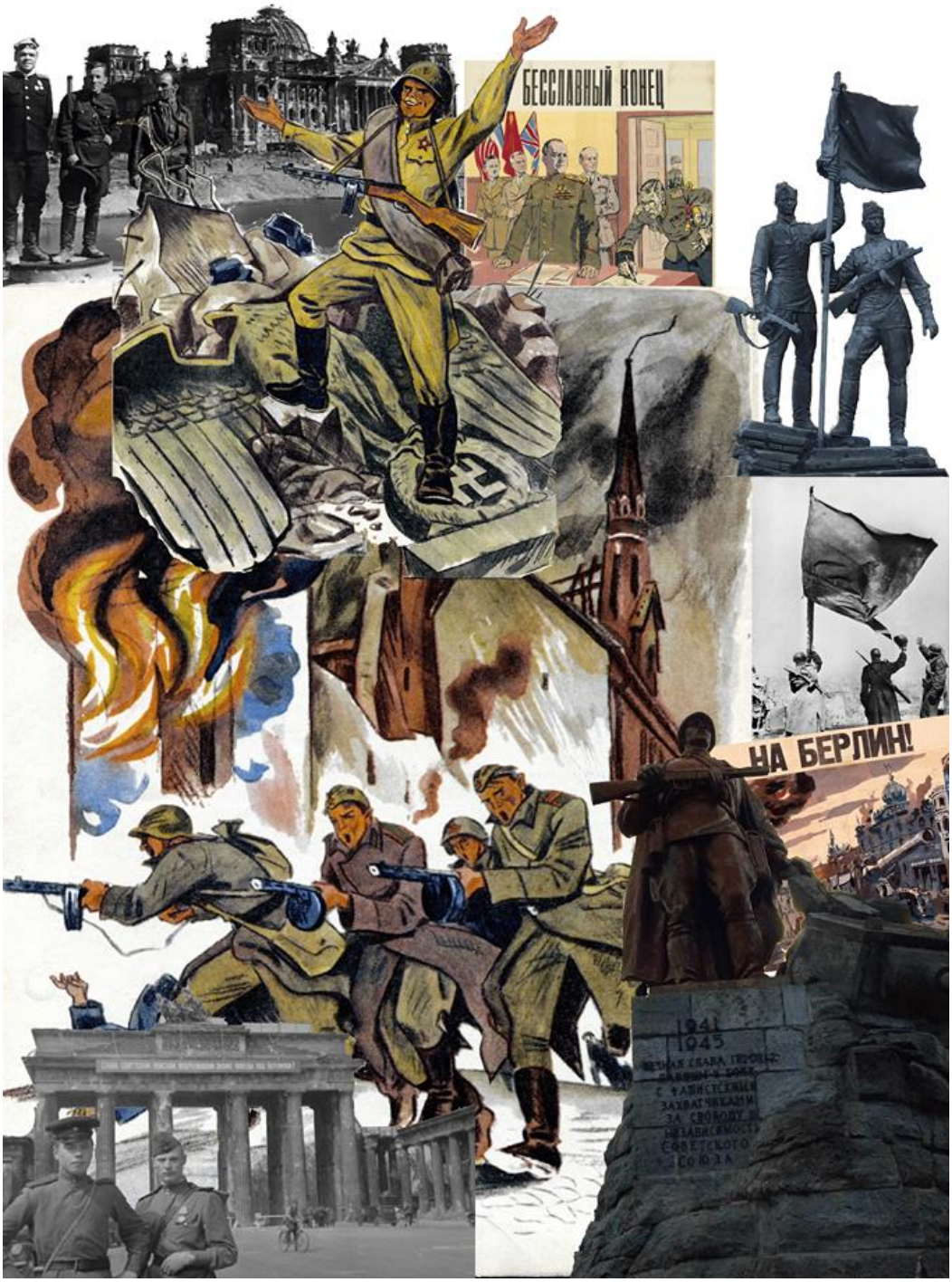
From sacrifice for Victory to a struggle for Glory

Remembrance of the Battle of Berlin by the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.



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Introduction

To those who frequently watch World War Two documentaries, footage of people digging in the Russian steppes near Volgograd or Voronezh is not an uncommon sight. Material and human remains are still an archaeological and tragic reminder of many battles in human history, but nowhere are bodies still excavated as frequently, than on the battlefields of the Eastern Front. Yet those whose eyes are often focussed on the remains near Volgograd or the bog-bodies of Belorussian marshes, might not be aware of excavations outside of the Soviet Union. Many more kilometres towards the west, more excavation sites appear now and then: around the city of Berlin thousands of remains of both soldiers and civilians mark another important Eastern Front battlefield.[1]

Countless cemeteries and mass graves scar the countryside around Berlin and the centre of the German capital.[2] Be it with 20.000 men on a larger cemetery or with three men and a simple stone as grave marker, it is perhaps especially the area around Berlin which demonstrates the enormous scale of fighting and suffering Germans and Soviets alike had to endure. The battle of Berlin raged in 1945 from the 16th of April until the 2nd of May, which marked the surrender of the Berlin garrison. The Red Army, eager to finish off Nazi Germany, eventually committed three *Fronts* (the Soviet equivalent of an Army Group) to the offensive operation. Although the German chances for success in the defence of their country were non-existent, resistance stiffened on the approaches to Berlin. When Soviet forces broke out of their Oder-bridgeheads, it very soon became apparent that this final confrontation would be more costly than earlier estimates had shown.[3] Yet it was perhaps the significance of *taking* Berlin which made the suffering on both sides acceptable – at least for Soviet commanders who were increasingly under pressure to capture Berlin before the British and Americans would do so.

Even though countless publications on World War Two bear 'Berlin' in its name, only a few describe the almost apocalyptic battle of 1945. Reasons for the constant usage of Berlin

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[1] 'Soldaten, Schüler, Volkssturmmänner wurden hier verheizt', Welt, 16.11.2018. Seen on 18.1.2019. https://www.welt.de/geschichte/zweiter-weltkrieg/article183951014/Vor-Berlin-1945-Soldaten-Schueler-Volkssturmmaenner-wurden-verheizt.html

[2] For example, see: 'Sowjetische Kriegsgräberstätten in Deutschland'; http://www.sowjetische-memoriale.de/index.cfm?inhalt=index&detailsuche=1&suche=&objektart=99&bundesland=2&landkreis=99&opfergruppe=99&lang=de and http://www.sowjetische-memoriale.de/index.cfm?inhalt=index&detailsuche=1&suche=&objektart=99&bundesland=101&landkreis=99&opfergruppe=99&lang=de for a complete list of Soviet burial sites in Brandenburg and Berlin areas. Seen on 18.1.2019.

[3] Alexander Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, (Cambridge 2017) 539.

in book titles and memoires seem lie in the symbolical importance of Berlin: as the seat of Nazi power, supposed capital of Prussian militarism and assumptive end goal for all Allied forces, the city could be seen as the negative equivalent of Jerusalem. While medieval crusaders embarked on their journey to capture Jerusalem and defend it because of its positive (and sacred) nature, the taking of Berlin would be a final blow to Nazism. Yet the Crusade on which the western allies embarked (in Eisenhower's words) did not include the taking of Berlin – this bloody privilege befell the Soviet Red Army, who had already borne the brunt of the Nazi onslaught since 1941. Since the victory in Berlin, the Soviet Union could boast its great-power status. Although the communist state came into being after the 1917 October Revolution, it was only due to the immense contribution of the Soviet Union in defeating Hitler, that the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) could completely display itself as legitimate rulers of their Soviet empire. All the suffering, purging and terror previously unleashed upon its own civilians, suddenly seemed justified: what else had prepared the former backward Russian industry and people for war on this scale, if not the CPSU and, for example, their Five-Year-Plans? The Great Patriotic War therefore became the *main foundation myth* of the Soviet Union.[4] Earlier attempts to mobilise the Soviet people into enthusiasm for the communist cause were nullified by terror and purges in the 1930s. A new myth was to be placed alongside the mythical throne of the October Revolution: the Great Patriotic War.[5] It was in this cult, full of rituals, visualisation and prose, that the battle of Berlin became a legendary Soviet tale, just like the heroes of Moscow, Leningrad and Stalingrad had been immortalised in marble.

As mentioned, only a few works (which are also available in English) describe the Battle of Berlin. Best-known of these is the book by Anthony Beevor (*Berlin - the Downfall: 1945*, first published in 2002), who writes a gripping account of the Soviet advance on Berlin, the fighting around and within the city and also provides ample information on the broader political context and a topic very intimately connected with warfare: humanitarian disaster. Another splendid work, Ian Kershaw's 'The End: Hitler's Germany 1944-45' covers various Berlin 1945 related topics, yet – as the author makes clear in the preface – is more of a *histoire des mentalités* than an account of military history. It appears that those who are more in for a military description – those who seek a 'Soviet' side of the Berlin battle – are often to end up with interesting translations of Russian works, mostly memoires. Most prominent in these cases would be the recollections of famous generals and marshals, such as Zhukov,

[4] Orlando Figes, *Revolutionary Russia*, (London 2014) 321.
[5] Or as some authors translate its name: the Great Fatherland War.

Konev and Chuikov. More and more translated recollections appear in English – most efficiently published on the 'I remember' website which hosts a broad collection of interviews and memoires.[6]

However, the English sources concerning the massive Berlin battle do not do any justice to its scale. In an era of an almost constant stream of Hitler-documentaries, 'World War Two Apocalypse' episodes and other often-broadcasted shows, one would expect a wild variety of popular works on the battle. This expectation is not met when visiting for example, the '75 Years Liberation' website of main Dutch news agency NOS (Dutch Broadcasting Foundation).[7] Although the website claims to cover all major events during the last months of World War Two – and especially the events concerning the liberation of The Netherlands – it does so without including the broader historical scope. The website claims to 'report' on events in the same spirit as newspapers did 'back then'. Contemporary Dutch resistance newspapers like 'Trouw' and 'Het Parool' were jubilantly reporting on the Soviet advance on the Reich's capital.[8] Apparently, the modern news-agenda wishes not to reflect the 'mood of those days' in relation to the fall of Berlin. While Dutch or other 'Western' topics are treated in line with contemporary attitudes, here, it seems choices are made to reflect modern-day attitudes on the Eastern Front, by for instance using Anthony Beevor's Berlin publication as its only source, while refraining from using contemporary Soviet sources. The NOS however, considers the liberation of Coevorden (where two Canadian soldiers perished) a more epic event than the fall of Berlin.

As mentioned, even in the year 2020, expectations of Western news coverage or publications on the battle of Berlin itself are not met. The same can be said for studies into the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War War (the Soviet/Russian name for their struggle against the Germans). One notable exception is Nina Tumarkin's *The Living & the Dead – The rise & fall of the cult of World War II in Russia.* This study was published in 1994 and therefor covers the post war Soviet. In her own words, the study: 'Tells the story of the development, career, and eventual demise of the organized public veneration of a legendary wartime experience.'[9] This study forms an excellent basis for the second chapter of this thesis,

[6] 'I remember: Memories of veterans of the Great Patriotic War'. Seen on 18.1.2019. https://iremember.ru/en/
[7] 'Liberation 75 Years'-portal of the Dutch Broadcast Foundation. https://nos.nl/75jaarbevrijding/, seen on 2.5.2020.
[8] For example, see Delpher, an online archival project which contains over 100 million pages from historical newspapers, books and magazines. An example from Trouw: 'Soviets in Berlin – the heart is being torn out!' https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010442978, seen 2.5.2020.
[9] Nina Tumarkin, *The Living & the Dead – the rise and fall of the cult of world war II in Russia* (New York 1994) 8.

as this concerns the post war Soviet war cult, which Tumarkin characterises as 'an organized system of symbols and rituals driven by political imperatives'.[10] However, Tumarkin's study – as it was published in 1994 – does not take in account the development of this cult in the 21st century Russian Federation. Where Tumarkin speaks of an eventual demise of said cult, the third chapter of this thesis will analyse the recent developments and intensification of Great Patriotic War veneration. Another publication that touches upon the post-Soviet remembrance is *Triumph und Trauma – Sowjetische und postsowjetische Erinnerung an den krieg 1941-1945* by the Deutsch-Russisches Museum in Berlin. As this publication was made in 2005, it covers an additional 10 years, compared to the scope of Tumarkin's work. In his introduction, Peter Jahn states that the memory of the Great Patriotic War has become even more important to Russian society after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. When the traditional communist historical focal points such as the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War lost their significance following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Great Patriotic War was left as the sole *Glanzpunkt* in the otherwise dark 20th century history of Russia.[11] The most recent relevant publication on the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War was thus published in 2005. To gain insight in commemorating the Berlin battle in recent years, one has to look at primary sources in modern Russia, as will be done in chapter 3.

This thesis seeks to answer the question: How did the public commemoration of the battle of Berlin develop and change over time from the immediate post-war period to the present day? For that, I seek to analyse sources mostly from areas connected with the (former) Soviet Union – since as mentioned, the victors of the Eastern Front enshrined Berlin as a great victory for their system and people. To gain insight into the changes and development of the commemoration, this thesis will start its analysis of sources produced during the Second World War and extend its covering of material into the 21st century. The first chapter provides context to help understand the significance of the battle of Berlin for the Soviet and later, Russian people. It does so by answering the question: how did Red Army soldiers experience the battle of Berlin and its immediate aftermath? By intertwining eye-witness accounts of the battle with (scientific) secondary literature, such as Beevor's work, I wish to highlight the main events concerning the fateful battle. This first chapter will assert the reasons for remembrance – if the final stand of the Third Reich would have been in a village in Bavaria

[10] Ibidem, 110.

[11] Peter Jahn, *Triumph und Trauma - Sowjetische und postsowjetische Erinnerung an den Krieg 1941-1945* (Berlin 2005) 16.

instead of the Reichshauptstadt, its fall would not have been as dramatic as it was in Berlin's case. The next chapter will examine the place of Berlin in the post-war, communist cult, by answering the question: How did the commemoration of the battle of Berlin take shape and change from 1945 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union? A wide array of art, rituals and sacred objects will be discussed, each piece of material bringing us closer to the significance of the World War Two victory for the Communist Party and Soviet people. The material as mentioned is extremely diverse and perhaps difficult to bring together in a coherent analysis. Therefore, it is necessary to ask basic yet essential questions about the origins, goals, effects and place in the remembrance cult of the case. One case will for example be the enormous Treptower Park memorial complex in Berlin. Why was it built and to what purpose? Does the sizable park still function as place of remembrance or are Soviet memorial sites an annoyance to local governments? Museums, books, songs, monuments – all raise similar questions. Soon after the Soviet victory in Berlin, movies began to appear, applauding the Red Army and its (political) leadership. Although movies should be mentioned as important carriers of the post-war Soviet cult, a complete analysis of these will not be provided. Movies – and especially, Soviet war movies – are worth separate readings and research. Cinematic accounts of the battle of Berlin already have been discussed in an excellent study by Denise Youngblood.[12] Therefore, only brief mention of such movies is necessary in this writing.

A final chapter will investigate the place of Berlin in the most recent nation building attempts of the Russian government. Since the majority of 'Soviet people' became Russians after 1991, this chapter will focus on the country which considers itself the heir of the Soviet empire: the Russian Federation. The main question to be answered in this chapter is: How is the battle of Berlin used to shape national identity in the present-day Russian Federation? Other questions will help shape an answer. Is the battle still of relevance today, for the Russian public? Do museums in Russia still display dioramas of 'their' victory? Does the government feel satisfied with their role as protector of Soviet monuments in and around Berlin, or are more memorial complexes to be built in the future? This chapter will provide various examples of interesting cases concerning the earlier mentioned questions, such as a life-sized Reichstag model in a military park near Moscow, where people are encouraged to stage 'stormings' of the mock-up German parliamentary building.

[12] For further reading see: Denise Jeanne Youngblood, *Russian war films: on the cinema front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence 2007).

A study of war memory in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation is more than a mere analysis of a wide array of statues and museums. Although these objects, which serve as 'vehicles of memory' – a term first used by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi while writing on Jewish history and Jewish memory – are key to the second and third chapter of this thesis, it are the writings of Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs which proved itself useful for this case.[13] Pierre Nora (1931) is best known for his extensive writing on *lieux de mémoire*-theory: 'memory places'. He did this by analysing French national symbols from the Middle Ages onwards, whether these were buildings, books, ideologies, religion or even concepts. His studies on the *lieux de mémoire* were published into seven volumes. Thankfully, when asked for a definition of the concept, he answered:

> "If the expression *lieu de mémoire* must have an official definition, it should be this: a *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community…"[14]

It is with this in mind that I will research the place of the Berlin battle in the Soviet and Russian war cult. By creating monuments – some even on the location of battle – the Soviets and their Russian heirs made history much more present and available to the beholder. They materialised the episode which the State wished to be remembered well. Since for many people the problem with history is its 'absent' nature, the (often) state-sponsored influx of monuments, artwork and movies creates a more approachable notion of history. The writings of another French theorist, Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), were crucial to the understanding of social construction in the memory sphere. Halbwachs' final work, *The Collective Memory*, is key to understanding the role of memory building within collectives. He stressed the importance of the collective in the shaping of memory. For this thesis, the most important theory concerns the sustainability of memory: it is the collective experience which tends to be more powerful than the personal memory of, for example, war. Therefore it takes the biggest possible group of people imaginable to make memory durable.[15] It is exactly what we are looking for when researching the role of the war cult in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation.

