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# The City of Victors: Epideictic Rhetoric at the Museum of Moscow and the Cult of the Great Patriotic War in Putin's Russia

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### Abstract

This article examines contemporary museum practices in post-Communist Russia by focusing on a special exhibit, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)*, dedicated by the Museum of Moscow to the 70th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany. The exhibit draws on 'popular memories'—intimate artefacts and documents donated to the museum by ordinary Muscovites—to tell the story of patriotism and perseverance in wartime Moscow. However, this curatorial and exhibition strategy supports the revival of the Soviet-era myth of the Great Patriotic War and contributes to the recovery of Stalin as a model national leader. The exhibition's rhetoric of participation is thus leveraged to authenticate a triumphalist narrative of the war in the service of an authoritarian regime.

Keywords: museums, epideictic rhetoric, popular memories, the Great Patriotic War, V Day, Russia, Stalin

This article examines museum practices in post-Communist Russia by focusing on a special exhibit, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)*, dedicated by the Museum of Moscow to the 70th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany. The exhibit's curatorial statement emphasized the role of popular memories—intimate artefacts and documents donated to the museum by ordinary Muscovites—in telling the story of patriotism and perseverance in wartime Moscow. The objects, letters, diaries, and schoolchildren's notebooks do indeed tell most of the story, but they seem to buttress a particular version of collective identity and history. In the exhibit's display, these archival traces become elements in a narrative of unity and collective sacrifice inspired by the faith in the country's leader, 'comrade Stalin'. The exhibit participates in the recovery of Stalin's image and validates the ideology of strong leadership that has been the hallmark of President Putin's regime. The exhibition's rhetoric of participation is thus leveraged to authenticate a triumphalist narrative of the war in the service of an authoritarian regime.

### Museum Rhetoric

Museums occupy a privileged place in contemporary memory culture. In Pierre Nora's oft-cited formulation, 'Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image'.<sup>1</sup> As the primary archival institutions of modernity, museums have acquired the status of 'compensatory organs of remembrance' and custodians of national histories.<sup>2</sup> According to a recent study of European museumgoers, people expect museums to accurately portray national pasts,<sup>3</sup> and the mainstream view still holds that 'museums are among the more trustworthy carriers of explanation of the world'.<sup>4</sup>

In the last three decades, however, scholars across disciplines have called into question the museum's status as a politically neutral depository of archival traces. It has become axiomatic to note that objects on display in any museum constitute strategic choices made primarily by the museum's curatorial staff. Which stories and experiences are represented through the selection of objects is an index of the museum's participation in the larger public conversation about the past. As curator Bruce W. Ferguson argues, 'the "voices" heard within exhibitions . . . constitute a highly observable politics'.<sup>5</sup> Rhetoric scholar M. Elizabeth Weiser considers the work of museums as a form of epideictic, or display, rhetoric: 'Museum rhetoric is clearly epideictic, using past events to evoke a consensus around present-day values and identities'.<sup>6</sup> 'When history museums present a narrative of past deeds', she points out, 'they are using their assembled artefacts to construct an epideictic narrative. Through their stories, they aim to persuade visitors to embrace values that the nation collectively considers ideal'.<sup>7</sup>

Museums' epideictic rhetoric involves the selection and arrangement of objects. 'The collection of any museum', writes Dominique Poulot, 'is the product

of reconstructions based on selection and choice, on selective omissions and voluntary commemoration'.<sup>8</sup> The selection is often 'guided by what story the objects on display can tell'.<sup>9</sup> As Weiser puts it, 'curators see the museum object, that artefact upon which visitors focus their attention, as a tool of the narrative—those words that enter visitors' minds largely unnoticed'.<sup>10</sup>

Museums form narratives through chronological and causal arrangement of objects, but the chronology and causality can be signalled more or less explicitly. A more explicit chronology is evident when objects are presented 'in context':

Objects are set in context by means of long labels, charts, diagrams, commentary delivered by earphones . . . Objects are often set in context by means of other objects, often in relation to a classification or schematic arrangement of some kind, based on typologies of form or proposed historical relationship.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, 'in situ' installations fashion an environment in which the relationship among exhibited objects is less explicit. Such installations 'privilege 'experience' and tend to thematize rather than set their subject forth'.<sup>12</sup> As distinct from a more cerebral appeal of in context displays, in situ arrangements involve visitors' 'senses, emotions, and imagination'.<sup>13</sup> Museums' three-dimensional narratives ask

the visitor to move not only through time, the chronology of the exhibit, but also through space, the architecture and arrangement of a display, in a way lacking in books, films, or any other form of narrative.<sup>14</sup>

The reorientation toward the visitor's experience has been a major shift in how museums approach their mission. 'Once defined by their relationship to objects', contemporary institutions of memory, including history museums, are 'defined more than ever by their relationship to visitors'.<sup>15</sup> Museums must compete with other cultural institutions in the 'experience economy' by offering stimulating exhibits that resonate with visitors' lives outside museum walls.<sup>16</sup> The experience imperative has had an impact on both the collection and display of archival objects. Advocates of the so-called 'participatory museum', for example, have argued that to make themselves relevant to their audiences, museums need to solicit and respond to 'visitors' ideas, stories, and creative work', present 'multiple stories and voices', and offer 'changing experiences'.<sup>17</sup>

