgian president, who is depicted as an incompetent, “fascist,” uncivilized leader gambling with the fate of his people. They charge him with not representing the interests of the population. To back up this assertion, the Russian media devote a lot of attention to the criticism of Saakashvili by opposition movements in Georgia and the Georgian Diaspora. A close alliance with Russia is presented as Georgia’s “natural” path, as opposed to the pro-American policy of the president.

### The Myth’s Effectiveness

“Patriotic” youth organizations such as *Nashi* fulfill an important role in Russia’s political system. They amplify the messages of the government – particularly in the realm of identity politics and package them in a manner that targets them at a young audience inside of Russia.

The marketing of a trendy type of patriotism by means of concerts, summer camps and orange-black ribbons on Victory Day appears quite effective. Besides, the protests that *Nashi* organizes allow for a channeling of dissatisfaction among youth and its projection outwards. By putting the victory myth at the center of its message, the government and *Nashi* struck a chord in Russian society. Regaining pride in its long history after the decline of the Nineties appears to be a genuine need in Russia. The myth is the most important embodiment of this pride.

Internationally, the victory myth has fared less well, however. The examples cited suggest that on the international stage, the uncritical assessment of the USSR’s role in the Great Patriotic and Russia’s undiplomatic demeanor towards its neighbors – *Nashi*’s actions are part of this – enables politicians in Estonia to avoid confronting that country’s historic dark spots and present-day discrimination against its ethnic Russian minority. In the former satellite states and the West, Russia’s apodictic view of history draws broad criticism and contributes to an antagonistic perception of the country. Paradoxically, Russia’s rabid defense of the victory myth, a symbol of Russia’s cooperation with the West in the defeat of a dictatorial and murderous regime, serves to strengthen those forces that try to deny this contribution.

### About the Author

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