I will apply these models to the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, even though

[13] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York 1989).
[14] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory*, vol 1 (New York 1996-8) xvii.
[15] Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York [1950] 1980) 51.

more modern authors – with perhaps more modern liberal thinking than Nora and Halbwachs – such as James Young deem these works outdated and champion the position of the individual in memory studies. In this thesis, I dare argue that the role of the State – whether Stalin, Brezhnev or Putin is at the helm – in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation is extremely strong when it concerns orchestrated memory. In a society which in its foundation is dictated by the collective, the attention of the personal experience and memory is shifted to the sphere of the common good. As we will see in the Soviet Union and increasingly in modern-day Russia, the collective commemoration and celebration of a *useful past* is exploited by the State, which often has more interest in shaping a collective memory than we can imagine in the Western world.

Summing up, by using this theoretical framework in the next chapter I will first analyse the Battle of Berlin itself using eye-witness accounts to examine the ways in which the battle was experienced. In the next chapter I examine how the battle became a centrepiece in the post-war commemoration of the Great Patriotic War. And lastly the third chapter will give insight in the way the legacy of this battle evolved in the years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, continuing to the present day. Ultimately, this thesis will provide a better understanding of the pivotal role of the Battle of Berlin, from the days of gunfire and smoke in the streets of the city until the festivities across the Russian Federation into the 21st century.

Chapter 1: Into the fascists' lair.

The Battle of Berlin through the eyes of Soviet soldiers.

The year 1944 had proven to be a prime disaster in the tragedy the Germans had written themselves. After losing the initiative on the Eastern Front following the lost battles of Stalingrad and Kursk in 1943, the Soviet war-machine rolled westwards. In the summer of 1944, no mandatory German summer offensive had taken place. Instead, it was the German's turn to be mauled by a Soviet offensive by the name of 'Bagration', an operation which destroyed most of the German Army Group 'Mitte' – the centre of the German lines in the east. 'Bagration' brought the Soviets on the Vistula river, just before Warsaw. 1944 also saw the opening of a true Western Front – a theatre of war the Soviets had been asking for, for many years. In June of that year, Operation 'Overlord' took place on the shores of Western Europe, at Normandy. Lightning strikes by the combined American and Commonwealth armies proved to be instrumental in speeding up the German defeat. It also marked the liberation of countries such as France and Belgium – and the Netherlands, partially. The downfall of the Reich which was supposed last over a thousand years did not only seem imminent – it had already been a fact ever since the German failure to capture cities like Moscow and Stalingrad from the military and political power they so much had wished to destroy.

This first chapter will first of all provide the reader with the relevant context for the rest of this thesis by answering the question: how did Red Army soldiers experience the battle of Berlin and its immediate aftermath? It is by understanding the details of the struggle to capture Berlin, that we can assert the importance of this battle to contemporaries and later in this thesis, to generations after the war. We will follow the Red Army on its way through Poland, to Berlin. We will do so, by using secondary literature on the operations, combined with eye-witness accounts of those who took part in the fighting. By doing this and by using multiple sources, written in different eras, that we will be able to grasp the significance of the fall of Berlin. We will also hear directly from words of Red Army soldiers why this battle is so memorable. Therefore, we will later be able to see whether their reasons for remembrance are used in the later Soviet and Russian war cults. This feeds into Halbwachs' theories on memories always being of collective nature. According to the French theorist, the individual

might memorise, it is the collective however that decides which memories are to be commemorated.[16]

In January 1945, the Soviet colossus had multiple bridgeheads on the Vistula river – locations, from which the road to Berlin would be a mere 600 kilometres. The Red Army had not come to the aid of the Polish Home Army which fought its famous Warsaw Uprising-battles from August till October 1944. After 'Bagration', the Red Army was too exhausted to launch another offensive to clear Warsaw from its German occupants. Also, the location of Warsaw itself proved to be of little use to future offensives.[17] However, the Red Army's incapability to assist the Polish Home Army also appears to be motivated by political unwillingness from Moscow, since Stalin would have seen little benefit in an independent Polish liberation attempt of the capital city. Nevertheless, the Red Army used its three months on the Vistula bridgeheads to resupply and replenish its troops, as well as locating as much units as possible onto the two bridgeheads itself.

In another moment of self-proclaimed brilliance, in this period Adolf Hitler once more intervened with rational military thinking. Dreaming of miracle operations and attacking with armies which only existed on paper, the Führer concentrated Germany's operational reserves on the flanks of the central part of the Eastern Front – namely in East Prussia and near Krakow.[18] As usual by now, German divisions were chronically understrength, making (counter)offensive operations with such units a ready-made disaster. By this time, Germany had lost the oilfields of Romania as well, further reducing their much needed fuel supply for their vehicles. Hitler's policy of 'defending every inch of ground' did not leave space for multi-layered defence and therefor made future Soviet artillery bombardments even more lethal: with no options to retreat, German officers had to construct their defences in a very limited area.[19]

In the early morning of the 12th of January 1945, the First Ukrainian Front[20] led by Marshal Ivan Konev broke out of its bridgehead on the Vistula and swept across Poland. On the 18th, the 3rd Guards Tank Army (First Ukrainian Front) already took Czestochowa, some 220 kilometres from their initial positions. Marshal Georgi Zhukov unleashed his First Belorussian Front on the 14th of January, breaking mainly out of his Magnushev bridgehead.

[16] Anna Green, *Cultural History* (New York 2008) 88.
[17] David Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed – how the Red Army stopped Hitler* (Lawrence 2015) 276.
[18] Ibidem, 307.
[19] Ibidem, 308.
[20] *Front* is the Soviet term for an Army Group. It could consist over anything from three till eight armies combined. The First Belorussian Front in January 1945 even consisted of ten infantry and tank armies.

The German Ninth Army was the first to face Zhukov's onslaught. Famous wartime reporter Vasily Grossman wrote: "And now, after being formed for the third time, it was being smashed and routed on the Vistula by the forces of Marshal Zhukov in their swift movement toward the eastern frontiers of Germany."[21] The notion of the Ninth's Army third formation indicates the rate of destruction on the Eastern Front – entire German armies were destroyed in the previous years, leading to new formations with the number-indication of their predecessor. The Red Army literally *raced* towards the Oder – which would be the last river on the approaches to Berlin. Lead elements (mostly tank formations) of the First Belorussian Front operated as far as 100 kilometres in front of the rest of the Front. General Vasily Chuikov – famous for his leadership in the defence of Stalingrad – commanded the 8th Guards Army, formed out of the former 62nd Army which he led at Stalingrad.

The Vistula-Oder Offensive was characterised by enormous speed, exhausting marches, crumbling German resistance and entire armies operating separately from the rest of the Front structure. Chuikov noted: "The officers and men were in high spirits. No one complained of weariness from the gruelling forced marches. On the contrary, they were impatient to reach the German border."[22] Although operational maps might show the Vistula-Oder Offensive as a warm knife running through butter, the soldiers who had to accomplish this great task saw the difficulties with their own eyes. One of them, Evgeni Bessonov, a tank rider (an infantryman, transported on the back of a tank in order to provide immediate infantry support to the armoured vehicle) in the 4th Tank Army recalls: "The battalion was moving as the Brigade's forward task force, and the Germans did not try to set up serious defences, but by the end of the day a strong German delaying force stopped us. Our companies attacked several times, but were thrown back with losses in personnel. German artillery, especially anti-tank guns, were especially active."[23]

With two Red Army fronts converging towards the Oder, German resistance mostly broke down. However, German Festung (Fortress)-doctrine made sure various cities would be defended to the last man. In complete Hitleresque style, countless cities of little strategic importance were declared a Festung. While fortresses such as Thorn (Torun) and Litzmannstadt (Lodz) were easily taken, other fortification strongpoints such as Breslau (Wroclaw) and Posen (Poznan) proved to be a more difficult nut to crack – they would tie

[21] Vassili Grossman, *The Years of War 1941-1945* (Moscow 1946) 429.
[22] Vasili Ivanovich Chuikov, *The End of the Third Reich* (Moscow 1985) 96.
[23] Evgeni Bessonov, *Tank Rider: into the Reich with the Red Army* (New York 2017) 157.

down Soviet formations which had to besiege them. However, Soviet commanders normally left adequate forces behind to isolate such fortresses and speedily moved towards the Oder.

February 1945: a Soviet rifle company during the Vistula-Oder Offensive moves through a Polish village. [24]

Once the Oder was reached at the end of January, Soviet troops had to cross the river in order to establish bridgeheads on its west bank. A soldier of the 5th Shock Army recalls: "After the liberation of Warsaw we advanced westward and reached the Oder River. We forcedly crossed the frozen river forming the famous Küstrin bridgehead. The Germans launched two extremely strong attacks but we repulsed both of them. Just at the bridgehead my first hand-to-hand fight took place."[25] The creation of new bridgeheads on the Oder certainly showed comparisons with the earlier bridgeheads on the Vistula – even more reason for the Germans to attack these troop concentrations with renewed fierceness. However, one important difference with earlier bridgeheads was obvious to all who could pin point the new Soviet locations on a map: these bridgeheads were only 60 kilometres from Berlin.[26]

This relatively short distance was a great motivator for the Red Army men and women, as Marshal Konev recalled, quite the same as the comment mentioned earlier by General Chuikov: "The troops were in very high fighting spirits. The soldiers and officers had to surmount incredible difficulties, but their stamina was literally doubled because they realised that, as a result of this last enormous physical and moral effort, we could finally

[24] Waralbum, 'Советская стрелковая рота на марше в польском населенном пункте', http://waralbum.ru/260327/. Seen on 9.1.2020.
[25] Artem Drabkin and Isaak Kobylyanskiy, *Red Army Infantrymen Remember the Great Patriotic War* (Bloomington 2009) 244.
[26] Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 312.

achieve complete victory over the enemy. They were firmly convinced that this time we would at last bring the war to an end."[27] With the numbers of kilometres dwindling, the end of the war was drawing closer and closer – just as the taste for revenge. While the Soviets poured over the countryside towards the Oder, they and their comrades fighting further to the north crossed the German state border. The arrival of Soviet boots on East-Prussian ground caused a renewal in Soviet propaganda rhetoric, as this line written by the famous Soviet poet Ilya Ehrenburg illustrates:

> "All the trenches, graves and ravines with the corpses of the innocents are advancing on Berlin… As we advance through Pomerania, we have before our eyes the devastated, blood-drenched countryside of Belorussia ... Germany, you can whirl round in circles, and howl in your deathly agony. The hour of revenge has struck!"[28]

A Soviet soldier poses on the German border next to a sign reading: 'Behold, there she is – accursed Germany!'[29]

[27] V. Sevruk, *How Wars End: Eye-Witness Accounts of the Fall of Berlin* (Moscow 1969) 26.
[28] Catherine Merridale, *Ivans War – The Red Army 1939-1945* (London 2006) 261.
[29] 'Muzej Mira', Museums of the world, picture from an exhibition inside the German-Russian Museum, Berlin. https://muzei-mira.com/muzei_germanii/1303-germano-rossiyskiy-muzey-berlin-karlshorst.html, seen on 19-9-2019.

Such notions of an ‘accursed Germany’ or an ‘hour of revenge’ certainly appeared and appealed to many soldiers. Signs were erected on the German border, telling the soldiers they were entering Germany – or in other words, the ‘Lair of Fascism’. Leaflets were handed out to troops near the Oder, telling them Berlin was only 75 kilometres away and that ‘the hour of revenge’ would be upon Germany soon enough.

However, not many Soviet eye-witness accounts (dare) describe the scale of cruelty and the immense amount of crimes committed by Soviet soldiers on German soil. This can be explained by using Halbwachs’ theory on individual memory and collective memory, which states that personal memories are always and continuously shaped by the collective.[30] One can imagine this would hold true in a totalitarian state like the Soviet Union, where the collective memory was subject to the foundation myth: the Great Patriotic War. Although seemingly absent from the collective memory, much about the Soviet war crimes is written by present-day historians. An author such as Antony Beevor almost solely describes the German suffering in 1945, but rarely touches upon the reasons why soldiers of the Red Army plundered, raped and torched entire villages. Although such crimes are not excusable, one has to think of the enormous suffering of the Soviet people and its soldiers at the hands of the Germans. With a propaganda-machine which lively showed Soviet soldiers shoving bayonets into German stomachs and Soviet women beating German ‘Bertha’s’ during the struggle, it is not surprising soldiers felt encouraged to pay the Germans back in their own coin. It remains a matter of discussion in how far crimes were sanctioned, encouraged or applauded by the Soviet leadership.

However, with discipline dwindling, officers had to set examples to restore order. A Soviet soldier recalls attempts by the Red Army command structure to instil order by punishing rapists: “Next topic – about our behaviour in Germany. Although a strict prohibitive order was in effect, I should say that there were some facts of both pillage and rape. I remember how one marauder was shot in front of the unit’s formation.”[31] Although relatively little was done by the Soviet leadership to stop the countless number of crimes, only in April and May of 1945, strict orders were given to prohibit such ‘relations with German civilians’.[32] However, examples of mass-rape continued to be found all along the war-path of the Red Army through German territory – until in Berlin itself. A soldier wrote: “It’s

[30] Chris Weedon and Glenn Jordan, “Collective memory: theory and politics” in *Social Semiotics*, 22-2, 143-153, page 145.
[31] Drabkin and Kobylyanskiy, *Red Army Infantrymen Remember*, 183.
[32] Merridale, *Ivans War*, 276.

absolutely clear, if we don't really scare them now, there will be no way of avoiding another war in future."[33]

Instilling fear into the German civilian population was not solely the merit of Soviet soldiers. With the Red Army entering the *Reich*, Goebbles and his fellow propagandists strongly imitated the way Ilya Ehrenburg wrote venomous poems and articles. Units spearheading the assault towards the Oder often encountered civilians attempting to flee – only to be overtaken by Soviet tanks. Evgeni Bessonov noticed the panic among the civilians:

> "The population fled from us. Traces of panic flight were everywhere – we saw cases, bicycles, pillows and other things in the ditches. […] Once our column caught up with fleeing local civilians. It was a column of stiff old men, children and women of different ages. […] We stopped all those people and in our broken German explained to them that they should go back to their homes. The battalion travelled on in order to complete the mission, and we do not know where the Germans went – we had other things on our mind."[34]

As Red Army troops marched through German fields and villages at last, a sense of pride filled their ranks as well. Were it not the Germans who once had observed Moscow through their binoculars in 1941? How many soldiers had fought and died to pave the road to Berlin? Grossman writes: "We longed to call out to the fighting men who lay in eternal slumber on the battlefields of Russia, the Ukraine, Byelorussia and Poland: "Can you hear us, comrades, we are there!"[35]

The Red Army's path towards victory had been a long and costly one – but with Soviet troops quickly crossing the Oder and establishing bridgeheads there, one could only think of the upcoming joy of victory. The entire theatre of war was transferred from formerly occupied Soviet and Polish lands, to the *Vaterland* itself – the German heartland. These villages, towns and farms were all furnished in the most lavish way possible, according to Soviet soldiers. Paintings, silver cutlery, countless garments, quality furniture – all things many of them had not yet encountered while living in the Soviet-Union.

The response of Soviet soldiers varied: while many simply burned down houses and smashed furniture as their idea of revenge, many others made sure to grab as much as possible

[33] Ibidem, 270.
[34] Bessonov, *Tank Rider*, 184.
[35] Grossman, *The Years of War 1941-1945*, 442

and ship it home.[36] It seemed as if an entire new world was encountered by the soldiers – one with different institutions then theirs, one with a completely different material culture. Ivan Dmitrievich Zabolotnyi, a soldier of the 60th Army (First Ukrainian Front) left a description of what he saw on German territory:

> "It was noticeable that the living standard in Germany was definitely higher than in our country. So were also solid buildings and perfect roads. As a forester's son, I paid special attention to German forests. They were well-groomed everywhere. On the other hand, the German soil is far not as fertile as ours is."[37]

Even Marshal Konev noted how the Germans 'cared well' for their forests – which seemed to have helped Soviet tanks during their operations through woodlands.[38] Political officers – maintaining the ideological health of the soldiers – had a hard time explaining the troops that the standard of living in Germany was so much higher, only because they plundered all of Europe.[39] They also had to reprimand soldiers for burning down German houses. Guards Colonel Strukov, attached as head of the Political Department to the First Ukrainian Front, wrote:

> "One warrior, for example, burned nine houses down. And when he was reprimanded answered: 'Do what you want. I will burn ninety-one more. I promised myself for all their villainy to burn a hundred houses'. Of course, you can't punish him, but you need to rein him in a bit. They destroy furniture in the same fashion, break and wreck everything."[40]

While revenge kept playing a role in the soldiers' mind, another aspect might have played a role in the destruction and plunder some of them engaged in. Well-kept forests might have been understandable, but the one question on many a Soviet soldier his mind was a simple: why? Why had the Germans attacked the Soviet-Union? Apparently the regular German farmer owned a big estate, while Soviet farmers had to work on collective farms. Shelves

[36] Merridale, *Ivans War*, 281.
[37] Drabkin and Kobylyanskiy, *Red Army Infantrymen Remember*, 274.
[38] Sevruk, *How Wars End*, 83.
[39] Brandon M. Schechter, *The stuff of soldiers – a history of the Red Army in World War II through objects* (Ithaca 2019) 212.
[40] Ibidem, 212.

filled with books, porcelain, big clocks in every room – what on earth did the German soldier wish to find in the hamlets of Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine? The men and women were astonished when entering a German house – some even being equipped with organs, countless pictures, decadent hunting equipment and elaborate bathrooms.[41] The manner of response could be divided into two categories: either one tried to enrich oneself with the objects at hand, or one had cold reservations to these riches. Because – as they saw – these personal enrichments only seemed to have corrupted the German people.