History museums are distinct from other cultural institutions in that they are agents of national remembering. And, especially if they are dependent on state sponsorship, they are often expected to 'tell the uplifting story of the nation and provide citizens with cultural glue'.<sup>18</sup> The issue, then, is not whether museums can be above politics, but rather what 'voices' they recruit to tell narratives of national pasts and how they convince audiences to embrace the stories museum objects tell. Contemporary archives and museums in the West often engage in the rhetoric of democratization—that is, they deliberately highlight contributions of 'ordinary people' to history making to authenticate particular constructions

of the past that are unveiled through exhibits and displays.<sup>19</sup> In the analysis to follow, I demonstrate how a similar appeal to ordinary people's memories was employed by a recent Victory Day anniversary exhibit at the Museum of Moscow. Like a number of other commemorative events lavishly subsidized by the Russian government, it participated in the revival of the cult of the Great Patriotic War. Before I turn to the exhibit's rhetoric, then, it is useful to review the story of this cult's origins, decline, and resurgence.

### The Cult of the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union and Post-Communist Russia

On 9 May 1945 Nazi Germany officially surrendered to the Soviet Army and its allies, ending the bloodiest war of the twentieth century. The Soviet Union paid a steep price for this victory—over twenty million of its citizens lost their lives. Until the mid-1960s, however, Victory Day (V Day) was not treated as a national holiday—it was an occasion for private grief and local remembrance. Families would mourn the loss of loved ones at home and veterans would don their medals and gather in parks and squares to celebrate their wartime camaraderie. Stalin's death in 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin's personality cult in 1956, led the way for the relative openness of public culture that lasted about a decade. Known as the Thaw, this period gave rise to a number of artistic explorations of the war experience, particularly in songs and films. Films like Mikhail Kalatozov's *Cranes are flying* (1957) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) offer a moving glimpse into the lives of ordinary people that have been irrevocably damaged by the war. Both films received international recognition for their artistry and humanism. Their tone is tragic rather than heroic, and their final scenes of jubilation at the end of the war do not alleviate a profound sense of loss.

Leonid Brezhnev's ascendance to power in 1964 brought an end to the liberalization of public culture and ushered in a conservative cultural agenda focused on solidifying loyalty to the communist regime whose legitimacy was beginning to fray in the wake of de-Stalinization. The Great Patriotic War was perfect material for a unifying myth. 'In its idealized form', Nina Tumarkin observed, 'the war had everything: violence, drama, martyrdom, success, and a chic global status'.<sup>20</sup> Under Brezhnev V Day became a cornerstone of the Soviet identity. For two decades, the heroic myth of the war was promulgated through built environment, museums, films, songs, literature, and secondary school curricula. Giant memory parks, eternal flames, and other shrines to the war cult became fixtures of urban landscapes. The entire generation grew up participating in official commemorative ceremonies, such as proclaiming allegiance to the Communist party at the eternal flame or playing war games in summer camps. But unofficial rituals as well—like newlyweds laying flowers at these eternal flames or war monuments—were also widespread. The glorification of

the war as heroic and righteous endeavour thus occurred not only through official channels but also through a variety of mass-mediated 'prosthetic memories' and embodied rituals.<sup>21</sup> Soviet citizens internalized this repertoire and relied on it as a mnemonic device. These habits of remembering deepened the grooves of the war myth and infused them with shared feeling. Rhetoric scholars would call these grooves *endoxa*, commonly held beliefs that can be mobilized as premises in public arguments. Among these beliefs are:

1. The war was righteous. In the Soviet Union—and in Putin's Russia—the war is referred to as the Great Patriotic War. The word choice obscures Stalin's crucial role in allowing Hitler to take over a large part of Europe prior to June 1941. In the myth, however, the blame for the war unequivocally rests on the Nazis, and the beginning of the war is 22 June 1941, the day when Nazi Germany unleashed its operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union.
2. The widespread and unquestionable unity and heroism of the Soviet people who rose to defend the Motherland at any cost.
3. The Soviet Army's status as a liberator of Europe. Once it drove the Germans out of the country, it liberated the rest of occupied Europe, thus saving the world from Nazism.
4. Whatever one thinks of Stalin, he was the architect of the Soviet victory in the war and therefore cannot be denounced as a bad leader.<sup>22</sup>

During Gorbachev's perestroika in the second half of the 1980s, the main strands of the myth came under officially sanctioned scrutiny and criticism. Newly opened archives revealed that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and its secret protocols provided for a German-Soviet partition of Poland and the Soviet domination of Bessarabia and the Baltics. The extent of Stalin's repressions before and during the war was widely publicized in the mainstream press, and Stalin as the commander-in-chief was also shown to be not quite as wise and strategic as he had been previously portrayed. It became evident that the Soviet Army was poorly prepared to repel the German invasion, despite repeated intelligence reports prior to the invasion. Stalin had purged many of the talented young generals just before the war for political reasons, and the lack of capable military leadership, coupled with the paucity of basic equipment, turned millions into tank fodder.

