

# The Two Sides of the Victory Medal

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*World War II veterans during a meeting of the fourth combat tank army on Victory Day in Moscow's Gorky Park, May 2010.*

IMAGE CREDIT

BY LARISA DERIGLAZOVA

Victory Day—the end of World War II, which Russians often refer to simply as May 9—can be a difficult holiday to understand for those who were not born and raised in Russia. From the outside, one is often led to focus exclusively on the pageantry and outward expressions of state-directed national memory. But what makes this holiday so special and deeply sacred for the Russians is the individual stories and memories of a war that touched upon every family.

Surprising as it may sound, May 9 is likely the least controversial national holiday and a unifying rather than a dividing force for Russian society. The memory of mass suffering during World War II, the loss of more than 20 million lives, and a clear understanding of who were friends and who were foes in that war create the foundation for a national consensus at least on two points. It was a victory over a dangerous and ruthless invader, and the human price for that victory was incredibly high.

Nevertheless, the consensus that exists in Russia does not prevent various controversies and difficult questions from arising around the war and the related policies of the Soviet state. Why was the human cost of World War II so high for the USSR? Why was the country not ready for the war, and how did so much of Soviet territory end up under occupation? Soviet foreign policy before and after the war and the Soviet occupation of Europe are also up for scrutiny. And the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war by their home country is also extremely problematic: many of them ended up in the Gulag after having been liberated from Nazi concentration camps.

Still, despite all the surrounding controversies, World War II is an integral part of almost everyone's family history in Russia. In fact, those controversies and that family history may be two sides of the same coin—or, as the Russian saying goes, *two sides of the same medal*. One side is shiny and glorious, something to show off in public. The other side is very private and tells the story of loss, suffering, and trauma. One can see these two sides of the Order of Victory Medal in the way this day is celebrated: publicly, with military parades and festivities in the main city squares and streets throughout Russia; privately, in visits to the cemetery and quiet family gatherings to mourn and commemorate those who perished.

Many Russian families have a difficult World War II story to tell. My family is no different in that respect. My grandfather fought from early 1942 until the very end of the war. He was in a cavalry unit fighting against the German tank divisions. He was wounded twice and both times returned to the front after his hospital stay. He had bullet fragments in his arm and suffered from the consequences of his injuries until his last days. Both my grandfather and grandmother came from families who had been deported from western Ukraine to the Soviet Far East in 1930 during collectivization, the period of forced consolidation of individual peasant households into collective farms.

When my grandfather was drafted, he received his identification papers, while normally deportees did not have access to such their identification documents, as those were kept by the local authorities. He left behind his twenty-year-old wife, my grandma, with two small children in her arms—my mom, born in 1939, and my uncle, born in 1941—and did not return until 1946. My grandfather never talked about his war experience. He was fortunate, though, for his two brothers did not return: one was declared missing in action, the other was killed. Sometimes I wonder what the fate of my family might have been had they not been deported and instead had found themselves under Nazi occupation in Ukraine. Would they have survived, given their Polish ancestry?

There are many personal stories like this, all unique and yet so terribly familiar.

My academic adviser at the university, a Jewish professor who turned eighty-nine this year, recalls how he along with other civilians was crossing the Volga River on a boat during the evacuation from Stalingrad under heavy shelling on August 18, 1942—just a few days before the Battle of Stalingrad began. He was eleven years old. Later, as an evacuee in Siberia, in the Altai region, he went to work as an assistant mechanic at a military factory after turning thirteen.

In the early 1980s, I met a man named Ivan in a small village in the north of Tomsk region in Siberia. Ivan was in the army led by the renegade general Andrei Vlasov. Ivan surrendered to the Germans in 1942 and became a prisoner of war. He survived, and after the camp was liberated by the Soviet army he was allowed to return home, as this area had been a place of political exile long before the Soviet era and remained one under communist rule. (Stalin himself had been in exile in this region back in the czarist days.) As a former prisoner of war, Ivan was considered a traitor. He had to report to the local police station on a regular basis and his freedom of movement was still restricted even in the 1980s.

In the fall of 1994, I was in the United States and met two former Soviet prisoners of war who had been liberated from a Nazi camp by the Western allies and had chosen to go to Canada instead of returning to their home, in Soviet Ukraine. I met them at an Amish cider factory in Indiana, where they arrived on trucks with the harvest from their apple tree orchards. They told me that they had made the right choice in 1945 and that they had visited Ukraine in the 1990s and had been devastated by the low living standards there.

These personal stories are small parts of the whole—the tragic war experience of the entire nation with its hardships and perseverance, trauma and victory. This personal understanding of Victory Day beyond official ideology manifests in the Immortal Regiment initiative that first emerged in the Siberian city of Tomsk back in 2012. The idea was put forward by journalists from the oppositional TV channel TV 2. The journalists proposed walking together on May 9 along the main city street, carrying portraits of relatives who had fought in World War II to commemorate their sacrifice. The idea was to have people's expressions of a family memory of the day, which had nothing to do with official military parades and glorification of the big war. Very soon this initiative captured the hearts and minds of people all over Russia and far beyond, and Immortal Regiments became part of the May 9 celebration in many cities in Russia and other countries. In Russia, the Immortal Regiment was incorporated into the official celebrations, and now it is an all-Russia movement, with participation the length and breadth of Russia.

Thanks to the Immortal Regiment movement, Victory Day has received a new impetus from millions of Russians who keep their family history alive and for whom the day of commemoration is not just about military victory and glory. People who take part in the Immortal Regiment marches commonly say how moving this experience is for them, how proud they are of the war veterans, and how important it is for them to remember their loved ones and their ancestors who sacrificed so much. During the Soviet era there were mass demonstrations in which people were required to take part; they carried portraits of Soviet leaders. Those mass demonstrations were about loyalty to the political regime and could not be avoided by ordinary Soviet citizens. The Immortal Regiment is different. It is a volunteer movement clearly grounded in a family's personal experience of war.

The Immortal Regiment is where two sides of the same coin, the public and private sides of the Victory Medal, merge in the most natural and sincere way.