As mentioned earlier, Soviet forces established bridgeheads over the Oder two weeks after their initial departure from the Vistula bridgeheads – thus having advanced over 400 kilometres. A final push towards Berlin would have been possible, General Chuikov reasoned in his memoires, written in the sixties.[42] However, Zhukov and Stalin made the decision to halt the further advance of the Red Army. Zhukov reasoned his northern flank (the Baltic coastline, still in German hands) was too vulnerable, while Stalin felt offensives in the south, towards Vienna might imply more political gain – one would not have to bargain over spheres of influence with the other Allies with such territories already in Soviet hands.[43] With German forces completely disorganised and shattered, it indeed seemed tempting to completely rout the *Wehrmacht*, *Volkssturm*, SS and other Nazi formations. However, the Soviet High Command preferred to clear the flanks, resupply and reinforce the frontline on the Oder.

This halt on the Oder meant that those of the 8th Guards Army were condemned to dig fortifications on frozen soil while being strafed by whatever German aircraft still operated on the Eastern Front.[44] Entrenchment, as so many times earlier in the war, became essential to survive on the Oder-front. A soldier recalls the damp and cold conditions: "Cold and wet as a dog since last night. They didn't bring up anything to eat all day – just nibble on a crouton [*sukhar'*]. Or doze off, if you can, crouched in a heap, switching off with your partner."[45] However, the build-up of Soviet forces on the Oder bridgehead continued. Vassili Subbotin, a writer for the divisional newspaper of the 150th Rifle Division (3rd Shock Army, First Belorussian Front) shared in the excitement for the upcoming, final blow towards Berlin: "We were waiting here on the Oder until our vehicle could drive across, and I was standing on a rocking, swaying bridge built by the sappers. We were all excited and inspired by the stream of people crossing over the Oder. It was as if I was drunk, standing on the swaying bridge and

[41] Schechter, *The stuff of soldiers*, 226.
[42] Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 317.
[43] Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 318.
[44] Anthony Beevor, *Berlin – Downfall:1945* (London 2017), 70.
[45] Schechter, *The stuff of soldiers*, 120.

distributing our newspaper. I shouted, complained without reason and was happy as everyone. It was a memorable morning."[46]

While Zhukov's and Konev's men were withstanding German attacks on the Oder-Neisse line (the latter being the river – a tributary of the Oder – where Konev's bridgeheads were located), the Soviet High Command started planning the upcoming storming of Berlin. Between January and April 1945, the Germans were able to reorganise their armies on the approaches of Berlin and drain whatever source of manpower they could find – thus creating a force of over 800.000 men (including the ill-equipped and ill-prepared *Volkssturm*) in and around Berlin. The Soviets were able to amass over 2.5 million troops for the offensive, supported by over 6.000 tanks and 41.600 pieces of artillery.[47] Although there were no more major rivers to be crossed during the assault on Berlin, a new natural barrier would prove to be disastrous to the planning on Zhukov's front: the Seelow Heights.[48]

With the final chapter of the war in sight, Soviet soldiers could look forward to a life after the war. But in order to gain peace – and complete destruction of the German resistance – they would have to fight their blood-soaked way into Berlin itself. The prospect of every German housing block becoming a fortress might have made them uneasy about their chances of survival. Before the final offensive, a Red Army soldier wrote: "Greetings from the Front. I am alive and healthy. We are not far from Berlin. Severe battles are going on, but soon the order will come, and we will advance to Berlin. We will have to storm it and I will see if I am still alive by then."[49] Although this letter shows signs of pessimism or apathy towards life, soldiers now more than ever worried about getting killed in the last moments of the almost victorious war. What point would dying be, if it was only a matter of days, weeks before the Nazis would ultimately be crushed?

Such thoughts also went through Evgeni Bessonov's mind during an engagement with the enemy later in April: "Why on earth did I have to attack without any support, send my guys to a certain death and be killed myself before the end of the war? Why the hell did I need this?"[50] As the Red Army was preparing for the final push, tension was arising in the bridgeheads – friendly troops returning from reconnaissance missions were incidentally fired upon by their own troops, while others could simply feel the "huge spring about to be

[46] Vassili Subbotin, *We stormed the Reichstag* (Barnsley 2017), 10.
[47] Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 330.
[48] Ibidem, 328.
[49] Beevor, *Berlin*, 211.
[50] Bessonov, *Tank Rider*, 206.

released."[51]

Steps to release the huge spring were taken with bigger resolve. Stalin had summoned the primary Soviet commanders for the Berlin operation – Zhukov and Konev – to Moscow for an important meeting. Soviet intelligence had intercepted a telegram from the Western allies' headquarters which implied the possibilities of British and American troops seizing Berlin before the Soviets would. Stalin asked his legendary question: "Well, then, who is going to take Berlin, we or the Allies?" The two marshals answered that they would take Berlin, which pleased Stalin – but also made the Soviet leader urge his subordinates to start organising the offensive, which was bound to take place as soon as possible.[52]

Although planning was already well underway, this sudden rush – the date of attack was set on the 16th of April – seemed to leave little time for detailed preparations. Soviet assault-groups, units especially trained in street-fighting, were reorganised into a less infantry-heavy form: by spring 1945 the Red Army enjoyed the luxury of sufficient military hardware such as flamethrowers, armour for an infantry-support role and artillery pieces which could support the assault-groups by direct fire.[53]

The by now well-tested Soviet tactic of reconnaissance-in-force in order to hamper German defensive preparations began on the 14th of April. Gaining some success on multiple locations, the Soviets by now had already penetrated five kilometres into German lines, without unleashing their entire offensive. Two days later, the artillery of Zhukov's First Belorussian Front opened fire for the main artillery preparation for the Berlin operation. Apparently the artillery strike was so heavy it created multiple new obstacles for advancing Soviet troops while it failed to clear the German second line of defence on the Seelow Heights.[54] Before the break of dawn, the First Belorussian Front attacked. Engines roared, explosions were heard in the distance and thousands of troops yelled the battle-cry: "To Berlin!"[55]

Zhukov's plan to illuminate the battlefield by countless searchlights in order to blind the enemy and confuse them proved to be a successful one, be it not that the Soviet troops were equally blinded by the light's reflection on the artillery preparation's dust screen. The result was chaos – especially since so many Soviet soldiers had to charge on a relatively small front. Zhukov's forces – for example those of Chuikov's 8th Guards Army – met strong

[51] Beevor, *Berlin*, 214.
[52] Sevruk, *How Wars End*, 10.
[53] Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 546.
[54] Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 334.
[55] Beevor, *Berlin*, 218.

German resistance. The well-entrenched Germans on the Seelow high ground simply picked off Soviet armour while Red Army troops were stuck in an endless maze of canals and marshland. The Seelow Heights – not much more than a ridge of 30 to 60 metres in height – overlooked a big mass of land reaching all the way to Küstrin on the Oder. "In April 1945 started the hardest battle that I took part in." recalls Nikolai Ivanovich Safonov.

> "For four days running we stormed the Seelow Heights and it was something fearful! It turned out during our attacks that the German weapon emplacements weren't neutralized and the enemy directed its full might against us. Later some experienced soldiers affirmed that it was more fearful than in Stalingrad. Our rifle company lost about 100 of its men out of 120. […] I have no words for what was going on there…"[56]

As the First Belorussian Front's progress was lacking, Zhukov ordered more troops to engage the enemy. In the sector of the 8th Guards Army he ordered the 1st Guards Tank Army (led by General Katukov) to enter the fray. Chuikov, whose headquarters Zhukov visited, openly disagreed with the Front-commander. Since the 8th Guards Army was supported by ample vehicles and artillery itself, more tanks and self-propelled guns could jam the few roads available, thus creating more chaos for the attacking troops., according to Chuikov[57] It would take until the 19th of April for Soviet forces to successfully break German resistance at the Seelow Heights – thus securing the last major defensive line before reaching Berlin. However, the delay and the subsequent pressure on Soviet commanders to finish of the Germans there resulted in the deaths of 30.000 Soviet soldiers, who perished at the gates of Berlin.[58]

Konev, facing less Germans, employed different tactics than Zhukov. The bulk of the First Ukrainian Front had to cross various waterways before their way to Berlin would be unobstructed. Initially, the First Ukrainian Front was supposed to close in on Berlin from the west – while proceeding from the southern direction.[59] However, Stalin ordered Konev's troops to break up Berlin's defences from the south, while Zhukov's were still stuck at the Seelow Heights. Even though Konev's advance in the southern sector was faster than Zhukov's, this did not mean German resistance was less stiff, as Evgeni Bessonov recalls:

[56] Drabkin and Kobylyanskiy, *Red Army Infantrymen Remember*, 174.
[57] Chuikov, *The End of the Third Reich*, 181.
[58] Beevor, *Berlin*, 244.
[59] Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 540.

> "We were conducting the offensive in difficult forest terrain that abounded with rivers, channels and swampy areas. We had to stick to the roads, which crippled our manoeuvres. […] The roads were covered with mines, blocked with rubbish, especially in built up areas and in front of them, as well as under railway and road bridges, which had high embankments. They used *Panzerfausts* against our tanks. Battles raged during day and night without any break and this was seriously exhausting."[60]

Various stories concerning competition between the two leading marshals subsist. However, Zhukov and Konev were not the only ones in for the 'race'. All stories are connected to the central theme of glory: the first Front to reach Berlin, the first Army to reach the city's outskirts, the first division to reach the Reichstag, and so on.[61] Interesting examples of 'glory' still remain, such as an artillery piece in the Military Historical Museum of Artillery, Engineers and Signal-troops in Saint Petersburg.[62] This ZiS-3 76mm divisional gun has an elaborate biography painted on its shield – including a mention of the probably most glorious shot ever fired by a Soviet artillery piece: the first on Berlin. Whether anyone ever attempted to verify the authenticity of this feat is unclear – however, the thought of being the first to fire on the city of Berlin itself was obviously important enough for the crew to mention it on the piece itself.

Although elements of the First Belarussian Front had penetrated Berlin's outer defences by the 20th of April, Berzarin's 3rd Shock Army (First Belarussian Front) was declared to be the first formation having reached Berlin. Following a Russian Imperial practice from the late Eighteenth Century, the first Russian commander to reach a city was to be its formal Military Commander (i.e. a military major). Berzarin was officially appointed this role on the 24th. With Red Army troops literally inside Berlin and more troops in the process of cutting off the city, the real savagery of street fighting began. Soviet soldiers would have to perform their offensive operations in a highly urbanised area, crossing canals and keeping up their own supply chain, medical evacuations, prisoner escorts and communications to the rear, often living in fear of vindictive German stragglers.[63]

Red Army units were formed into special assault-groups which were to penetrate and destroy German defences – thus avoiding the useless sacrifice of Soviet tanks at the hands of

[60] Bessonov, *Tank Rider*, 198.
[61] Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 541.
[62] Photo collection room number 6 of the Artillery Museum in Saint Petersburg. https://fotosergs.livejournal.com/16968.html, seen on 18-10-2019.
[63] Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 336.

German *Panzerfaust*-fire. Although troops would be equipped with flamethrowers and (smoke) grenades, the risk of hand-to-hand fighting was still present. Although Soviet troops were supposed to be the masters of this 'ungentlemanly' way of fighting – their military manuals always emphasising the use of the bayonet – losses were staggeringly high. Even after regular reinforcements, a veteran of the fighting in Berlin recalled: "…all the same by the evening fewer than half of us remained."[64]

American and British air forces ceased their relentless attacks on the city, with their last destructive payload delivered on the 20th – ironically, Hitler's birthday.[65] This would not mean a complete stop of bombs raining down on the city, for Zhukov's and Konev's artillerymen continued to do so with much enthusiasm. Although artillery – firing directly and indirectly – was to play a great role in the support of infantrymen, it was the complete chaos which dictated the movements and decisions soldiers and their officers in the field had to make. Chuikov, in his memoires, writes about the use of various tactics which demand quick decisions and independent thinking – ways of thought not always attached to the Red Army. The men of Chuikov's 8th Guards Army would have to blow holes in walls in order to create a safe passage through housing blocks instead of using the main roads – which would be heavily defended by German forces.[66] While orders would often indicate a general direction of advance, it was up to the commanders of assault groups to choose back alleys, gardens, or roofs to facilitate their movements. By using complicated movements, the Soviets were often able to ambush German troop concentrations. Pavel Vinnik, a soldier in the 5th Shock Army recalls such an attack while operating *through* apartment blocks: "I directed my fellow soldier to bring the company and remained alone for about 50 minutes. Then the company joined me. We went downstairs to the third floor, opened all windows there and threw hand and anti-tank grenades at the Germans. Only a jumble remained of them, and the street became passable, while we had no casualties."[67]

Another description of the Berlin struggle from the viewpoint of an engineer of the 2nd Guards Tank Army reads: "[…] We are moving towards the centre of Berlin. Gunfire, fire and smoke everywhere. Soldiers run from one building to another and creep through the courtyards carefully. Germans were shooting at our tanks from windows and doors […]. The Germans have a starved and long-suffering look. Berlin is not a beautiful city, narrow streets,

[64] Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 547.
[65] Steven J. Zaloga, *Downfall 1945: The Fall of Hitler's Third Reich* (Oxford 2016) 61.
[66] Chuikov, *The End of the Third Reich*, 202.
[67] Drabkin and Kobylyanskiy, *Red Army Infantrymen Remember*, 246.

barricades everywhere, broken trams and vehicles. The houses are empty because everybody is in the basements."[68]

The chaotic fighting and the unclear boundaries between Red Army units often seemed to have contributed to cases of friendly fire. Three Soviet Air Force armies were soaring over the skies of Berlin, all taking attack missions from the various active Fronts. An instance of an aviation attack requested by the First Ukrainian Front enraged Chuikov, for it were his own friendly troops who were bombed at the request of his neighbours.[69] Konev recalled: "It is always a bitter shock when, by some mischance, one is suddenly hit by one's own people and suffers losses. It was especially painful during the fighting for Berlin, since reports of this kind kept coming in all day, apparently not only to me, but also to Zhukov. The commands of both fronts applied to GHQ [General Headquarters, *STAVKA*] to clear up the problems of troop co-ordination so that unnecessary argument could be avoided."[70]

The horrific nature of combat in an urban environment: troops of the 17th Shock Engineer-Sapper Brigade fight their way through a Berlin street, as seen by an artist and eye-witness from that brigade. [71]

The Soviet advance through the often empty houses also allowed for a surrealistic kind of spare time among Soviet troops. As Red Army men often had to wait for other units to move

[68] Beevor, *Berlin*, 316.
[69] Beevor, *Berlin*, 319.
[70] Sevruk, *How Wars End*, 102.
[71] 'Pamyat Naroda', Journal of Military Operations of the 17th ShISbr. https://pamyat-naroda.ru/documents/view/?id=131664933, seen on 9.1.2020.

up among their flanks or wait for a renewal of their ammunition supply, little was left to do except being alert in a rather relaxed way. For example, in the period from the 16th till the 28th of April, 86 men and women of the 39th Guards Rifle Division (8th Guards Army) were accepted into the ranks of the Communist Party – a procedure which at least demanded a photograph to be taken and some bureaucracy to function in order to enrol in the ranks of said party.[72] The mentioned period stretches well over one of the most fierce moments in the fighting for Berlin.

Of course the availability of German furniture and other house-equipment proved useful to the Soviets. Either to sit down and take your boots off for a while, or to make a phone call. The most curious example is the phone call as described by cameraman Roman Karmen – whose work would contribute to the Soviet documentary 'Fall of Berlin – 1945' which was released in September of that year. "To check this [if the connection was still intact] I lifted the receiver and dialled the first Berlin number I came across in the directory lying beside the phone" he wrote. "A woman's voice replied and I rang off. The line to the centre was still in order."[73] Continuing these calls, an interpreter was asked to make a serious phone call with no one less then Nazi propaganda minister Goebbels. To many their amusement, the interpreter bluffed his way past German telephone operators as 'a Berlin citizen' and managed to deliver a message to Goebbels: "Remember this, Herr Goebbels. We'll find you anywhere you run, and the scaffold is ready and waiting for you!"[74] After Goebbels finished the phone call, the interpreter was left with a legendary story.

Apart from phone calls and other more relaxed activities, the urban environment of Berlin also facilitated close-quarter combat and earlier mentioned difficulties in moving towards objects over, for example, canals. With the likelihood of bridges over the Spree-river or other waterways being mined, Soviet commanders had to use various tactics in the crossing of waterways. Guards-*podpolkovnik* Gritsenko's 117th Guards Rifle Regiment (39th Guards Rifle Division) even staged a diversionary battle in the Köpenick area in order to focus German attention on that battle. Meanwhile one of Gritsenko's companies crossed the Spree during the night by 'improvised means' (often meaning: makeshift rafts and smalls boats) and took the bridge intact.[75] Another such feat was accomplished by a company of the 120th Guards Rifle Regiment (again, 39th Guards Rifle Division). Guards senior-lieutenant Nikolai

[72] A. V. Morozov, *39-ya Barvenkovskaya* (Moscow 1981) 103.
[73] Sevruk, *How Wars End*, 311.
[74] Ibidem, 312.
[75] Chuikov, *The End of the Third Reich*, 191.