By the time I finished high school and was preparing for my university entrance exams, much had changed under Gorbachev. So much of the previously hidden information concerning the dark spots of the Soviet past was brought to light that history books were declared inadequate and history was eliminated from the roster of entrance exam subjects. When I graduated from Moscow State University in 1991, officially sanctioned revelations of Stalin's repressions and of the war as tragic and messy—rather than heroic—dominated public culture. By the mid-1990s, the war cult seemed to have waned. According to Tumarkin, by 1993,

the war myth had been almost completely destroyed. Thus, 22 June 1991, which marked the 50th anniversary of Nazi invasion, 'was widely recognized as Den' Pamyati (Day of Remembrance)', but 'this recognition was less a tribute to the weight of a fifty-year mark and more a demonstration of the general reassessment of the war with a greater emphasis on its tragic aspects'.<sup>23</sup> When, two years later, Tumarkin attended the anniversary celebration of 9 May at a Victory Park on Poklonnaja Gora in Moscow, she noted that 'many people did not seem to experience any feelings about the war; they simply came to stroll, to look, to drink, in general to enjoy themselves. Even when a singer sang one of those most moving wartime songs, [she] didn't see anyone wiping away a tear'.<sup>24</sup>

If I had fallen asleep in 1991 and, like a Russian Rip Van Winkle, awoke in the early 2000s, I would have been shocked by the extent of the revival of the war cult under Vladimir Putin. In today's Russia, the Great Patriotic War—and it is emphatically 'the Great Patriotic War', not World War II—again acquired the status of the sacred event of the collective past.<sup>25</sup> For Putin, the memory of the war has been an instrument of national unity. Especially since the beginning of his third term as president, after massive public demonstrations against the rigged presidential election of 2012, Putin has drawn increasingly on the memory of the war, and thereby on the Soviet period as a whole, to shore up his presidency. As a former KGB operative, he was actively involved in the defence of the Soviet system, and he has openly bemoaned the end of the Soviet Union as *the* greatest geopolitical catastrophe. Increased control over the media as well as the attacks on independent journalists have given the Putin presidency a virtual monopoly over the narratives about the war.<sup>26</sup>

To guard a preferred narrative of the war, the government has employed both legislation and commemoration. In 2009, fearing that the 70th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (1939) would set off 'a fury of anti-Russian hysteria' in the west, certain nationalistic politicians began to lobby for the setting up of a presidential Historical Truth Commission (2009-2012) to counter 'falsifications of history to the detriment of Russia's interests' and for a memorial law that would penalize 'rehabilitation of Nazism'.<sup>27</sup> After several amendments, the law was finally adopted in 2014, which was the year when Russia annexed Crimea and then instigated a conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The law thus not only provides legal backing for the newly resurrected myth of the war but also supports its righteous rhetoric of struggle against Nazism in today's politics. The 2014 Maidan protests in Kyiv, Ukraine, for example, were described by mainstream Russian media as the doings of fascists. Similarly, the conflict in the Donetsk region in Eastern Ukraine between pro-Russian separatists (assisted by Russian mercenaries) and Ukrainian army units was cast as an echo of the Great Patriotic War.

'Epideictic rhetoric is part of the cultural glue that holds common beliefs together', Weiser notes.<sup>28</sup> In Putin's Russia, the cult of the Great Patriotic War has functioned as such cultural glue, and its revival has taken many forms, both official and grassroots. Indeed, officially sponsored historical institutions have begun to leverage 'the people's memory' to legitimize a preferred version of history of the war. As Russian historian Nikolai Koposov has observed,

the likening of the country's history to a family's memory has been key to the official rhetoric of the Kremlin and the ministry of education. Their arguments, Koposov explains, can be boiled down to this: 'that pluralism is good, but you cannot bring up children on a negative image of their country. After all, they reasoned, no one would educate them using a negative image of their family'.<sup>29</sup>

Recent history textbooks that replaced the 'revisionist' ones from the 1990s often appeal to familial memory: many contain homework assignments asking students to interview their grandmothers and grandfathers about what they are proud of in their past. In this way, 'family memory' is presented in these new textbooks as a legitimate alternative to professional evaluations of history. The mobilization of memory allows the state to overcome and marginalize the academic mainstream linked to the 90s' criticism of the country's totalitarian past and the defence of democratic ideals.<sup>30</sup>

In this political climate, 'good memories' of the Stalin era are indivisible from the proud remembrance of the War, since it is rooted in Stalin's conception of the war as 'the holy war' in defence of the Motherland. And although sociological studies show that the majority of the public is aware of wide-scale repressions before, during, and after the war, the 'good war' acts as screen memory that prevents an open and honest reckoning with the legacy of Stalinism. Indeed, under Putin, it has become acceptable to express admiration for Stalin as a strong leader who brought the people together and not only triumphed over Germany but also expanded the Soviet sphere of influence in Europe as a result of agreements with our allies. Fond memories of Stalinism go hand in hand with a nostalgia for the old world order in which the Soviet Union was a major player in the international arena.

The revival of the war cult and re-Stalinisation are interconnected and have been driven by both the state and grassroots initiatives.<sup>31</sup> Anniversaries of the victory in the Great Patriotic War have often served as a pretext for bringing Stalin's image out of museum archives and for erecting new monuments to him. Flags featuring Stalin and a slogan 'Thanks to Grandfather for the Victory' have been spotted for several years during anniversary V Day marches of the so-called Immortal Regiment, a multi-city parade of civilians honoring their relatives who took part in the war. The idea of this grassroots parade originated in a Siberian city of Tomsk, when journalists affiliated with an independent TV station invited their fellow residents to take to the streets carrying a portrait of their relatives who participated in World War II. They envisioned it as a way to make individuals and families the centre of V Day commemoration and thereby to infuse the anniversary with personal feeling. The initiative quickly spread across Russia, and its popularity became attractive to pro-Kremlin actors. The Moscow 2015 March of the Immortal Regiment, for example, was financially and organizationally backed by Putin's United Russia Party, over and against the wishes of the original organizers who wanted to keep the commemoration free from political affiliation and PR.<sup>32</sup>

The case of the Immortal Regiment suggests that the Russian government is no longer relying on Soviet-style propaganda but has learned to imitate grassroots

memory initiatives. Russian state-sponsored history museums, for their part, have appropriated the form of democratic exhibition rhetoric developed by museums in the West, but have deployed this rhetoric to foster a version of history serviceable to the current authoritarian regime.

### The City of Victors: Exhibiting Popular Memories of the War at the Museum of Moscow

Museum of Moscow did its part to promote the V Day as a popular festivity and to buttress the officially sanctioned revival of the war cult. Its special exhibit, entitled *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)*, advanced a triumphalist narrative of the war by deploying a selection of artefacts and narrative accounts contributed by regular Muscovites. This narrative is shaped not through dogmatic statements but through subtle arrangement of archival objects and testimonials. Together, letters, diaries, posters, and domestic objects tell the story of wartime sacrifices, perseverance, and camaraderie. But they also participate in an implicit commentary that ascribes meaning to these wartime experiences and invites visitors to align their understanding of Russia's past and present with the perspective of previous generations.

'The will to influence is at the core of any exhibition', writes Bruce W. Ferguson.<sup>33</sup> The Museum of Moscow, however, downplays its decisive role in shaping the war narrative by foregrounding the agency of its contributors as the source of historical authenticity and emotional appeal to visitors. Consider the framing of the museum's mission statement. Upon entering the exhibit, the visitor encounters an invitation printed in black letters on a red background:

We have never stopped and will never stop collecting materials related to the Great Patriotic War and its participants. Please bring and pass on these materials for safekeeping in perpetuity. Let's write the history of our country together!

Visually, this statement evokes the look of wartime posters. Not incidentally, to the right of the statement is a framed poster exhorting the viewer to 'Join the ranks of the people's defence' and picturing men in uniforms clutching rifle bayonets. The poster overlaps an enlarged photograph that presumably depicts this volunteer army. Finally, a handwritten note, penned by a volunteer who identifies himself as a Communist and a librarian at the Lenin State Library in Moscow, individualizes and gives voice to the spirit of self-sacrifice implied by the poster and the photograph:

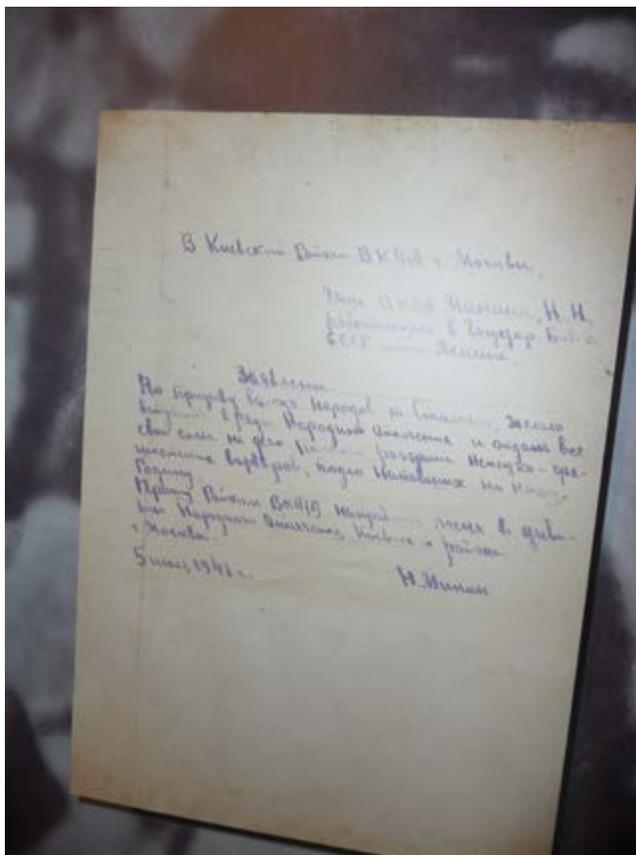
Answering the call of the people's leader Comrade Stalin, I wish to join the ranks of the people's defence army and give all my energy to the cause of defeating the fascist barbarians who treacherously invaded our Motherland.