Balakin scouted the sewers adjacent to the Landwehrkanal and discovered a way to pass to the canal unnoticed. His entire company crept through the sewers, swam over the canal and surprised the present *Volkssturm* unit. Two buildings were cleared and the Potsdamer Platz came in reach for Soviet troops.[76] The city also became the scene of situations which have a more familiar sound to those who have read various works on the battle of Stalingrad. An unknown unit, as described by veteran Vladimir Abyzov, set up quarters in a cellar in order to get some rest and gear up for the next engagement. When most of the troops were comfortable and smoking, two officers walked into another cellar on the other side of the street. Shouting and shooting followed: the two officers had been shot since the room they entered was still filled with Germans.[77]

Yet with Soviet troops penetrating the heart of Berlin, the main prize came in sight for many men and women: the Reichstag. The struggle for this building and its subsequent capture, followed by the famous Khaldei-photo of a soldier hoisting a Soviet flag on the building will be described in the second chapter. However, before this famous event, the last days of April marked the moments of final struggle and the subsequent defeat of the Nazis within their own capital. With fanatic German or foreign SS-men still holding out in cellars or fortified buildings, the Soviets chose to send officers, armed with a white flag for negotiations to the German strongpoints. In the instance of lieutenant Alexei Berest, the Germans even requested to speak to a 'high-ranking Soviet officer'.[78] The lieutenant of the 150th Rifle Divison (which would eventually storm and take the Reichstag) was dressed up in a leather coat from a more senior officer and was sent to the German lines. Much to his surprise, the German commander did not intend to surrender, claiming they outnumbered the Soviet attackers ten to one. According to him, the Soviets should better surrender to him. Berest saw through the obvious German bluff and forgot his diplomatic role by saying: "We have not come to Berlin to let you monsters go. If you do not surrender, not one of you here will come out alive."[79] Berest's way of thinking would be similar to that of many of his compatriots: the job of crushing the Germans was to be finished. Later that night, the Germans Berest had spoken to surrendered. By the 30th of April, the banner of the 150th Rifle Division flew over the Reichstag cupola, thus fulfilling one of the most honourable and Soviet-glorious tasks in the history of the Great Patriotic War.

[76] Chuikov, *The End of the Third Reich*, 224.
[77] Vladimir Abyzov, *The Final Assault*, (Moscow 1980) 63.
[78] Subbotin, *We stormed the Reichstag*, 27.
[79] Ibidem, 28.

Nevertheless, the end of the war came as a surprise to many. Negotiations between Chuikov and Weidling – commander of the Berlin garrison – ended in the surrender of the entire garrison on the 2nd of May 1945. By that time, Hitler had already committed suicide and only fragments of his 'Thousand Year Reich' remained. Famous correspondent for *Krasnaya Zvezda* Konstantin Simonov wrote of the significance that it had been Chuikov who had accepted the German surrender: "It seemed as if history itself had tried its best to bring this army [which had fought in Stalingrad] to Berlin and make the surrender of Berlin look particularly symbolic."[80] But not everyone was able to sense Soviet-appreciated symbolism as recognised by the ideological elite, symbolised by figures like Simonov. One soldier, Nikolai Belov wrote his to his wife how he took a very long sleep when the fighting ceased. "I was like a corpse" he wrote.[81] "I don't know if there'll be another lot of fighting like we've just seen, but I doubt it. It's all finished in Berlin."[82] Some soldiers immediately sensed the end of the giant struggle. They wrote letters home, wrote poems, gathered in Communist Party meetings and held small parades. Others however, slept, drank and prepared themselves for a world they had almost forgotten: a return to home and peace. "On this day of celebration we will not forget those that can no longer hear the word 'peace,'" said a soldier in the presence of Vassili Subbotin.[83] Subbotin also reflected on these first moments of peace: "No shots, no explosions, unusual but good."[84] He was amased by the fact that they could think of the future and make other plans – instead of surviving the next battle, which would come no more. But once more firing erupted on the streets of Berlin. This time however, it were soldiers firing in salute – greeting the achieved victory by fire from their submachineguns, rifles and pistols. Such honorary salutes were very common in the streets of Berlin.

The last major salute – including artillery fire and unprecedented litres of alcohol – was given on the 8th (by then already the 9th) of May, when the Germans unconditionally surrendered themselves to the representatives of the Allied Powers in Berlin-Karlshorst. Some soldiers – like Subbotin – started touring the streets of Berlin – finally beholding buildings which they had only seen in Soviet propaganda or perhaps an old book. Others continued the looting and the sending home of packages filled with that loot which had started when Soviet soldiers entered the *Reich* and did not end after the German surrender.[85] Many, horrible

[80] Beevor, 392.
[81] Merridale, *Ivans War*, 287.
[82] Ibidem.
[83] Subbotin, *We stormed the Reichstag*, 62.
[84] Ibidem.
[85] Beevor, 408.

instances of (mass) rape continued to take place within the ruined city.[86] However, the Soviets were also focused on what we could call a humanitarian operation: the people of Berlin were in dire need of supplies: food, water and energy sources. Berzarin – Berlin's Soviet Military Commander – organised soup kitchens and made sure Berlin soon became habitable for its citizens. On the 11th of May, the first Jewish religious service in Berlin took place since many years, led by a Red Army rabbi.[87]

Berlin, the city which had been an unreachable goal for the Red Army in 1941, was firmly in the hands of Stalin's army. Its soldiers were now sleeping amidst the rubble or in the empty apartment blocks. Thoughts of returning home were on their minds – the country which had suffered so much during the war years now had to be rebuilt. Destroying the Germans who had stood between the Soviets at the Oder and the city centre of Berlin had cost the Soviets dear: of the more than 350.000 men and women lost, 80.000 of them had been 'irrecoverable'.[88] The Soviet political leadership and its generalissimo had all reasons to be pleased with the outcome of this final struggle. Soviet-controlled territory had been seized and the main prize was taken before the Western allies could do so. Stalin's 'little cogs of history' – ordinary Soviet citizens to whom he toasted in 1945 – had done their part in the machine of history. And while soldiers like Evgeni Bessonov, Nikolai Balakin and Pavel Vinnik had all realised the significance of this apocalyptic battle, they were now to return to their normal lives as professional soldiers in peacetime, teachers or factory workers. The Soviet state recognised the valour of its soldiers and was quick to enshrine the millions of Red Army warriors into temples of marble or columns of granite. But it was the blood of those men and women who had prevailed in the greatest armed conflict in human history – and it would be their often nameless sacrifice which would be owned and exploited by their state.

In this chapter, we have seen the monumental struggle and the fierce desire of soldiers to reach the city – all of which reinforces the mythical status the Battle of Berlin would gain in Soviet- and Post-Soviet memory. Instances of competition (who would reach the city first, who would fire at the city first) took place, just as propaganda efforts to call Berlin the 'lair of fascism'. To finish off the hated enemy in its own capital appears to have been an enormous source of joy, with soldiers and journalists being aware of the great symbolic value. After 'the job' was done, crowds of soldiers celebrated and greeted the new victory. Others remembered what the war had done to them. One one slept like a stone while the other one simply longed

[86] Ibidem 409.
[87] Beevor, 419.
[88] Hill, 559.

for home. Perhaps these letters written in the immediate aftermath of the victory provide the most authentic perception of the soldiers' experiences, compared to memoires written years after the war. These early letters had not yet been shaped by the collective memory of the Great Patriotic War that would arise in the following decades, in accordance with Halbwachs' theory on collective memory. Hence Berlin became a place of remembrance – its streets had been soaked with the blood of Soviet soldiers, thus elevating the struggle for the German capital into the Soviet pantheon of legendary battles where cities as Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad and Kursk were already placed in.

Chapter 2: Glorification and Mourning.

The Battle of Berlin as a state-sponsored landmark event.

Following their successful European campaign, the Soviet Union had to tend to its almost lethal wounds: over 40.000.000 people perished during the war against Nazi Germany, over 9.000.000 of them being soldiers. Such horrendous losses could only be explained by emphasising the importance of their sacrifice: those men and women, as cogs in the great Communist Party-machine, contributed to slaying fascism and liberating Europe from the chains of German imperialists. A long process of healing followed this mass slaughter – as it did everywhere in the world. However, in the Soviet Union this process also served another purpose: the sacrifices of the Great Patriotic War would be shaped into one of the focal points of the nation.

In this chapter, the following question will be answered: How did the commemoration of the battle of Berlin take shape and change from 1945 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union? This will help explain the everchanging and increasing importance placed on the Battle of Berlin. One thing soon became apparent: while victory was won with the blood of many men and women, it was solely the achievement of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). According to their own explanation, it was the CPSU which organised and led the Soviet people to victory. The Party leadership soon drew all attention on itself and started uttering their repetitive formulae in movies, on monuments and on countless banners carried during official celebrations. Unsurprisingly, historian Nina Tumarkin describes such expressions as 'self-congratulatory'.[89] However, within the ranks of the Party, it became very much clear that the Red Army would never have reached Berlin without its strong leadership – obviously personified in the figure of generalissimo Stalin. According to Tumarkin, many Soviet people still held the belief that Stalin himself was responsible for gaining victory in the Great Patriotic War.[90]

For a state which in its earliest years tried to distance itself from the Russian Orthodox Church and its religious imagery, the Soviet Union had its own liturgic and iconographic correlations with the old Christian faith. Along the principles of socialist realism, a type of art had to be presented to people which was understandable to them, ideologically attractive and approved of by the Communist Party.[91] What followed – most notably, in sculpture and in

[89] Tumarkin, *The Living & the Dead,* 35.
[90] Ibidem.
[91] Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: a histor*y (Cambridge 2011) 479.

painting – was a way of working, very comparable with nineteenth century art. However, unlike art in nineteenth century Russia, the artworks as produced in the Soviet Union were made for the proletariat. Themes and forms had to adhere to the environment of workers and peasants – although the depictions were more often a fantasy of Party leaders and intelligentsia. Struggling heroes, warlike soldiers and cheering workers – this was the kind of world presented to the people of the Soviet Union by their leadership. It is not surprising the Second World War proved them with a great deal of material for monuments, paintings, museums and patriotic slogans. Although bloody battles such as Berlin were won at a tragic cost of human life, it was the socialist realist-man (and woman) at its finest: heroic, struggling, victorious and often: falling in battle.

Yet it was to be this dramatic end-battle in Berlin which was to become the centrepiece of the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War-altar. The enshrinement of soldiers, partisans, home-front workers and of course, leaders, was already on its way during the war.[92] The heroes of the struggle for Berlin would naturally be soldiers. Various cemeteries were turned into sacred places of remembrance – who else than fallen soldiers, could speak of the glorious victory gained by the Soviet Union? These places of remembrance can be analysed using Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire,* as these physical monuments, officiated by Soviet administrations, became part of the Soviet collective memory. We will see later how these monument-complexes were turned into the centre of the Berlin battle commemorations. One of its main statues, the 'Soldier-Liberator', would become the ultimate symbol of the Red Army's liberation-mission throughout Europe.

However, not only would physical reminders of the Soviet victory become present in Berlin, the 9th of May itself would become an important fixture in the post-war Soviet Union with the establishment of Victory Day in 1965. Before 1965, commemorating the battle started as soon as it was done. Large groups of soldiers were sighted all over Berlin, singing and drinking alike. However, the official commemoration also took shape: the banner of the 150th Rifle Division, hoisted over the Reichstag building on the 30th of April 1945, soon became known as *Znamya Pobedy*: the Victory Banner. The Reichstag-flag saga itself could fill multiple chapters. However, since the photograph made by Yevgeny Khaldei became world-famous as the symbol of the conquest of Berlin, it is interesting to point out the various 'flag stories'. After the 1933 Reichstag fire, the building had lost its political prominence – no parliamentary meetings were held in its main hall because of the damage. The few times

[92] Merridale, *Ivans War,* 166.

Hitler found it necessary to assemble the parliament, their meetings were held at the Kroll Opera House. However, the Reichstag's central location in Berlin, and its historical value possibly made Stalin choose the building as symbolic main objective for the Berlin operation.[93] Raising a red flag (any piece of red cloth would suffice) at the Reichstag building soon became an obsession for many commanders and soldiers – each willing to sacrifice their men and themselves in order to have their names and units connected with the capture of it.

On the 30th of April the assault on the Reichstag was launched. German resistance stiffened and fanatic soldiers held out in the basement of the building. However, surpassing pockets of resistance, various Red Army assault groups managed to reach the roof and plant banners. Although many soldiers would later claim to be the first 'flag hoisters' on top of the Reichstag, only the banner planted by Meliton Kantaria, Mikhail Yegorov and Alexei Berest survived the heavy fighting.[94] On the 2nd of May, the banner was to be relocated to the Reichstag cupola – or rather, its skeleton, since little remained after the heavy fighting and the 1933 fire. From there, 'all of Berlin' could see the red banner – the symbol of victory.[95] May the 2nd was a rather busy day at the Reichstag. The building was now fully controlled by Soviet forces and soon many photographers and other soldier-tourists rushed towards the scene. Although many reporters made (staged) photographs, it was to be Yevgeny Khaldei's famous picture which would go down in history.[96]

Khaldei himself carried a red flag with hammer and sickle on it with him, since he wished to have the ultimate Soviet depiction of victory – very much comparable with the 'Raising of the Flag on Iwo Jima' photograph taken by Paul Rosenthal, which symbolised the Allied victories in the Pacific theatre of operations. Neither the Kantaria-Yegorov-Berest banner, nor the – by then – various other flags were chosen for the depiction, for most of them were makeshift banners made out of table cloth, bed linen or curtains. Khaldei's picture had it all: star, hammer and sickle, dramatic background (which he himself contributed to due to photo manipulation) and brave soldiers. The photo was published (after some manipulation, since one of the soldiers present carried quite some trophy-watches on his arm) and is still recognised as one of the most famous World War Two pictures. But what of the 'Victory Banner'? Was it Khaldei's flag, which he photographed, or was it the one placed by the

[93] Beevor, 210.
[94] 'Unknown facts of the history of the Victory Banner', Voice of Russia, 5.5. 2009, archived at: https://www.webcitation.org/68CoV7ORJ?url=http://rus.ruvr.ru/2009/05/05/959299.html. Seen at 23.4. 2019.
[95] 'Truth about the Victory Banner', Russkij Globus no. 5, May 2008. https://www.webcitation.org/68CoV7ORJ?url=http://rus.ruvr.ru/2009/05/05/959299.html. Seen at 23.4.2019.
[96] Ernst Volland, *Das Banner des Sieges* (Berlin 2008) 11.

assault group led by Berest? Since the assault group flag was the only one, placed on the 30th of April to survive the hostilities until the surrender of the Berlin garrison on the 2nd of May, it would become the one to be sent to Moscow as a precious relic. The name of the division and superior formations were later added to the banner, just as the star and hammer and sickle in the top-left corner. By doing this, the soldiers of the '150th Rifle, Order of Kutuzov 2nd Class, Idritskaya Division of the 79th Rifle Corps of the 3rd Shock Army, part of the First Belorussian Front' were able to secure their place in history.[97]

As Tumarkin points out, the location where this banner is currently held (the Central Museum of the Armed Forces in Moscow) could indeed be described as 'holy of holies' to the many hundreds of thousands who would visit the shrine of said banner. This banner would play a central role in the future Victory Day parades in Moscow. At first, the original piece was carried during the Soviet era, later followed by a replica which is still in use to this day.

Meliton Kantaria (left) and Mikhail Yegorov (right) holding the banner they planted on top of the Reichstag cupola. The inscription, bearing the name of the 150th Rifle Division, was only added after the flag was removed from the cupola. [98]

As one of the best known and most extravagant manifestations within the Soviet Union and the future Russian Federation, the state holiday of Victory Day has an interesting history. As seen in the previous paragraphs, the date of the 9th of May originates from the moment the German High Command signed their instrument of unconditional surrender on the 8th of that

[97] Nina Tumarkin, *The Living & the Dead*, 137.
[98] Waralbum, 'Младший сержант М.В. Кантария и сержант М.А. Егоров со Знаменем Победы'. http://waralbum.ru/371128/, seen on 9.1.2020.

month – by which time it was already the 9th in Moscow. Celebrations in the capital were accompanied by victory salutes, fireworks, feasts in the streets, distribution of medals and so on. On the 24th of June 1945 a grand parade was held on Red Square – which would be the foundation for future parades. However, the jubilant spirit did not remain, as Stalin preferred to see himself as the main victor of the Great Patriotic War.