In the exhibit, the handwritten application serves as an example of an archival document supposedly entrusted to the museum for safekeeping, but it fulfills other functions as well. Along with the enlarged photograph of anonymous volunteers, it appears to ‘answer the call’ of the poster and, in its earnest if formulaic way, confirms the spirit of dedication to the collective cause. This textual-visual collage thus establishes the museum’s role as a depository of people’s contributions, asserts the desirability and authenticity of collective history writing, and positions the spectator as a grateful descendant of the war-time generation.

Mission statement, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



Volunteer's letter, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



In keeping with the mission statement, the exhibit arranges archival objects to extol the heroism of both famous and lesser known Muscovites. Among the heroes familiar to most Russians is Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, the eighteen-year-old high schooler who joined the partisans and was captured and executed by the Germans on 29 November 1941. Kosmodemyanskaya was posthumously awarded the Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union and she became a major martyr, 'the Joan of Arc of the Great Patriotic war'.<sup>34</sup> Zoya's short life and her ultimate sacrifice were immortalized in monuments, statuary, biographies, museums, films, names of institutions, and school curricula. The exhibit evokes Zoya's memory via suggestion rather than didactic narration. The enlarged photographs of Zoya and one of the monuments honoring her thematize her identity as both a person and a legend. In front of these photographs are several mundane objects that conjure her civilian identity: a pair of skates, a winter coat, and a school desk. Because of their undeniable materiality and specificity, these objects anchor Zoya's myth in the realm of the everyday. Rather than recount the details of Zoya's biography—which are presumed to be known to the visitor—the arrangement asks the audience to relate to her as a concrete human being, a representative of the young generation whose lives were cut short or forever altered by the war.

The theme of normal life interrupted by war permeates the museum's display. To increase the viewer's identification with the selected 'voices' of ordinary people, an array of strategies conveys what it felt like to live in the city between June 1941 and May 1945. In situ displays of streetscapes and domestic interiors are juxtaposed with personal narratives inscribed on poster-sized panels and in glass cases.

Anti-tank fortifications in Moscow, *The City of Victors* (*Gorod Pobeditelei*) (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



Sandbags, The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei) (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



The life-size, anti-tank fortifications set against the backdrop of a photograph of Moscow's barricaded streets in the fall of 1941 evoke the atmosphere of the days when the German tanks rolled dangerously close to the city. Nearby, the archival video footage of wartime Moscow is framed by a wall of stacked sandbags; as the visitor peeks through the opening at the footage, her senses of smell and touch add to the feeling of immersion. Another in situ display, featuring a wartime Moscow apartment, is complete with a small wood burning stove and a radio. We are invited to imagine families—women, children, and grandparents—gathered in this space listening to radio dispatches from the front.

Moscow apartment detail, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



Moscow living room, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



To assist the visitor's imagination, multiple text panels feature recollections of Muscovites who endured through the hardships. B. Mironov, identified as a member of the Moscow Anti-Air Defense unit, recalls:

Gradually we got used to the war routine, and even found it somewhat romantic. One has to live somehow. After the chaos of air raids, you would come back to the room, light up the stove, and stare at the fire. And then you remember the days at the young pioneer camp and the bonfires. Too bad that it is hard to procure firewood. We had to burn part of the furniture and dismantle the fence outside. After the war there will be no more fences.

Even ballerinas joined the battle on the home front. We learn this from an excerpt from a diary of E. Makarova, the Bolshoi Theater ballerina, who along with her colleagues was recruited to dig trenches to prepare for the defence of Moscow. She reminisces:

We returned in the early morning. Could not even take off the clothes. Moscow soil is so heavy! I had never thought that I would be shovelling dirt and that I could survive. But I have 8 years of standing at the bar! Beside me all the girls—skinny, beautiful—are digging trenches through the night. Our little soldiers would now have all the more reason to persevere.

Moscow residents adapted to regular air raids and scarce food rations. The text printed on a glass case surrounding the living room display details wartime realities:

1. everyone had to have a roll of black paper to cover the windows during air raids;
2. it was important to keep one's keys in a certain place in order to quickly run to the bomb shelter at any moment;

3. the clock had to be easily visible, because the raids were carried out punctually.

Children, too, responded to wartime privation with equanimity: 'Habitually hungry kids sometimes talked among themselves about tasty pre-war food, remembering festive dinner parties at home. But they calmly accepted their hungry existence'.

These small-scale, intimate details of the residents' day-to-day lives augment in situ displays and prompt the visitor to imagine living in cold apartments, subsisting on meagre rations of black bread, and anticipating the next air raid. At the same time, they testify to the spirit of collective resilience, echoing the theme of self-sacrifice expressed by posters and letters of volunteers. The narrative is shaped through a kind of multi-modal polyphony: texts, images, and objects work together to conjure the feeling of the period rather than instruct the audience in the cut-and-dry chronology of the war.

The exhibit is elliptical in its presentation of events stretching between 22 June 1941 and 9 May 1945 and spotlights only what Moscow residents apparently remember the most. A photograph of the military parade on 7 November 1941—the parade whose participants marched straight to the front—represents the critical moment at the beginning of the war when the civilian population was mobilized to the defence of Moscow. The selection of this event is noteworthy as a reflection of Russia's present-day commemorative culture. Under Putin, the reenactment of this parade has become an iconic ritual in the resurgent cult of the Great Patriotic War. Ironically, it is also the only official acknowledgement of the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution.

Military parade in the Red Square, November 7, 1941, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



V Day, 9 May 1945, represents the culmination of the war for most visitors (even though the Soviet Union, bound by its obligation to the allies, officially continued to participate in hostilities against Japan). Posters, enlarged photographs, and testimonies recall the spontaneous, collective jubilation that consumed the city in the days following Germany's capitulation. As one of featured recollections put it, 'That night and the whole day following, our entire large Moscow—like a "communal apartment"—sang, danced, and cried. How terrible that not all have survived'.

V Day celebrations, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



V Day testimonial, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



Like the chronology of war events, the terrible price of victory is left unspecified. The exhibit represents the collective loss through another in situ installation—a minimalist table set for a wake. On the table, simple glasses, each supposedly filled with the traditional vodka and covered with a slice of black bread, stand in for those who will never return home. The wake table is a peculiar island in the overall spatial narrative of the exhibit. Unlike the rest of in situ arrangements featuring 1940s furniture and domestic objects, this one is abstract—a simple wooden table and benches devoid of any historical specificity of style. The display thus suggests that the grief for wartime losses transcends time, that it somehow continues to haunt the present. However, the table is positioned in the centre of the hall whose wall space is covered with Victory posters and enlarged photographs of festive crowds. The representation of loss and mourning is literally encircled by images of triumph and celebration. The juxtaposition produces ambiguity: on the one hand, it seems to offer closure to those who may be still grieving, on the other—it introduces a discordant note into the narrative of collective victory. Given that the exhibit's title is *The City of Victors*, the former interpretation may well be preferred by the museum staff, but the ambiguity of the display also permits one to reflect on the trauma of the war experience.

Wake table, *The City of Victors* (*Gorod Pobeditelei*) (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



Wake table detail, *The City of Victors* (*Gorod Pobeditelei*) (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



In addition to its immersive portrayal of the ordinary heroism of Moscow residents, the exhibit extols the righteous cause behind this heroism by appealing to the audience's emotions. In line with the Soviet-era myth of the war, the Soviet Army is depicted as a liberator not only of its own territory but also of the entire Europe. The audience is presumed to agree with this strand of the war myth, as the only mnemonic prompt on display is an excerpt from a patriotic lyric by Yevgeny Vinokurov, 'Muscovites' (1953). The poem celebrates two young men who died in battle far away from home:

In the fields beyond the sleepy Vistula

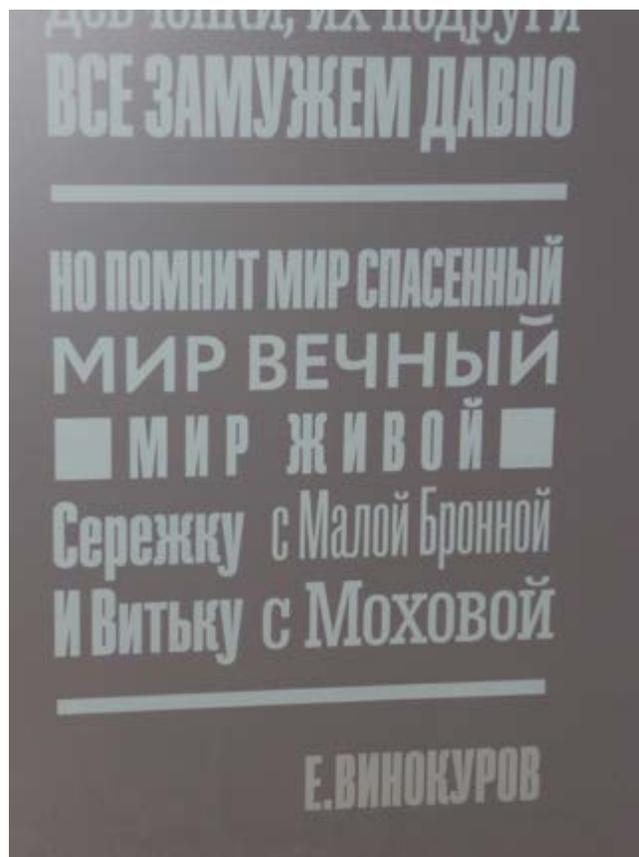
In the moist earth are lying

Seryozhka from Malaya Bronnaya

And Vit'ka from Mokhovaya

Known only by their first names and street addresses, these soldiers personify the Soviet Army's sacrifice. Their girlfriends stopped waiting for them and married other men, the poem tells us, but these ordinary Muscovites are remembered by 'the saved world'. Not incidentally, in May 2015 'The saved world remembers' was used as a slogan throughout public spaces in central Moscow and other Russian cities to urge the recognition of the international debt of gratitude for the Soviet Union's role in World War II.