From 1947 till 1965 Victory Day as a holiday did not exist – more emphasis was put on holidays like the 1st of May (Labour Day) and the 7th of November (anniversary of the October Revolution). It was during the rule of Leonid Brezhnev that Victory Day regained its glorious status, this time even made more glorious by annual parades, commemorative medals and mass rallies as a manifestation of self-congratulation to the Soviet state and Communist Party.[99] 1965 marked the first year of renewed state-interest in the Great Patriotic War. It was marked by a parade in which various veterans of the Berlin battle such as Kantaria and Yegorov, raisers of the Victory Banner, participated. Brezhnev's interest in reviving the World War Two cult can be explained in various ways, in which two explanations seem prevailing. First, Brezhnev – himself a veteran of the Great Patriotic War – sought to boost his own image by praising the heroes of the war he himself also took part in. Second, the war could be explained as a new, dramatic scenery which would appeal to the younger generation of USSR inhabitants, since the battlefields and veterans were all around them, thus giving a new and more dynamic story than the stories of the Revolution and Civil War, which they had doubtlessly heard many times before.[100]

In other words, the Soviet people needed to be reminded of their glorious, useful past, using both material and immaterial *lieux de mémoire*. The shadows of giant monuments, such as the one constructed in Volgograd (Stalingrad) in the 1960s, were to drop upon spectators in order to inspire them to future heroic deeds. All these attempts at Soviet state-building could be seen as an answer to the economic and ideologic stagnation which often seems to characterise the Brezhnev era.[101] However, as much as the 9th of May was a state-holiday, it was also very much a people's holiday. For many Soviets, it was the only day which truly united all Soviet people in their mourning and joys – for the entire nation withstood the Germans and fought them all the way back to Berlin.[102] For the first time in many years, veterans started gathering in parks and in front of prominent places – either as a display of

[99] Tumarkin, 35.
[100] Ibidem, 132.
[101] Figes, 373,
[102] Tumarkin, 147.

their past merit or as a way to contact old comrades-in-arms. Although the reinvention of the war cult worked rather well for the state – displaying the heritage of a communist state defeating capitalism in the form of fascism – many veterans appreciated the renewed interest in their stories and suffering from the 'heroic' years of 1941 till 1945.[103] From here on – basically starting in 1965 – we can recognise a duality in the state orchestrated holiday of the 9th of May. This top-down approach to organising the commemoration the Great Patriotic War adheres to Halbwachs' ideas about the formulation of collective memory. However, although the state merely excelled in self-congratulations and stressed the heroic role of the Communist Party and its members, a broad majority of the Soviet people cherished the memory of loved ones who perished in the war while others among them felt that the Soviet system indeed proved its worth by destroying the savagery of national socialism. Here, it seems that besides the official collective memory desired by the CPSU, a form of personal memory and way of commemorating was able to co-exist.

Another form of official commemoration took a more material shape. Soldiers who fought during the Berlin Strategic Offensive Operation were all awarded the 'Medal for the capture of Berlin', as ordered on the 9th of June 1945 by the Presidium of the High Soviet.[104] Over a million soldiers would receive this decoration – it would be their token of participation, a reminder of their role in the final destruction of fascism in Europe. The rather simple medal – compared with the medals for defensive operations – bore the words 'For the capture of Berlin' on its front and read '2nd of May 1945' on its back: the day the Berlin garrison surrendered. In historical depictions and in modern fiction, the Red Army is often portrayed as an army which threw around medals for all soldiers and officers to wear. People often imagine 'war heroes' such as Brezhnev being photographed with a shiny chest or contemporary North Korean generals, who in good communist fashion sport a big collection of awards on their uniforms. Although such images are mostly exaggerations of reality, the Soviet soldier often wore more medals and orders, compared to his German and American counterparts. The American 'Our Red Army Ally'-guide from April 1945 also includes a recognition guide for U.S. soldiers meeting Red Army soldiers where ample attention is given to the fact that Soviet soldiers wore medals on their combat uniforms, while U.S. soldiers only did so on their ceremonial dress.[105] The Soviet award system indeed did not hold back on the

[103] Tumarkin, 134.
[104] 'Online Library of the USSR'. Orders of the 9th of June 1945 by the Presidium of the High Soviet of the USSR describing the various new medals concerning the capture of enemy cities, such as Königsberg, Vienna and Berlin. http://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_4542.htm, seen on 30-4-2019.
[105] 'Our Red Army Ally', pamphlet No.21-30 by the War Department (Washington 1945), 5 and 25.

distribution of medals, orders or gratitude certificates. Yet Catherine Merridale clarifies this: while the Red Army did not permit its soldiers to go on furlough or any other kind of reward which would remove soldiers from the frontline, it did intensify the distribution of medals as sign of the state's gratitude.[106] Soldiers obviously took pride in the wearing of their medals and the Berlin medal no doubt added to the proud collection of a soldier or officer. Although said medal was merely a token of presence during the campaign – as being present in or around Berlin in April-May 1945 was enough to be a recipient – a medal of this kind served its purpose: after the war, fellow soldiers could identify and relate to soldiers who had fought in the same battles as they did.[107]

Further, Red Army soldiers did not receive additional payment or honours for their partaking in the Berlin battle – they did their duty like millions of other Soviet soldiers fighting on various fronts. Those who ended the European conflict near the Brandenburger Gate or the Reichstag would forever regard themselves as the 'takers of Berlin', showing evidence of their presence by wearing the Berlin-medal, showing pictures at home or having their name written down with graffiti on various landmarks in Berlin, such as the Siegessäule and Reichstag.[108] To further historify the events of April and May 1945, a documentary film by director Yuli Raizman was released in September 1945.[109] The documentary was created by using combat footage of the Red Army operations in 1945 but also used documentary material from German sources in order to shape perspective: in various scenes we first see imagery of SA-men marching the streets of Berlin as a very intimidating force. The Soviet troops appear to be the sole instruments in destroying these ghosts from the past. The soundtrack to the documentary film by Dmitry Shostakovich gives the film an even more jubilant and glorious setting.

But apart from the aforementioned graffiti on famous Berlin structures such as the Reichstag and Siegessäule, the area around these would see the rise of an even greater Soviet-addition to its public place. While graffiti could only be seen by those with a keen eye or at least knowledge of the Russian language, the series of monuments would leave little to the imagination of the beholder. While the ruins of Berlin were still smouldering, the commanders of the First Belorussian Front deemed it a necessity to construct grand

[106] Merridale, 141.
[107] Brandon Michael Schechter, *Government Issue: The Material Culture of the Red Army 1941-1945* (Berkeley 2015) 60.
[108] 'Berlin woman revives Red Army ghosts in Reichstag graffiti' by The Times of Israel, 12.1.2018. https://www.timesofisrael.com/berlin-woman-revives-red-army-ghosts-in-reichstag-graffiti/, seen on 30-4-2019.
[109] 'Berlin 1945' on the website of the Central Museum of Documentary films. https://csdfmuseum.ru/films/26-%D0%91%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD, seen on 30-4-2019.

monuments in the centre of Berlin. One of the realised projects, the monument in Tiergarten, along the Charlottenburger Chaussee, was placed on a very special location.[110] The symbolism of said location is not too hard to grasp: the monument has the Reichstag, the Brandenburger Gate, the Siegessäule and the former Reich Chancellery as its close-by neighbours.[111] This monument, with a bronze casted Soviet soldier on top of it was to symbolise the Soviet victory against the German occupiers – a memory which would endure many centuries, especially when the memorial-structures were placed within the city centre. Already in May 1945, the order was given for the construction of various memorial sites.

Even though, according to Nora, *lieux de mémoire* do not have to be physical entities[112], the Soviet leadership wasted no time in transforming sites in Berlin that had particular significance in the Battle of Berlin into permanent, physical reminders of the struggle and feats of the Soviet soldiers. The first of these would be at Tiergarten, Seelow (to be discussed later on) and Küstrin. The memorial site at Tiergarten – like most Soviet monuments – would include the graves of a great number of fallen soldiers. In this case, about 2500 soldiers lie buried besides or below the marble or granite structures of the monument. Notably, nine of the graves belong to Heroes of the Soviet Union, posthumous wearers of the state's highest decoration.[113]

Although the location itself had great allegorical value, the fact that it was placed within the British Zone of Occupation complicated various matters. Since the Cold War did not set off exactly after the victory of May 1945 and fraternal emotions still played an important role in the meetings between East and West (like the phrase 'Spirit of the Elbe' signified), it was possible for the Soviet authorities to obtain permission for the construction of the Tiergarten monument, some 300 meters into British occupation-territory.[114] The British appeared to have been very understanding of the fact that Soviet casualties during the entire war did not permit the Red Army administration to repatriate all casualties back to the home territories of the Soviet Union and therefore needed to bury their heroes in the soil of their former enemy. This was opposed to the idea which the main Western allies held: no soldier was to be buried in former enemy territory – which is demonstrated by large American cemeteries at for example Margraten (the Netherlands) and Luxembourg, both near the

[110] After the 1953 People's Uprising in East Berlin, the West Berlin government renamed the Charlottenburger Chaussee to 'Straße des 17. Juni' to commemorate the victims of the failed uprising.
[111] Helga Köpstein, Die sowjetische Ehrenmale in Berlin (Berlin 2006) 11.
[112] Green, *Cultural History*, 102
[113] Ibidem, 42.
[114] Ibidem, 19.

German border. The Tiergarten monument was not completed until the early days of November 1945 – this might have to do with another assignment that the two head sculptors (Lev Kerbel and Vladimir Zigal) also had to complete: the monument at Seelow. However, on the 11th of November the monument was dedicated, a festivity accompanied by a parade and various speeches. A German newspaper reported on the occasion that the 'Heroes of the Red Army' would not be forgotten and that those who perished did so in the interest of human happiness.[115]

The warpath of the First Belorussian Front, headed by Marshall of the Soviet Union Georgi Zhukov, was to have two additional monuments. It was obvious Zhukov tried to immortalise his own Front-campaign in opposition to the exploits of his military rival Ivan Konev (First Ukrainian Front) – as if being called 'Marshal of Victory' was not glorious enough. The monuments of Küstrin (modern-day Kostrzyn nad Odra) and Seelow were both significant locations for the last months of the European war: it was at Küstrin that Zhukov's forces established a bridgehead in the months leading up to the Berlin offensive. More closely connected to the battle of Berlin itself were the Seelow Heights, a strip of natural elevation named after the nearby village. On this ridge, with hills up to 70 meters, Zhukovs forces met fierce resistance from German defenders for about four days in April.[116] Although over 35.000 Soviet and Polish soldiers perished while attacking and breaking through the German defences at the Seelow Heights, only 198 were buried at the newly constructed memorial site. The Oderbruch area (roughly between the Oder-river and the Seelow Heights) still keeps the graves of many thousands of soldiers, either in mass graves, unmarked graves or smaller cemeteries.

However, since the Seelow Heights were a place of slaughter (not least because of Zhukov's desire for a fast breakthrough), the place became a location of martial glory. The earlier mentioned sculptors Kerbel and Zigal were commissioned for the main sculpture: a battle-ready looking Soviet soldier, resting one hand on his submachinegun while the other leans on a broken German tank turret. Located on a pedestal, the bronze soldier mournfully looks eastwards: he beholds the Oderbruch valley, where so many of his comrades perished. The monument was inaugurated on the 27th of November 1945, just sixteen days after the inauguration of the Tiergarten complex. Years later, when the monuments authority passed over to authorities of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a museum was created below the memorial complex. In addition, German language texts were added to the base of the

[115] Köpstein, 49.
[116] Beevor, 229.

pedestal which lauded the Soviet soldiers for their heroic struggle and deaths. In the 1970s, the monument was the location of frequent oath-taking ceremonies as held by the NVA, the army of the GDR.[117]

However, no monument in liberated or conquered Europe would be as elaborate as the Soviet memorial complex at Treptower Park, just south-east of the Berlin city centre.[118] The main alley stretches over 300 meters in length and over 80 meters in width.[119] Entering the park today, it is still a humbling visit which tries to tell the Soviet war-narrative to its visitors. To access the site, the visitor enters through an arch – by which the visitor is reminded of the Red Army's glory and the heroic struggle of the Soviet people against Fascism, both in the Russian and in the German language. Soon after that, one will encounter a two and a half meter high statue of a mourning 'Mother-Motherland'. This is followed by two enormous half-lowered Soviet flags, forming the beginning of the alley which leads to the main sculpture, standing atop a *kurgan*, an artificial hill. After passing two solemnly kneeling bronze statues (sculpted after Soviet soldiers), one oversees the sheer size of the main complex: three football-fields easily fit within its dimensions. Five big squares of grassland lead up to the main *kurgan*, with each containing the remains of around a thousand Soviet soldiers. These grave-fields are flanked by a total of sixteen sarcophagi, eight on each side.

Whereas Soviet monuments in other countries were often to remind the liberated or occupied people whom they owed their lives to, the complex in Treptow did attempt to soothe the possible German wounds. Apart from the obvious jubilant and heroism the sculptures and effigies displayed, the texts on the sarcophagi are written in both German and Russian. It was to be made clear that the German people were also among the liberated, freed from the Nazi yoke.[120] The effigies on these sarcophagi tell the entire Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War: from the treacherous attack on the 22nd of June 1941 by the Germans, to the heroic defence of cities such as Leningrad and Stalingrad. Ample attention is given to the factory workers in the rear, constantly fuelling the Soviet war machine by their efforts. Also the Soviet partisans are praised for their struggle against the Nazi occupants on one of the effigies, while the other sarcophagi bear the images of scenes of liberation by the Red Army and the subsequent mourning of casualties. The main statue, a Soviet soldier on top of a

[117] David McCormack, *The Berlin 1945 Battlefield Guide Part 1: The battle of the Oder-Neisse* (Stroud 2017) 86.
[118] Paul Stangl, "The Soviet War Memorial in Treptow, Berlin" in *Geographical Review*, 93, No.2 (2003), 213-236, there 220.
[119] Köpstein, 140.
[120] Stangl, 222.

broken swastika, is the obvious focal point of this memorial complex. The soldier holds a small child on one arm, symbolically saved from the Nazi terror, while his other hand wields a sword, its tip pointing at the broken swastika. One of the earlier designs for this monument included a *Reichskriegsfahne* (the war-flag of the Reich) and a German eagle at the feet of the soldier. However, this design was rejected for it would equal the German people with the defeat of Nazism, which was not exactly the message the Soviet leadership wished to convey.[121]

The main kurgan of the Treptow memorial complex, featuring the 'Soldier-Liberator' statue. [122]

The Treptow monument, designed by architect Yakov Belopolski and sculptor Yevgeny Vuchetich (the latter would also sculpt the famous 'Let us beat swords into plowshares' statue in 1957, which stands in front of the United Nations building in New York) displays the same atmosphere as a cathedral – with a long central pathway, every step building up towards an main-altar, which in this case hosted the main statue of the 'Soldier-Liberator'. Below this altarpiece is a shrine, with extensive mosaic-works and a location for ceremonial wreaths. The official date for the complex' dedication was set for the 7th of November 1948, but various deadlines (including those on the mosaics) were not met. It would be the fourth anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, the 8th May 1949, which would see the dedication of the Soviet

[121] Köpstein, 150.
[122] Artwork2.com, 'Евгений Викторович Вучетич. Советская скульптура. Часть 2'. http://artwork2.com/content/evgenii-viktorovich-vuchetich-sovetskaya-skulptura-chast-2,seen on 9.1.2020.

monument at Treptower Park. We will see later how this monument and its iconic statue would become one of the main symbols of the post-war Soviet war cult.

The fourth of the relevant Berlin-monuments in and around Berlin is located in the north of the city. Located in the area of Schönholzer Heide, the Soviet cemetery there hosts the biggest number of graves: over 13.000 Soviet casualties of the battle of Berlin lie there.[123] Like in Treptow, the visitor has to enter the main complex through an opening between two decorated walls (whereas in Treptow these are Soviet flags, Schönholz has two walls with the insignia of the various Red Army combat arms). In this opening, the visitor is requested in both German and Russian to uncover his head, since those who lie here fell for the peaceful future of the visitor.

Compared with the Soviet monuments at Tiergarten and Treptow, Schönholzer Heide is rather modest in form. Where Tiergarten displays tanks and a huge bronze soldier near the Reichstag building, the Schönholz complex is mainly a place of mourning. While Treptow has a 'Soldier-Liberator' as main sculpture, Schönholz is marked by a simple obelisk (although it is 33.5 meters in height). Other sculptures and effigies display scenes of mourning: heroic soldiers falling in battle, soldiers kneeling and a 'Mother-Motherland'-figure standing behind the remains of a fallen soldier. This memorial complex kept much of its nature as cemetery: here, no great signs of everlasting-victory or spectacular broken swastikas can be seen. This quiet corner of Berlin is perhaps the ideal location for a memorial, dedicated to the solemn memory of those who fell. While Tiergarten and Treptow both were famous for their various parades, speeches, symbolism and iconography, Schönholz's number of burials, all in mass graves (or 'brother-graves' as they are known in Russian), are perhaps the best instruments of remembrance: many young lives were lost, just before or soon after the long desired victory was achieved. Those who fell in battle often were buried in brother-graves, containing any number between two to two hundred casualties. As Red Army casualties increased throughout the battle of Berlin, more and more of such communal graves were created – the north of Berlin was no exception.[124]

In 1946 it was decided to concentrate the various Soviet burial sites into one central location. The Schönholz location was deemed ideal and soon an architecture and design-group led by K. Solovyov, W. Korolyev and M. Belavenchev went to work. Sculptor Ivan Pershudchev was commissioned for the main sculptures and effigies.[125] What is remarkable

[123] Köpstein, 177.
[124] Ibidem, 173.
[125] Ibidem, 176.

about the cemetery is the fact that so many names of fallen soldiers are recorded and inscribed on the marble walls around the main courtyard. It seems as if the architects really wished to honour the Red Army soldiers who fell by mentioning their names, rank and days of birth and death.

This is quite remarkable, considering the fact that the Red Army casualty registration system was one of the least efficient of all major armies in World War Two.[126] The reburial process, from the smaller brother-graves to the massive memorial complex at Schönholz, happened in phases, but in 1948 almost 10.000 remains were relocated to the new site. After almost three years of burial, some burials consisted of little more than skull fragments or various bones – making identification an extremely difficult task. During the war, this often would have been done by reading – if filled in – the text in the identification tube or by searching for personal letters, booklets or inscriptions in metal objects such as canteens or spoons. However, many of those reburied at Schönholz and other locations did not have such personal items on them, so – if not already listed or mentioned on the other graves – many of them were buried without their names of the surrounding walls. The Soviet monument at Schönholz was ready in 1949 and dedicated on the 32nd anniversary of the October Revolution, the 7th of November 1949. Apparently no photographs or other descriptions of this occasion remain.[127]

The combination of cemetery and monument, as we have seen, was a prevailing concept within the Soviet cult of war remembrance. As Nina Tumarkin points out, those heroes (disregarding the fact whether they were identified or not) also served their country in death.[128] These memory-locations would often turn into locations for solemn rituals: parades, commemorations or military oaths. Since these places were considered sacred, rituals often added to the almost spiritual experience of being an individual, standing in the shadow of heroes or even following them in their footsteps. For example, as mentioned earlier, new NVA soldiers had to swear allegiance to their state and internationalist cause on the location of the Seelow Heights battle of 1945.

The last location of memory concerning Berlin is again to be found outside of the city

[126] The Red Army lacked the efficient 'dog tags' their German and American counterparts had. Only a small wooden or bakelite tube was issued, where soldiers had to insert a small piece of paper with their personal information. Often this practise was ignored, or those burying the soldiers had no time for any registration at all. In this case, one should consider the enormous amount of chaos and casualties which confronted the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War, making 'paperwork' such as this an impossible job – much to the pain and uncertainty of the home front.
[127] Köpstein, 198.
[128] Tumarkin, 128.

centre. The post-war authorities did not have a hand in the location of this monument and museum, since it happened to be the original location of the German unconditional surrender on the 8th of May, 1945. This museum is an interesting variation from the previous memorial-complex examples, for its changing narrative throughout the years tells us a lot about the development of war remembrance and commemoration. During the German military build-up of the 1930s, new barracks and military institutes were built all over the country. The *Wehrmacht* was in need of a new military engineer (*Pioniere*) training and education facility, and the east-Berlin neighbourhood of Karlshorst was chosen to house it. The (future iconic) grey, square-built building was to house the officers mess-hall, where the leadership of the educational institute were to eat their dinner and where they could amuse themselves with card games in the evenings.[129]

However, by 1945, the card games surely must have ended as everything was attempted to halt the Soviet advance on Berlin. On the 21st of April 1945, the Soviet 5th Shock Army led by General Nikolai Berzarin reached the German capital and as was now customary in the Red Army, Berzarin was to become the future 'Commander of the Berlin Garrison', a kind of military city major. It was this former *Wehrmacht* mess-hall which was to become his headquarters. As it was one of the few undamaged areas in Berlin, the building was chosen to become the location of the Act of Military Surrender.[130] After the signing of this act – as described in the first chapter – the building served as headquarters to Berzarin as 'Commander of the Berlin Garrison' and Zhukov, as first supreme head of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SVAG). One would expect this building to rapidly become a shrine to the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, but the functionality of it 'spared' it from this fate.

However, in 1967 (the year of the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution) a decision was made to transform a part of the building into a museum. In the late 1960s , the Soviet Union was reinventing much of its Great Patriotic War history under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev – who mostly sought to link his own wartime activities by raising impressive memorial complexes, like the one in Volgograd.[131] Besides the raising of monuments and museums as part of Brezhnev's personality campaign, it can also be seen in the light of Nora's theory on *lieux de mémoire*. Nora mentions the necessity of a disruption

[129] Peter Jahn, "Gemeinsam an den Schrecken erinnern: Das deutsch-russische Museum Berlin-Karlshorst" in Hinz, H.M., (ed.), *Der Krieg und seine Museen* (Frankfurt am Main 1997), 11-27, there 11.
[130] Babette Quinkert, *The German Surrender in May 1945* (Berlin 2010) 14.
[131] Adrianne Nolan, *"Shitting Medals", L. I. Brezhnev, the Great Patriotic War, and the failure of the Personality Cult, 1965 – 1982* (Chapel Hill 2008) 17.

with the past to have taken place in order for these monuments and museums to gain commemorative importance[132]. The adjustments made to the building in Berlin-Karlshorst were comparable to monuments and museums throughout Soviet-controlled areas: a T-34/85 tank, mounted on a pedestal accompanied by the words 'The heroic deeds of the Soviet soldiers who fought against fascism will live forever in the hearts of present and future generations', followed by an open-air exhibition of Soviet military hardware.

The development of the 'Museum of the Unconditional Surrender of Fascist Germany in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945' was mostly a military affair: the Soviet Armed Forced commissioned the paintings, interior designs and exhibitions. It must have been a rather interesting cooperation between two powerful state organs, since the building was also still in use as one of the Berlin KGB headquarters.[133] The museum's main function was to provide a formative experience to its visitors: mostly Soviet Army soldiers. This formative experience was to instil gratitude and admiration for the past generation, who fought and lived during the Great Patriotic War. This ties in with a quote by Nora on the importance of *lieux de mémoire* as permanent reminders of times past "The less memory is experienced from the inside, the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs"[134]. As some rooms were left 'as they were' (for example, Zhukov's office while being supreme head of SVAG), others were altered by adding marble memorial-constructions to it.

The best example of this may be the 'Surrender Room', where one of the walls is completely covered with the names of various army formations of the Red Army which took part in the conquest of Berlin. Apart from the – I expect rather obvious – exhibitions containing maps, uniforms and weapons, the 1967 opening also saw the instalment of a diorama, depicting the storming of the Reichstag. This piece of art was created by the Grekov-studio in Moscow, which is still renowned for its production of military-inspired artwork.[135] To those familiar with the art produced by the Grekov-studio, the diorama is a true immersive moment during a visit to Karlshorst. The visitor sees smoke rising from the heavily damaged Reichstag building, impressive tanks and even more impressive and heroic Soviet soldiers urging each other on to move forward. As is the case with most Grekov-projects, in the

[132] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" in *Representations*, 26 (1989) p. 13.
[133] Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, *Catalogue of the Permanent Exhibition* (Berlin 2014) 184.
[134] Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" , p. 13.
[135] The 'Studio of Military Artists named after M.B. Grekov' was founded in 1934 and does still produce military-inspired at work at this moment. The studio's most famed works are the dioramas installed in the Victory Museum on Poklonnaya Hill, Moscow which depict six key battles of the Great Patriotic War. Also famous is the 'Destruction of Fascist forces near Stalingrad'-panorama (opened 1982), located in the Stalingrad Battle Museum in Volgograd.

background one hears the thundering of guns and the shouting of soldiers coming from loudspeakers. To add to the experience, the space between the visitor and the artwork is filled with war debris: shattered ammo crates, dust, barbed wire and broken guns. The modern-day visitor – just like the Soviet soldiers who first saw this diorama when they visited the 'Surrender Museum' – is still supposed to feel the excitement of the last moments of the Great Patriotic War.

An analysis of the 'Museum of the Unconditional Surrender of Fascist Germany in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945' would be incomplete if we did not consider the amount of visitors it attracts, as well as the metamorphosis the museum underwent in the last years. Between 1967 and 1987 the museum welcomed 1.850.000 visitors.[136] This average number of 92.500 visitors per year is rather significant, considering the rather exclusive nature of visiting, as well as the remote location of the site – which still is a problem for the museum. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the museum could no longer be the heroic shrine devoted to the men and women who made the Act of Unconditional Surrender of Nazi Germany a fact. In 1991, a bilateral partnership-agreement between the Russian Federation and (by then unified) Germany was signed, which secured cooperation on the museum front.[137] In 1994 another partnership was agreed upon by creating a common museum society. Both parties agreed on the much needed restructuring and reorganisation of the museum: Germany would provide financial means, while the Russian Federation would remain responsible for the exhibitions and objects.[138] The 'new' museum was opened in 1995 and was a clear sign of how two former enemies could cooperate to create a museum in which the suffering of *both* countries was shown, as well as the uniqueness of the Eastern Front: much emphasis is nowadays placed upon the theme 'War of annihilation against the Soviet Union 1941-1945'.

The result of the cooperation between Germany and Russia is an example of exhibition-making done well. The Soviet narrative does not hold its central role anymore, although this might not be obvious straight away because of the complete focus on the Eastern Front. Most notable is the absence of a cheerful narrative: an important difference, compared to the earlier jubilant Soviet narrative. This is a conscious choice, as the Museum's Science Advisory Board explains in the foreword to the permanent exhibition catalogue: "A museum

[136] Dirk Verheyen, *United City, Divided Memories? Cold War Legacies in Contemporary Berlin* (Lanham 2010) 103.
[137] Peter Jahn, "Gemeinsam an den Schrecken erinnern", 14.
[138] Deutsch-Russisches Museum, *Catalogue*, 9.

designed as a Red Army hall of fame was to become an antiwar museum, a museum that promotes peace at the location of a surrender."[139] The museum tries to offer many different points of view on the horrors of war from the perspective of perpetrators, victors and victims alike.[140] Although the ground floor still exhibits elements of the Soviet-run museum, it does so in a rather modest way. Here the museum-historian or cultural-historian can grasp a sense of the museum *that was*: one still enters through the Sovietesque 'Glory to the Great Victory'-arch and the table where Marshal Zhukov was seated is still in place. Upstairs the exhibition is mostly led by a chronologic and thematic storyline, very often supported by videos or audio-material which reflect on personal stories from the Great Patriotic War and the subsequent conquest of Berlin. This exhibition gives a splendid overview of the events and lets perpetrators and victims 'speak' through the various forms of media. A rather painful and interesting detail lays in the letters, documents and stories concerning Soviet war crimes against civilians, most notably the sexual violence perpetrated against German women. One could not have imagined such information to have been on display some forty years ago, when openly discussing Soviet war crimes against the 'liberated' peoples was unthinkable.

In this chapter we have seen the post-war development of a specific element of the Soviet war cult "from a national trauma of monumental proportions into a sacrosanct cluster of heroic exploits that had once and for all proven the superiority of communism over capitalism" as stated by Tumarkin.[141] With the battle of Berlin as a centrepiece of the Great Patriotic War-altar the Soviet leadership envisioned, thanks were given to both (deceased) fighters and the Communist Party. Be it through museums, memorial complexes or medals, the final battle in the struggle against fascism became one of the key-elements in the foundation myth of the USSR through the establishment of various *lieux de mémoire*, both tangible and intangible. Grown in battle – as the 1944 Soviet anthem states – the Red Army destroyed the enemy and secured Soviet dominance over large parts of Europe, thus becoming one of the two remaining world powers. To its citizens it seemed the Soviet system proved effective – and this perhaps for the first time since the Revolution and the following Civil War. This foundation myth, the struggle between opposing ideologies and the immense scale of the Soviet war effort would – as we have seen – echo for many generations. The echo rings well into the twenty-first century, as we will examine the role of the battle of Berlin in contemporary Russia.

[139] Deutsch-Russisches Museum, *Catalogue*, 9.
[140] Ibidem, 12.
[141] Tumarkin, 133.

The Reichstag diorama created by the Grekov-studio, now in the permanent exhibition in the Karlshorst museum. The visual element (the painting and objects in front of it) are paired with audio fragments to recreate the atmosphere of battle. [142]

[142] Wat te doen in Berlijn? 'Museum Karlshorst – de laatste capitulatie'. https://wattedoeninberlijn.nl/museum-karlshorst/, seen on 9.1.2020.

Chapter 3: Modern-day Reichstag stormers.

The Battle of Berlin in the Russian Federation's nationalism.

On Sunday, the 23rd of April 2017, dark clouds of dust were once again rising over the Reichstag building.[143] Yet this time it was not the impact of artillery shells which gave rise to such fountains of black earth, but a well-choreographed show of pyrotechnics, summoned from the safety of a computer installation. This time, the Reichstag building was located at *Park Patriot* – a relatively new military/amusement park near Moscow. On that 23rd of April, many of the park's name-givers were attracted to the area of the park which hosted 'military historical reconstructions' – the first one held on that day. Hours before the first guns were fired and over a thousand re-enactors started to 'relive' the final struggle in mini-Berlin, a scale model of the Reichstag was unveiled. Plans for the construction of the mock-up German parliament building were presented in the early weeks of 2017 and instantly sparked a flabbergasted response from Germany. Spokeswoman for the German government Ulrike Demmer merely responded by saying: 'The idea is a surprising and speaks for itself'.[144] Yet this did not stop the Russian Minister of Defence Shoigu and the Chief-of-Staff Gerasimov from attending the open air play, in which numerous tanks and planes also took part.

Scale model of the Reichstag as located in Park Patriot near Moscow. Shown here in the situation of 2017. [145]

[143] 'Reichstag stormed as Battle of Berlin re-enacted near Moscow', video by RussiaToday's Ruptly-service, 23.4.2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bCkr8t1q18, seen 21.5.2019.
[144] 'Russian Plans for mini-Reichstag disconcert Berlin' by Die Presse, 24.2.2017. https://diepresse.com/home/ausland/aussenpolitik/5174865/Russische-Plaene-fuer-MiniReichstag-befremden-Berlin, seen 21.5.2019.
[145] Odinchovo, 'В Германии надеются, что Минобороны РФ разберёт Рейхстаг'. https://odintsovo.info/news/?id=57789, seen on 9.1.2020.

Obviously, the 'Nazi' soldiers did not stand a chance and were soon vanquished. Seventy-two years after the actual battle of Berlin, the steps of the mini-Reichstag were filled with cheering 'Soviet' soldiers. Various red banners and flags were flown on the structure, symbolizing the Red Army's ultimate victory. One of the re-enactors explained the educational purpose of such mock-battle: 'Like this, the youngsters learn how to appreciate their homeland and the sacrifice of their grandparents.'[146] When considering the response of German officials, the man merely said that as *Park Patriot* is Russian territory, they (Russians) could do whatever they wanted. A spokesperson for the park described the use of such re-enactments: they would be no fun, but horrific, in order to show the true nature of war.[147] As a re-enactor of many years myself, I know this aspiration to be noble: of course one wishes to accurately show battles, soldiers' life and marching. But one can – thankfully! – never grasp the true-sense of horror and trauma soldiers had to endure. And that is exactly where the *Park Patriot* spokesperson is incorrect: such shows are entertaining, spectacular and interesting, but show in no way any horrors or violence as present during the 1945 Berlin battle. However, after the mock-battle, the public was allowed to write their names on banners and posters, just like the Soviet soldiers who left their messages on the real Reichstag. Not all the visitors engaged in cheering for victory: young girls merely drew hearts on the banners – as girls thankfully still do.

The presidency of Vladimir Putin saw a revival of the Great Patriotic War-cult. While it is difficult to examine the exact influence of state-organised celebrations and commemorations, recent polls show that 76 percent of the Russian population celebrates Victory Day (May 9th) as a holiday.[148] This was the highest number since 1995. What has happened between these years? More relevant for our topic: in what light is the battle of Berlin currently shown, in a Russia which seems to excel in self-admiration for the deeds of their (great)grandfathers?

The main question to be answered in this chapter is: How is the battle of Berlin used to shape national identity in the present-day Russian Federation? For Central and Eastern European countries, the Second World War nowadays is an immense source of national pride

[146] 'Where the Reichstag is stormed on a daily basis' by T-Online.de, 23.4.2017. https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/id_80965294/patrioten-park-in-russland-wo-taeglich-der-reichstag-erstuermt-wird.html, seen 21.5.2019.
[147] Ibidem.
[148] Levada-Centre, autonomous non-profit organisation for analytics. Survey on the celebration of Victory Day. Results as of 5.5.2017. http://www.levada.ru/2017/05/05/deklaratsii-o-dohodah-chinovnikov/, seen on 13.5.2019.

and patriotic material: a 'useable past', according to Igor Torbakov.[149] Whereas most countries of the former communist bloc see their entire twentieth century as a martyrology, perhaps even as a competition in suffering (in which for example, Poland and Ukraine aspire to top the bill), the Russian Federation surveys its most violent past as a heroic-era, where heroes were many and monuments grow bigger and bigger. One of these new sites of heroism is located on the battlefield of Rhzev.[150] Yet this all might seem strange to the average person from the 'west', where public attitude towards history is often either more sober or completely lacking in knowledge. As we have seen in the previous chapter, commemorations concerning the Berlin battle alone already attracted thousands of people, while books for children were published and medals from those who took part in said battle were cherished. It should be stressed that the sheer number of casualties of the Great Patriotic War left such an enormous demographic and psychological imprint, that the Soviet Union and its successor-state, the Russian Federation, were left with a desire and need for mass-commemoration.