Vinokurov poem fragment,  
*The City of Victors (Gorod  
Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December  
6, 2015), Museum of Moscow,  
Moscow, Russian Federation.



'Saved World Remembers' billboard featuring the cover of the 12 February 1945 issue of *Life*, Arbat Street, May 2015. Moscow, Russian Federation.



By celebrating ordinary heroes, the exhibit resurrects the memory of Stalin as the architect of the Soviet victory in World War II. It does so indirectly, by eschewing overt commentary in the form of textual labels and allowing archival artefacts and documents to paint him as the ultimate inspiration behind the people's war effort. A number of posters throughout the exhibit epitomize the worshipful attitude toward the Peoples' Leader, as envisioned by Soviet propagandists of the time. One poster salutes the defenders of Moscow—'the people and the army'—who saved the capital supposedly under Stalin's leadership. Dated 1947, the poster is not part of the state war propaganda but a commemorative exhortation that codifies Stalin's role as a wise commander-in-chief. Another poster features the Generalissimo's image on a Victory medal which also bears the Leader's winged phrase 'Our mission is righteous—we have won'. The poster's imagery is quasi-religious: the medal bearing Stalin's profile is sun-like, and its rays illuminate the figure of a soldier surrounded by cheering crowds.

Victory poster, *The City of Victors (Gorod Pobeditelei)* (May 9-December 6, 2015), Museum of Moscow, Moscow, Russian Federation.



Lest we suspect the museum of propaganda in favour of Stalin, the curators marshal documents composed by ordinary people to illustrate the widespread piety toward him. The case in point is the previously cited volunteer's application to join the ranks of the people's resistance. Elsewhere in the exhibit is a school composition book opened to an essay titled 'Stalin, the Great Military Leader'. The essay's dutifully formulaic prose recounts the highlights of Stalin's military career, including his decisive leadership in the battle of Moscow.

Both posters and the pious language used by ordinary people invoking Stalin's authority testify to the omnipresence of the dictator's cult in public imagination of the period. The inclusion of Stalin imagery and references in both official and vernacular documents and the avoidance of direct commentary by museum staff seem to suggest that the leader's aura infused the very air breathed by the wartime generation. The implicit argument is: whatever view of Stalin we may hold today, the war generation's values and deeds are inextricably linked to their faith in him. The exhibit thus discourages the viewer from judging their pieties and suggests that our memory of the war should be aligned with the perspective of our

forefathers. Questioning the tenets of the war myth therefore would be tantamount to betraying *their* memory.

To promote grateful identification with the forefathers as the preferred visitor stance, the museum juxtaposes the dedication of ordinary soldiers and civilians of the 1940s with the attitudes of later generations. The curators, in fact, single out the late 1980s as the low point in the collective memory of the war. The evaluation of this period, however, is entrusted to an ordinary Muscovite, whose recent recollection takes the visitor back to the heady days of glasnost and perestroika. In his testimony, A. Nikandrov remembers his conversation with his grandfather in 1989, at the height of Gorbachev's *glasnost* era, which also happened to be a time of scarcity. A war veteran, his grandfather was entitled to food rations every month. The author mentions that at the time the Soviet Union was even receiving humanitarian aid from Germany, which was helpful as the stores were mostly empty. The grandfather would come home tired and grumpy since it would take hours to stand in a queue for groceries. He would joke that it was easier at the front! The interaction between grandfather and grandson that follows highlights the young generation's cynicism:

One time I asked him, Grandpa, maybe the victory was all in vain? We would probably live like Europeans now—contentedly! In response to which he sighed and answered simply: 'Then you wouldn't exist!' So many years have passed, and he is long gone, but I am still ashamed.

This is a remarkable statement, especially in the way it evokes shame about the period in the country's history when the state was opening its archives and the full extent of Stalin's crimes became exposed. The selection of this particular memory fragment as emblematic serves a didactic function. The testimony paints the post-war generations' disillusionment in the war myth as betrayal of the forefathers and, by extension, of the nation. From the vantage point of the present, to question the cost—and the point—of sacrifices in the Great Patriotic War is the height of ingratitude. By prominently showing this contrite testimony, the exhibit urges its audience to disavow the late Soviet scrutiny of the war myth and thereby to dismiss any doubts about the righteous mission of which comrade Stalin assured his people.

## Conclusion

The exhibit *The City of Heroes* claims to represent the voice of the people. Aside from the exhortation 'Let's write the history of our country together!' the curators' speech is tacit and oblique. In the exhibit's spatial narrative, the museumgoer encounters multiple voices, presented through a variety of media. The rhetoric of the exhibit is multi-modal and polyvocal, but this does not mean there isn't a preferred 'deep narrative' that the visitor is invited to construct through the experience. 'Deep narrative', explains Weiser, operates both below and above

the surface of an exhibit. Such a narrative might be seen in what is emphasized or deemphasized in the displays, what follows what in the galleries, or even what is or is not offered for sale in the gift shop or repeated in the marketing materials.<sup>35</sup> In situ installations, photographs, posters, and narrative recollections add up to a unified account that reaffirms the Soviet-era war myth about the courageous and united people that under the wise leadership of Stalin rose as one to repel the German aggressor and liberated Europe from fascism. The apparent polyphony yields an uplifting story of the collective trauma of the war that simultaneously rehabilitates the cult of the strongman.

Moreover, through its selection of 'voices', the exhibit comments on public memory of the war and implicitly advocates for an emotional identification, rather than critical detachment, as the preferred attitude to the collective past. Objects on display give the visitor intimate access to the thoughts, feelings, and routines of representatives of the war generation and their descendants. It is difficult to doubt the sincerity of their beliefs and values or to argue with the existential truth of their accounts. The exhibit thus positions the visitor as a member of this family-like community of feeling. The epideictic rhetoric of the exhibit therefore participates in the Putin regime's cultural programme of whitewashing the nation's history and using the gratitude to our grandparents as an excuse to resurrect Stalin as the ultimate model of leadership.

## Endnotes

1. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire", *Representations* 26 (1989): 13.
2. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 252.
3. Peter Aronsson and Simon Knell, coordinators, *National Museums Making Histories in a Diverse Europe* (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012), 28.
4. Peter Aronsson, "Comparing National Museums: Methodological Reflections", in *Comparing National Museums, Territories, Nation-Building, and Change*, ed. Peter Aronsson (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2008), 14.
5. Bruce W. Ferguson, "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense", in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 175-76.
6. M. Elizabeth Weiser, *Museum Rhetoric: Building Civic Identity in National Spaces* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 30.
7. *Ibid.*, 31. Epideictic or display rhetoric is one of the three rhetorical genres outlined by Aristotle's fourth-century BCE treatise the *Art of Rhetoric*. However, contemporary rhetoric scholars believe that epideictic encompasses a broad spectrum of discursive and material practices, from ceremonial speechmaking to monuments and museum displays. See Lawrence J. Prelli, ed. *Rhetorics of Display* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).
8. Dominique Poulot, "Preface: Uses of the Past—Historical Narratives and the Museum," in *Great Narratives of the Past: Traditions and Revisions in National Museums*, eds. Dominique Poulot, Felicity Bodenstern, and Jose Maria Lanzarote (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012), 7.
9. Mieke Bal, "Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 97-115.
10. Weiser, *Museum Rhetoric*, 42.
11. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 21.
12. *Ibid.*, 3.
13. *Ibid.*, 138.
14. Weiser, *Museum Rhetoric*, 49.
15. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 138.
16. John Falk, "The Museum Experience: Who Visits, Why and to What Effect?" in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012).
17. Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Museum 2.0, 2010), iii-iv.
18. Stephan Berger, cited in Weiser, *Museum Rhetoric*, 33.
19. Ekaterina V. Haskins, *Popular Memories: Commemoration, Participatory Culture, and Democratic Citizenship* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2015).

20. Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 132.
21. See Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
22. See Nikolai Koposov, *Pamyat' Strogogo Rezhima: Istorii i Politika v Rossii* (The Memory of a Brutal Regime: History and Politics in Russia) (Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2011). See also Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*.
23. Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 213.
24. *Ibid.*, 221.
25. On the use of the term 'The Great Patriotic War' versus 'World War II' in Russia, see Markku Kangaspuro and Jussi Lassila, "Naming the War in Russian Public Discussion", *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. LIV, no. 3-4 (2012): 377-400.
26. See Mark Edele, "Fighting Russia's History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II", *History and Memory* 29 (2017): 90-124. See also Elizabeth A. Wood, "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of WWII in Russia", *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38 (2011): 172-200.
27. See Dina Khapaeva. "Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin's Politics of re-Stalinization", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49 (2016): 61-73.
28. Weiser, *Museum Rhetoric*, 31.
29. Koposov, *Pamyat'*, 152.
30. N. Potapova, quoted in Koposov, *Pamyat'*, 159-160.
31. On the rehabilitation of Stalin in Putin's Russia, see especially Nanci Adler, "'The Bright Past', or Whose (Hi)story? Challenges in Russia and Serbia Today". *Filosofija i Društvo* xxiii (4), 2012: 119-138; Dina Khapaeva, "Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin's Politics of re-Stalinization", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49 (2016): 61-73.
32. On the March of the Immortal Regiment and its cooptation by the United Russia Party, see Mischa Gabowitsch, "Are Copycats Subversive? Strategy-31, the Russian Runs, the Immortal Regiment, and the Transformative Potential of Non-Hierarchical Movements", *Problems of Post-Communism* (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1250604>.
33. Ferguson, "Exhibition Rhetorics", 179.
34. Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 76.
35. Weiser, "Museum Rhetoric", 58.

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