However, just as the Great Patriotic War would turn into the 'foundation myth' of the Soviet Union and create a popular base of political legitimacy, for Russia – apart from a solemn desire for remembrance – it still serves multiple purposes.[151] One of these purposes echoes the exact motives the Soviet Union had in the enshrinement of the Second World War. The sheer interest of the political elite in retaining their power plays a key part in the reasoning of state orchestrated war cults, as summarised by Thomas Sherlock in his book on historical narratives in the USSR and Russian Federation:

> "The attempt by authoritarian and particularly totalitarian regimes to strictly regulate the public sphere reflects their need to control political discourse and generate uncontested myths. Modern nondemocratic regimes rely on historical myths more than their democratic counterparts because they face greater challenges in retaining power and securing public support. Nondemocratic regimes continuously violate a wide range of political and socioeconomic interests and therefore propagate myth in order to foster compliance to regime policies."[152]

[149] Igor Torbakov, "History, Memory and National Identity: Understanding the Politics of History and Memory Wars in Post-Soviet Lands" *Demokratizatsiya*, 23, No. 4, (2011) 209-232, there 215.
[150] A fine example would be the monument to Soviet soldiers who fell during the bloody battles near Rzhev. 'Project No.001001: Rhzev Monument for Soviet Soldiers in the Tver' Oblast'. https://rzhev.histrf.ru/, seen on 13.5.2019.
[151] Figes, *Revolutionary Russia*, 321
[152] Thomas Sherlock, *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia: Destroying the Settled Past, Creating an Uncertain Future* (New York 2007) 10.

The leaders of the Putin-era (Putin and Medvedev) indeed generate 'uncontested myths'. Unlike the questions which were asked during the Gorbachev-era, nowadays the Russian government seems to dictate or at least guide the country's views on the Great Patriotic War. A good example of this is the fact that Putin decreed the writing of a 'fundamental historical work' concerning the history of the Great Patriotic War. An army of over two hundred multidisciplinary scientists and writers worked to get the twelve volume operation done before the 9th of May 2015 – which succeeded. Conveniently, the entire project is digitised and available on the website of the Russian Defence Ministry.[153] A work of this scale, decreed by the Russian government indeed seems like a way to capture the 'agreed upon' findings of many historians and other scientists in a massive handbook on the history of the most important event in recent Russian history. Here, an official state-sponsored view of the collective memory of the Great Patriotic War becomes obviously apparent. Halbwachs' theory on the formation of a collective memory as an alleged top-down motion finds itself enshrined in twelve volumes of Kremlin-approved history writing.

A key-thought in contemporary (government encouraged) Russian thinking is the idea of Russia and Russians being especially distinguished from the rest of the world – not in the last place because of the ancestral role in the destruction of Nazi Germany. The problem in this case might perhaps be the statistical truth in the words as spoken by president Putin during the May 9 parade in 2005, after mentioning the gigantic scale of the Second World War:

> "But the most ruthless and decisive events — the events that determined the drama and the outcome of this inhuman war — unfolded on the territory of the Soviet Union. The Nazis counted on rapid enslavement of our people. Their intention was to destroy our country."[154]

Of this notion, there can be – as mentioned earlier – no doubt. Yet it is this perception which seems to give Russia a certain amount of 'righteousness' or 'power' in domestic and international affairs – according to itself. Very evidently, Putin's May 9 speech in 2012 left very little doubt on their own stance in international affairs:

[153] Website of the Russian Ministry of Defence, 'Fundamental multivolume work "The Great Patriotic War 1941-1945"', http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/books/vov.htm, seen 5.12.2019.
[154] Website of the Kremlin, 'Speech at the Military Parade in Honour of the 60th Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War', http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22959, seen 5.12.2019.

> "Russia is consistent in its policy of strengthening security in the world. We have a great moral right in taking this principled and firm stand, because it was our country that bore the brunt of the Nazi attack, met it with heroic resistance, traversed immense hardships, determined the war's outcome, routed the enemy and liberated the world's peoples."[155]

According to Putin, Russia has a 'great moral right' in its policies around the globe, because Russia (read: the Soviet-Union) destroyed most of the German armed forces during the Second World War. Although it would be interesting to see how this reflects on current political crises with – for example – Ukraine and the United States, this is not the place. However, we have now seen how the Russian government itself set the boundaries of scientific and political discourse by outlining the history of the Great Patriotic War.
Nina Tumarkin's excellent book on the development of the war cult in the USSR was published in 1994 and therefore is not able to take its readers into the modern way of celebrating and remembering the Great Patriotic War. The book's final chapters concentrate on the *glasnost* years, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The story leaves the reader with thoughts on the breaking-down of the war cult, triggered by the revelations of enormous casualty numbers during the struggle and newly shed light upon the Soviet state's crimes before, during and after the war. An interest in the war years seemed to have broken down in those years, with more and more people proving to be weary of the same old heroic tales.

How enormously different the Russian remembrance-landscape is now! Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev the entire system of war cult seems to have been reinvented and mixed up with earlier ceremonial traditions, such as an involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church. It has transformed into the sacred remembrance of men and women who fought and died for a state which leadership had demolished churches in the 1920s and 1930s. While the survivors of the Great Patriotic War are slowly fading away, the risk of the past being evermore distant and absent from collective memory clearly activated the Kremlin in its wishes to preserve a glorious and heroic picture of the war. One of these efforts is the 'Immortal Regiment' (*Bessmertniy Polk)* action which annually takes place on the 9th of May. Descendants of war veterans – basically everybody in Russia – carry the pictures of their (deceased) ancestors through the streets of countless cities throughout the

[155] Website of the Kremlin, 'Speech at the military parade marking the 67th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War', http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15271, seen 5.12.2019.

Russian Federation. Among its most prominent participants, Vladimir Putin with a portrait of his father. This new manifestation started out as a regional initiative, but since 2015 has been heavily promoted by the authorities as a new state ritual and has even been promoted internationally.[156] This shows how a more individual form of commemoration has been successfully transformed into a new collective commemoration.

The introduction of this chapter has shown a curious way of remembering the war's end in modern-day Russia: the *Park Patriot* collection of buildings, exhibition halls and terrains for historical reconstructions. But let us first try to make sense of two elements which we have seen already in the Soviet period: monuments and museums.

After the Brezhnev surge in World War Two dedicated monument-building which continued well into the 1980s, a major setback can be noticed during the *glasnost*-era. However, Putin's Russia is becoming rather famous for its big monumental projects. As already mentioned earlier in this chapter, a battlefield which has received far less attention than others – Rzhev – has recently become the site of a massive Sovietesque monument. The search for a national identity is often combined with new statues, as if the results of nationhood can only be made immortal with bronze and granite. A recent, well-known example is the new statue dedicated to Vladimir the Great (c. 958 – 1015) who is known as the Kievan prince who ordered the conversion of his state from paganism to Christianity. The statue is located next to the walls of the Moscow Kremlin.[157] Since Moscow has considered itself the Third Rome for many years already, this statue fits in splendidly: by having such a giant statue of a figure who is part of Russia and Ukraine's common history, it is Russia who asserts itself as the dominant and rightful heir of the medieval Kievan empire. Although a statue such as the one dedicated to Vladimir the Great can give an important international signal, various war-related monuments often seem to have been produced for the domestic 'market'.

Much further away from the Kremlin one can find the *Park Pobedy*-complex on Poklonnaya Hill. Later in this chapter we will discuss the museum located there, but more interesting concerning the construction of statues and other monuments is the park which is located behind the museum. In Soviet times, not much was to be found at Poklonnaya Hill. As early as the 1950s, plans were made to turn the hill into a memorial complex 'dedicated to the

[156] Radio Free Europe reporting on the developments concerning Immortal Regiment manifestation. https://www.rferl.org/amp/russia-immortal-regiment-grassroots-to-quasi-religious-cult/28482905.html, seen 11.7.2020.
[157] Website of the Kremlin, English version. Photo's showing the opening of a new monument dedicated to Vladimir the Great. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53211/photos, seen 14.11.2019.

victory of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War'.[158]

Nothing came of it. Small monuments could be seen, but the park underwent a more dramatic development in the post-Soviet years. It would take until 1995 before the main museum was opened – alongside a series of religious buildings (an Orthodox church, mosque and synagogue, in that order) which were opened in the 1990's – rather unthinkable in the Soviet era. A park this size – roughly three square kilometres – simply needed a whole array of various monuments dedicated to the memory of those who fought and perished during the war. Since its dedication on 9th of May 1995, the Victory Monument is the highest monument in Russia (141,8 m.), outmatching the 'Motherland Calls!' (85 m.) statue in Volgograd and the 'Monument to the Conquerors of Space' (107 m.) in Moscow. Its rather simple design – an obelisk, such as many that can be found as war monument in Russia and other former states of the USSR – is upgraded with rather impressive bas-reliefs depicting elements of the Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany.[159] The whole installation is crowned by the Greek goddess Nika, proclaiming the Victory. Almost mandatory and certainly well-rooted in post-Soviet Russian symbolism is the statue of Saint George slaying the dragon in front of the obelisk – symbolising the defeat of fascism but also simply because it is the Moscow city seal.

The rest of the park can be seen as an open-air exhibition space for military hardware, alongside many monuments created between 1991 and the present day. An interested visitor should bring along comfortable footwear in order to see the monuments dedicated to 'The Defenders of Russia' (1995, showing 'warriors' from Russia's medieval, Napoleonic and World War Two history), 'Warrior-Internationalists' (2004, dedicated to those who fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet campaigns there), 'The Allied Countries of the Anti-Hitler Coalition' (2005, depicting the main allies of the USSR during World War Two) and 'Front-Dogs' (2013).[160]

However, more closely connected to the memory of those who fought in Berlin is the monument 'In The Struggle Against Fascism We Stood Together' (2010). This monument deserves our special attention for its connection to the battle of Berlin – its main figures being the flag-raisers Kantaria and Yegorov – but also for its political significance. Russia's relationship with its neighbours is often problematic, to say the least, but when Georgian

[158] Tumarkin, 215.
[159] Apart from its obvious reference to monuments from Antiquity, the obelisk in Soviet tradition also resembles the shape of a Mosin-Nagant rifle bayonet, without doubt one of the main weapons used by Soviet soldiers.
[160] The Red Army deployed over 60.000 dogs during the Great Patriotic War. Dogs were used as messengers, sledge-dogs or walking anti-tank mine. The dog depicted on this monument rests its paws on a piece of tank-track, symbolising the effort of dogs in destroying enemy tanks.

president Mikheil Saakashvili ordered the destruction of a war monument in Kutaisi, the *history wars* were heating up.[161] Russian authorities were alarmed by the alleged Georgian attempts to erase the common history of the two countries – for many Georgians (roughly 700.000) fought in the Red Army during the war years. More tragically, two people died during the demolition on December the 19th, 2009, as they were protesting the removal of the monument. President Putin, alongside members of the Georgian community in Russia, was eager to propose the creation of a Kutaisi-like monument in Moscow.[162]

The current monument (revealed on the 19th of December 2010, one year after the demolition of the monument in Georgia) in Moscow indeed has a slight note of the Kutaisi monument – the silhouette of the demolished monument figures as background for the new monument. The rest – and most obvious elements – of the monument bears little resemblance with its deceased Kutaisi-counterpart. The true eye-catchers of the assembly are two soldiers hoisting a Soviet flag on top of broken Nazi-symbols like an eagle. Looking closely, one can see the soldiers standing on top of a kind of dome-structure, without doubt symbolising the Reichstag dome on which Meliton Kantaria and Mikhail Yegorov raised the red banner. Perhaps the usage of these two figures tried to convey the Kremlin's message of the shared history of Russia and Georgia, for it was Kantaria who was born in Georgia while Yegorov was a Russian. On the left side of the sculpture we can see a bas-relief depicting Soviet soldiers in Berlin, underneath the silhouette of the Reichstag with the hoisted flag.

The jubilant soldiers on the base are obviously cheering to the news of the recently gained victory. The right side has another relief showing the ceremonial fruits of victory with the 1945 victory parade. The most symbolic moment of that parade is portrayed here: Soviet soldiers carrying Nazi-banners, pointing the banners' top to the ground on their way to deposit these trophies below the walls of the Lenin-Mausoleum.[163] In the background – marked by the Kutaisi silhouette – one can find more modest examples of monuments to the Soviet struggle against the German invaders abroad. Monuments in Kiev, Almaty and Minsk are shown, once more symbolising the common struggle these countries had to endure in the war years.

[161] Radio Free Europe reporting on the destruction of a monument in the city of Kutaisi in 2009. https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian_President_Blasted_Over_Monuments_Demolition/1910056.html, seen 14.11.19.
[162] RIA Novosti news agency, 'Moscow authorities will reveal the 'Monument of Glory'-analogy on the 19th of December' https://ria.ru/20101110/294641988.html, seen 14.11.19.
[163] 'Into Moscow, your guide to Moscow', webpage showing various pictures of the monument in the Victory Park. http://www.intomoscow.ru/albom_pamyatnik-v-borbe-protiv-phashizma-my-byli-vmeste.html, seen 14.11.19.

Monument 'In the struggle against fascism, we stood together', Park Pobedy, Moscow. In the background of the flag raisers we can see the silhouette of the demolished Kutaisi monument.[164]

To make the message more obvious, a sentence and the name of the monument is inscribed above it all: 'In the struggle against fascism, we stood together.' So here, a new *lieu de mémoire* has been created on a site that did not previously have ties with what is currently being commemorated. On one hand it commemorates the Soviet feats during the Great Patriotic War, but on the other hand it is also a reminder of current political tensions between the Russian Federation and its neighbour Georgia, reminding the latter of common goals and glory shared in the past. This can be seen as an example of what Nora has called 'exterior scaffolding' – an obvious outward expression of memory – in the absence of the collective Soviet memory which existed during the Soviet era.[165]

[164] Imena, 'ПАМЯТНИК «В БОРЬБЕ ПРОТИВ ФАШИЗМА МЫ БЫЛИ ВМЕСТЕ»' https://imena.onf.ru/placements/moskva/pamyatnik-v-borbe-protiv-fashizma-my-byli-vmeste, seen on 9.1.2020.
[165] Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" , p. 13.

In September 2014 the shadows of Berlin were once again to figure and function on the streets of Moscow. Two monuments, each measuring 11 metres in length and 9 metres in height were revealed by Minister of Defence Shoigu during a solemn ceremony. The two sculptures – flanking the entrance of the main Ministry of Defence building on the Frunzenskaya Embankment – each depict Russia's military glory of the past century.[166] The composition on the left seeks to glorify the Russian Imperial Army of the First World War (which indeed seems a great task itself given the fact that the Russian Imperial Army lacked great victories during said conflict). Depicted are various soldiers struggling, supported by a priest holding a cross. To bolster the successes of the soldiers, the last emperor Nicolas II is present on horseback. A description of this First World War composition seems out of place in our search for the legacy of the Berlin battle, were it not that these two statue-groups form an interesting 21st century Kremlin-envisioned lesson in history. The sculptures on the right of the building's entry depict Red Army soldiers during some of the most famed episodes of the Great Patriotic War: the counterattack at Moscow in 1941, the taking of Berlin in 1945 and the Victory Parade of the same year.

Interestingly, the statue on the other side seems a mirror: where Nicolas II is the main figure on horseback on the left side composition, it is Marshal Zhukov who rides a horse on the right hand side – thus being artistically equal to the last 'czar'. However, it is again the most symbolic episode of the battle of Berlin which prevails above all other war episodes of the previous century: Kantaria and Yegorov raising a flag above a cupola-shaped pedestal. The taking of the Reichstag an thus the symbolic end of the Great Patriotic War is again shaped in bronze, ready to be seen by all those who pass or enter the building of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

[166] Website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Pictures of the opening of the two sculpture compositions by Shoigu. https://xn--80ahclcogc6ci4h.xn--90anlfbebar6i.xn--p1ai/multimedia/photo/gallery.htm?id=19649@cmsPhotoGallery, seen 26.11.19.

During the opening ceremony, Minister of Defence Shoigu praised and thanked the artists of the Grekov-studio for military art, an institute which we have already encountered in the previous chapter. Shoigu continued by saying:

> "Of course they [the artists] have done everything possible to keep the memory of our fathers and grandfathers alive. The memory to those who have laid down their lives in the name of freedom and independence of our country. I am most certain that these beautiful installations will inspire a new generation towards new feats [*podvigov*] in the name of the well-being of our country. And of course they will be an enduring remembrance to what previous generations have done for the good of our country."[167]

The statue in front of the Russian Ministry of Defence, celebrating Soviet military triumph during the Great Patriotic War.[168]

Yet it is the combination of the two world wars which is most striking. While the World War One installation lauds the soldiers of the Russian Imperial Army, the installation on the left hand side is dedicated to Soviet soldiers – soldiers of a state which wished to be done with

[167] Rustur, magazine for domestic and international tourism. Two new monuments dedicated to war heroes revealed in Moscow. http://rustur.ru/dva-novyx-pamyatnika-geroyam-vojny-otkrylis-v-moskve-na-frunzenskoj-naberezhnoj, seen 26.11.19.
[168] Installation in front of the main Ministry of Defence building on the Frunzenskaya Embankment. Collection author.

Czarist memory and tyranny. Although matching features can be found between the two armies and the states which they fought for, the current display of the two together is an odd one. The aforementioned monument dedicated to 'The Defenders of Russia' – which is still located in Park Pobedy – lacks a World War One-figure. Perhaps the memory of the First World War was all too vague in 1995 when the monument was revealed and therefore, it has only been a recent phenomenon to include Russian Imperial Army soldiers in the state propagated pantheon of heroic Russian warriors. This resurrection of World War One memory would need a whole series of separate studies.

However, we can easily notice the theme of patriotism which flows from a series of actions taken by Putin to enshrine Great War memory into the Russian hearts.[169] Although many monuments (of which various are in Moscow) have been revealed and covered with flowers, the installations at the Ministry of Defence building leave an uneasy gap: the Russian Civil War. For it was that war which raged from roughly 1918 till 1922 that set the soldiers of the first installation (the Russian Empire) against those of the second (Soviet rule). Although this is an oversimplification (for the 'White' side of the Russian Civil War included more than mere monarchists), the Kremlin-message should be clear: in times of war, it is the unity of the Russian people which makes the Mother- or Fatherland strong. When this unity falls apart, the memory of the Russian Civil War dooms upon the Russian beholder. And it is exactly the memory of the Bolshevik coup of 1917 and the subsequent fall and destruction of monarchism, democracy and Russian nationalism which are to be forgotten in Putin's Russia.[170]

The introduction of this chapter illustrated perhaps one of the more grotesque moments in post-Soviet war remembrance. *Park Patriot* – a name which barely requires translation – was opened on the 16th of June 2015 by Vladimir Putin. The park, which covers a rough 5400 acres, hosts a congress and exhibition centre, multiple museum buildings, a horse dressage arena, and various open-air exhibitions such as the 'Partisans Village' and a battle-arena for military historical reconstructions such as the event illustrated in the

[169] For example, in 2012 a law was signed to make the 1st of August a military holiday for it was the date on which the Russian Empire entered World War One.

[170] For example, the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg re-started the clock in the room where the Provisional Government was arrested during the Bolshevik coup of November the 7th, 1917. The clock present was stopped in 1917 for a historic moment had taken place. Hundred years later, the museum re-started the clock for they claimed the 'Revolution has been buried'. The Calvert Journal, publications concerning travel in the 'New East'. https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/9170/hermitage-re-starts-clocks-stopped-russian-revolution, seen 28.11.19.

introduction above. The park's website shows us Minister of Defence Shoigu and next to him a text explaining the goals of the park:

> "The Park received its name "Patriot" not by chance: here everything will be permeated with patriotism. On the territory of the Park we will assemble an aviation museum, a museum of armored vehicles, a museum of artillery, sports facilities, sports simulators, historical exhibitions, expositions of weapons and equipment samples. We will make a project that will allow young people not only to look at the exhibits, but also to drive and fly on military equipment simulators, shoot from combat weapons, jump with a parachute."[171]

Thus this 'military Disneyland' – as The Guardian dubbed it – has the clear intention of showcasing the military achievements of the Russian Federation and its predecessor-states.[172] Apart from the many displays of modern military hardware, the park exhibits focus on Russia's history as well. Once again, the achievements of Russian ancestors are to inspire and motivate Russian youth into working for or sympathising with the idea of a great Russian nation – in this case by joining the army or at least enjoying the exhibitions and the firing of AK-47's. As non-Russians, we might easily be compelled to issue our verdict to this display of macho culture and militarism. Especially in a time when the Russian Army frequently reaches international news – the opening of the park happened just one year after the start of the war in the Donbass and the annexation of Crimea – the glorification of military institutes might seem odd to, for example, Western Europeans.

In Russia and many other countries of the former Soviet sphere of influence, attempts at nation building often go hand-in-hand with military display: take for example Poland. In 2016, the Polish parliament agreed on creating a 'Territorial Defence Force' consisting mostly of part-time volunteers, which was obviously meant as an army reserve for the Polish Army. However, the Polish Defence Ministry said the Force was primarily founded in order to strengthen the Polish Army's 'patriotic and Christian foundations'.[173] And while the creation of military theme parks and the mass enrolment of the civil population into part-time military

[171] English website of *Park Patriot,* Information. https://en.patriotp.ru/about/, seen 13.12.2019.
[172] The Guardian, "Vladimir Putin opens Russian 'military Disneyland' Patriot Park." https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/vladimir-putin-opens-russian-military-disneyland-patriot-park, seen 13.12.2019.
[173] Newsweek Polska, "Minister of National Defence in the Sejm: Christian faith of Polish soldiers assures safety of Poland". https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/wojska-obrony-terytorialnej-sily-zbrojne-rp-mon-wojsko-armia/7mekcc2, seen 13.12.2019.

organisations (which also occurs in Russia) do seem alien to societies in which the army is almost one of the least prestigious government branches, we might as well remember that the United States of America do not confine the over-enthusiastic spread of American patriotism to their own fifty states. Take for example the countless Hollywood movies and series which greatly form the World War Two narrative from the American perspective, where it often seems like a single man or group can take on the entire German *Wehrmacht*. Another example of 'militainment' is the wide array of videogames which the US Army has developed in order recruit potential new soldiers into its ranks.[174] The point of these examples is not to address moral or social issues concerning the positive display of military operations or hardware through theme-parks or videogames. Yet it is to illustrate the enormous impact militaries wish to have on society. In Russia, such is the case without doubt, for all male citizens between 18 and 27 years old are to serve at least one year with the Russian Armed Forces. In a society so often confronted or entertained by its military, *Park Patriot* also displays the historical foundations of said institution. As mentioned above, Russia's president is of the opinion that historical feats translate into a modern-day mandate for international politics.

This chapter has aimed to provide an answer to the question: How is the battle of Berlin used to shape national identity in the present-day Russian Federation? Comparing the post-war development of the war cult with the post-Soviet commemorations and celebrations, some similarities can be seen. Victory Day remains one of the most important public holidays with a military parade as its centre piece. Monuments too remain pivotal to the collective memory of the Great Patriotic War, with new monuments being raised across the Russian Federation. In an obvious attempt to link these to the glorious Soviet past, these monuments are built in a neo-Soviet style, very much resembling those that were built in the post-war era.

However, apart from similarities we can see some striking differences. For instance, whereas during the Soviet era, monuments could be erected within the Soviet sphere of influence, this has now become more of an internal affair with construction projects being limited to the territory of the Russian Federation. The many monuments that have been raised in recent years signify that there has been an intensification of the war cult. The Great Patriotic War in the Russian Federation seeks to unify the Russian people under a shared glorious past – a past all can relate to thanks to the authentic sacrifice of their ancestors. This is a source of immense, immortal pride for those who did not experience the Great Patriotic War themselves. It gives them a tangible link to the Great Victory over Nazi Germany. This is

[174] The game 'America's Army' has over five main games and multiple updates. https://www.americasarmy.com/, seen 13.12.2019.

exemplified by the organisation of Immortal Regiment marches taking place on Victory Day. Whereas such an expression of pride would have been very much an internal affair in the Soviet Union, the Immortal Regiment marches have been exported to Russian expat communities around the world, becoming an international expression of Russian pride and suffering during the Great Patriotic War. More than in Soviet times, the Victory is truly a feat of the people – not of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, who first sought to claim this feat.

As an instrument of state, the legacy of the Soviet Union has passed unto the Russian Federation – with all its glorious and inglorious aspects. While wielding the sword of history, the Kremlin seeks to justify its national and international policies by focussing on the glorious aspects of this legacy. For example, the Russian Federation approaches disagreements with Georgia and Poland from a moral high ground, seeing itself as the obvious defender of the world against fascist ghosts from the past.

Perhaps the most obvious historical feat to take pride in and to refer to in international debates is the taking of Berlin. As we have seen, this final chapter of the Second World War in Europe means a whole lot more to the Russian war cult than just 'finishing' a war: it stands for unity, power and indirectly, it provides the Russian government a sort of license in international politics. In *Park Patriot*, history provides the spectators of military re-enactments a sense of pride and entertainment. The re-enactment arena (dubbed 'Reconstruction Zone' on the park's website) provides for many scenarios – including the battles of Moscow and Berlin – to be shown. Naturally, the site also attracts cinema productions for Russia's still growing war movie business. However, 'battles' which include the storming of a mock-up Reichstag (as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter) adequately show how alive Russian feelings about this major military event are. These recreations form intangible *lieux de mémoires*, which have become more important as the actual historical sites are no longer in the Soviet sphere of influence.

Where commemorations concerning the war's end in Europe often tend to focus on gratitude towards those who fought and unrelated festivities (for example, the Dutch often celebrate Liberation Day by attending concerts featuring pop-musicians), in Russia the 9th of May is an expression of sorrow and gratitude as well, but much more a show of power, unity and euphoria. By making the Russian public acquainted with its recent war history and victories, the Russian government assures itself of popular support and international mandate. This follows Halbwachs' theory on the formation of collective memory, as the memory of the Great Patriotic War is changing into a state-orchestrated collective memory due to less living

survivors of the war being able to share their individual memories. With the battle of Berlin as an exemplary case for the investigation of Russia's war cult, it is without doubt that this bloody battle still has relevance for the Russian public today. By either a sense of pride or sorrow – the former more promoted by the Kremlin – the populace identifies with the Soviet soldiers who fought and died in Berlin. Whether ones ancestor fought in Berlin, Lapland or Austria in 1945, all joy and pride comes together in the single military masterpiece of Berlin. The many monuments in Moscow alone promote the idea of a strong unity of the Russian people during the struggle with the German invaders – and thus guiding the national identity of Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although we could see the war cult and the place of Berlin within said cult as a mere tool of nationalist politics, we can also see how the solemn celebrations and military display satisfy a more subconscious need: for all Russians wish to see their deceased family members in the celebrated pantheon of heroes.

Conclusion

The Battle of Berlin has given individuals and government ample material for remembrance. This thesis sought to find out how – between 1945 and the present day – the single apocalyptic event of the battle for the German capital was and is remembered by answering the question: How did the public commemoration of the battle of Berlin develop and change over time from the immediate post-war period to the present day? In order to narrow down the results it was necessary to focus this analysis on the individual and state organised level. To support this, the theories on collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs and those on commemoration and *lieux de mémoires* by Pierre Nora have been used as a theoretical framework throughout this thesis. The perception of those who took part in the battle itself was examined in the first chapter and thus provided us with a context for the remembrance cult. Although not explicitly, the sometimes brutal, touching and cheerful testimonies form a sharp contrast with the following chapters. In the second and third chapter little remains of those personal stories – the heroism and glory of those who fought and bled were enshrined in master narratives which suited the state's agenda or were cast into iron and bronze.

The first chapter thus gives us a contrast – from personal memories towards states and organisations which recognised the Battle of Berlin as a *useful past*. The central question reflected on in this first chapter is: how did Red Army soldiers experience the battle of Berlin and its immediate aftermath? Soldiers and commanders who took Berlin could thoroughly enjoy their hard gained victory: they were awarded with medals and indeed proved themselves useful cogs in the machine of war – as Stalin phrased it. But instead of continuous thankfulness and perhaps more abstracts rewards in terms of for example freedom, were not in place. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union sought – in the words of Nina Tumarkin – a self-congratulatory path of remembrance. According to them, it was the Soviet Union and its leadership which had prevailed in the Great Patriotic War. The Party had inspired men and women to heroic deeds and it was Stalin's mastery of organisation which had proved essential in destroying the Hitlerite hordes. This shows that during the war and in the immediate aftermath, there was some room for individual memory. This was soon replaced by a state sanctioned collective memory, a process described by Halbwachs, who described the prevailing strength of a collective memory over an individual one. Although celebrations and parades were held to mark the victory in the immediate aftermath of the war, further room for remembrance within the Soviet Union itself was quickly removed from the public sphere, at least until 1965. In other countries however, which were in the Soviet sphere of influence,

monuments to the heroes were created on historically significant sites. This Soviet way of instilling thankfulness into the population of territories like Poland and Berlin can perfectly be analysed by the four main war memorials in and around Berlin: Seelow, Tiergarten, Treptow and Schönholz.

These solemn locations – as they all serve as cemeteries as well – became one of the focal points of the second chapter, which discusses the question: How did the commemoration of the battle of Berlin take shape and change from 1945 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Mass graves which contained the remains of Soviet soldiers who fought their way into Berlin were reorganised and relocated while large monuments were placed near the locations where the fighting had taken place. In this way, Nora's writing on *lieux des mémoire* can be well applied here, since these monuments were to play a large role in collective memory. Images of the main statue of the Treptow monument, the 'Soldier-Liberator', still echoes around the former Soviet realm. In 2019, a Siberian artist even managed to recreate its image on a grain of rice.[175] But apart from skilful artwork, monuments such as those in Berlin helped to shape the Soviet master narrative. Showing the victory in the Great Patriotic War as a great achievement – of which there is no doubt – the Soviet state gained legitimacy. This was also done by making the 9th of May a public holiday in 1965. This Victory Day serves as an intangible *lieu de mémoire*, linking both those who experienced the war themselves and those who were born after it with a glorious past.

The communist system, for which so many had already died and bled and which caused many to suffer throughout its early years, proved successful by destroying Nazi Germany. The Victory during the Great Patriotic War did not only have an impact on the Soviet Union itself but the Soviet people themselves realised the world had been rid from the horrors of fascism by the hands of themselves or, later, their ancestors.

It is this same belief which brought the course of this thesis into the third chapter. Russia, as *successor state* to the Soviet Union, also claims to be its successor in terms of history. This leads to the central question of the third chapter: How is the battle of Berlin used to shape national identity in the present-day Russian Federation? The leaders of the Putin-era defend Soviet monuments throughout Europe and often clash with leaders of – for example – Poland and Ukraine on the protected status of monuments. Thus, Russia portrays itself as main defender of monuments of the Soviet-era. The most interesting case was found in the demolished Kutaisi monument, Georgia. In order to express disapproval of the action by

[175] Telekanal Zvezda, 'Siberian portrayed the Soldier-Liberator on a rice grain'. https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201958632-NtNUr.html, seen on 10.2020.

Saakashvili, Putin ordered the construction of a new monument in Moscow, with the silhouette of the demolished monument in the background. This signifies a shift from being able to access and shape the actual memorial sites in the former Soviet sphere of influence to relying on new monuments in the Russian Federation itself. As we have seen, Russia's interest and glorification of the Battle of Berlin and of World War Two entirely rests on two foundations. On one side, the public has a need to sanctify and honour their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents as heroes who fought in defence of the Soviet Union during its greatest trial. Celebrations therefore fulfil an individual and collective need. This is also exemplified by the emergence of the Immortal Regiment marches, both in Russia and internationally. On the other hand, the master narrative of the Great Patriotic War which finds its origins in the Soviet era, is a useful tool for modern-day politics as used by the administrations of Putin and Medvedev. With Berlin as prime example of the Russian sacrifice in the struggle against fascism, the Kremlin claims it wields a sword of historical righteousness. The sacrifice of many men and women during the Great Patriotic War nowadays seems like a tool to claim a 'moral right' in international politics.

This could be seen as an abuse of history, as the feats of those who fought and died during the Battle of the Berlin are now being used as arguments in international disagreements rather than being commemorated. The same can be said for the Disneyfication of the horrors of the Great Patriotic War in for instance Park Patriot, which focusses solely on the glory of battle and leaves little room for a more critical look at the Battle of Berlin. Moreover, with the declining number of living survivors of the war, their individual memories are being substituted by a collective memory largely governed by the state.

As touched upon in the introduction, the existing historiography on the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War is limited and does not take in account recent developments in the Russian Federation. This thesis, in particular chapter 3, hopefully serves as an addition to the works of Tumarkin and Jahn. It shows that under the present leadership of Vladimir Putin the war cult has solidified a place in modern Russian society. For further studies I propose more research on the expression of the Great Patriotic War in Russian nationalism. Although ample information and cases seem available, the book has not yet been closed. With more monuments, museums and movies in the making it would be interesting to see the future development. In my opinion, it is impossible to understand modern-day nationalism in Russia without being aware of the enormous cultural, political, economic and military legacy of the Great Patriotic War.

However, with the possibility of more books and articles on the subject of Russian nationalism piling up, I would like to point the reader towards the primary sources used (mostly) in the first chapter. For it was due to the sacrifice of many and due to the eye-witness accounts left by men like Evgeny Bessonov, Vassili Subbotin and Nikolai Safonov that we know of the heroism, sheer folly and barbarism that was displayed during the war. Whichever use modern governments have found in exploiting the past deeds of soldiers, it should not be forgotten that the road towards Berlin came at the price of over 9.000.000 Soviet soldiers.

The Battle of Berlin and its legacy are here to remain. With more monuments likely to be constructed in the future – with or without Berlin reference – and museums coping with nationalist challenges, the battle will continue to be a vehicle of both pride and discussion. But as mentioned in the introduction, the scars of the Berlin battle are perhaps more relevant and human when they are not enshrined in displays or bronze castings. In December 2019, the remains of a Soviet soldier were unearthed in the garden of a Potsdam resident.[176] Since it is expected that such discoveries will be made regularly for decades to come, the quote attributed to 18th century Russian generalissimo Aleksander Suvorov dawns upon us: "The war is over, only when the last soldier is buried."

[176] Telekanal Zvezda, 'Remains of a Soviet soldier found near the villa of a German TV-host'. https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/2019124153-EI76v.html, seen 4.12.2019.

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