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[The Hypocrisy of Victory Day](#)



Over seven decades on from the end of the Second World War, Russia's Victory Day commemorations are as large as they have ever been. There are parades across the country, "Immortal Regiment" marches, and public festivities. Speeches by the great and the good are full of fine words for those who fought and died in that war, speeches vowing that any veteran of that war will "never be forgotten."

Those speeches are shamefully misleading. The Russian state's actual treatment of its living veterans is neglectful at best, subjecting many who are now well into their eighties and nineties to Kafkaesque bureaucratic nightmares or poverty.

Historical facts of the war those veterans fought in are also neglected. For those seeking to investigate the historical truth behind what Russia commemorates every May 9th, it is becoming ever more difficult and unpopular to access source materials. Anyone who provides interpretations questioning the Russian state's historical narrative risks becoming a pariah. For example, a German researcher who discovered a discrepancy in data between Russian and German archives regarding casualty rates [was branded](#) an "extremist", and the minister of culture [labelled](#) people publicising previously unknown facts about the war as "inveterate scumbags".

All the while, public consciousness drifts further from facts and tangible evidence, and towards the spectacular illusions of grandeur provided by militarist ceremonies on Red Square and elsewhere.

A hypocrisy throughout society is taking its cue from the government's approach to commemoration — one where you can "honour and remember" while at the same time [forgetting](#) the historical context of that war; where you can put a "Thank You Grandfather for Victory" sticker on your car, but not give way to an elderly veteran in the street.

Veterans or Beggars?

At first, it seems absurd that people fail to connect remembrance with the war itself, or do not link their pledge to revere and respect veterans with the veterans they actually encounter. But in fact, such detachment from reality has been actively encouraged by the government: monuments are more politically useful as assets for Russia's present drive to restore its national self belief than as an entry point into independent historical exploration.

An attitude of "to each, their own" in today's Russia is also encouraged; a useful way of limiting and isolating civic-minded campaigners seeking social justice and therefore government reform. With an encouraged mindset of "to each, their own" alongside a reverence for a return to imperial greatness, it is unsurprising that some people are prepared to ignore a frail beggar who happened to have fought in a war a long time ago.

In May 2008, Dmitry Medvedev issued a presidential decree: all Great Patriotic War veterans requiring new accommodation should have received it by 2010. It might have seemed that this honourable concern would only require finances and builders. But the issue of supplying flats to war veterans is fraught with frenetic activity: veterans [appeal](#) to the prosecutor's office, which orders the municipal authorities to implement the

decree, then the prosecutors [apply](#) to the courts.

This vigorous bureaucratic bustle is not about funds, builders or respecting veterans – these are the symptoms of detachment-from-reality syndrome. It is about declaring how important veterans are, and how in touch and indispensable Russia's leaders are, by their noble vow to do something about it. By 2017, some war veterans are still [awaiting](#) accommodation. While they wait, some are living in [squalid conditions](#).

If one asks any of the thousands of officials involved in the bureaucratic whirlpool surrounding the accommodation decree about their attitude to veterans, they will doubtless reply give you a rehearsed, somber reply, one that expresses their most profound respect.

Actions do not follow these fond words. Certainly not when it comes to [allowances](#) for war veterans, their access [medicines](#), or even when it is a matter of [saving their lives](#). Those officials – self-declared patriotic Russians who tie St. George ribbons in the right places and are ready to wholeheartedly admire the deeds of Great Patriotic War soldiers – are, in reality, just creating headaches for these same old veterans almost every other day of the year except Victory Day. The obvious contradiction between words and deeds seems not to bother them, who are either aware of their cynicism, or locked in an illusory ideology that blinds them to their reality. In effect, they are treating their veterans like a distant relative's antiques: they dust them off and admire them once a year before putting them back in an undignified cupboard of squalor and bureaucracy.

Out with the Old, in with the New

There has been over seventy years to create symbols and monuments to the Second World War. In that time, there has been no shortage of these unveiled. But it is clearly not enough. This year alone, new memorials have been erected in [Kuban](#), [Chuvashia](#), [Oryol](#), [Novgorod](#), [Tula](#), [Ulyanovsk](#), [Pskov](#) and other regions.

However, this proliferation of new monuments is accompanied by a mass destruction and deterioration of older ones. This, in turn, has triggered a new wave of interdepartmental correspondence in government circles. A renovation of monuments in [Yaroslavl](#) region was only begun after the prosecutor's office intervened. Similar problems were reported in [Bryansk](#), [Chelyabinsk](#), [Lipetsk](#), [Smolensk](#) and [Nizhny Novgorod](#) regions, [Tatarstan](#) and [Karelia](#). In Tyumen region, a monument [was dismantled](#) following a decision by the head of a village.

In any case, memorials are often regarded simply as real estate to be bought and sold, and there is money to be made in the state commission of new monuments. The prosecutor's office sues municipalities, forcing them to accept ownership of monuments and register them as real estate. What is more, courts sometimes [side with the prosecutor's office](#), but occasionally [refuse to recognise](#) the right of ownership.

Once monuments become ordinary real estate, they are subject to the full relevant procedures. For example, they become saleable assets, should their owner go bankrupt. This is how the monument to those who fought in the Great Patriotic War from Ulyanovsk region was declared a socially important property, together with fire and gas-exchange stations. The municipality [took over](#) these bankrupted assets in 2009.

The same [happened](#) to the Monument of Glory dedicated to heroic feats on the battlefield and the labour exploits of Izhevsk engineers during the Great Patriotic War. The Izhevsk city administration spent a long time in court, however, insistently trying to get rid of this costly "real estate".

In another case from Yantuzovo village in Bashkortostan, there were three [attempts to sell](#) the monument to the Great Patriotic War soldiers together with a vegetable warehouse and a cowshed. Since nobody wanted to buy these properties, bankruptcy officers decided to hand the memorial over to the local authorities.

A monument to the fallen [was put on sale](#) in Ussuriysk. It got lost among other property of the Primorskaya Soya Company – somewhere between a settling tank for spent-soap lye and power distribution panel No.14. Four monuments were simultaneously [put on sale](#) in 2014 together with other property of the Znamya Agricultural Cooperative from Bashkortostan. Three of them were [estimated](#) to be worth at least 15,000 roubles each, and one at 340,600 roubles.

On May 2, 2017, the eve of Victory Day, one more property was [put on sale](#) – the monument to the fallen at the

entrance to Nenashevo village in Zaoksk district, Tula region. An unbiased property evaluator [wrote](#): “the monument is painted and made of brick, concrete and plaster around an armature. The property is in satisfactory condition, with some small cracks and chipped places”.

The memorial is on sale together with a statue of Kirov and two roads in one lot for 229,000 roubles. However, according to the evaluation, the monument to the fallen heroes of the Great Patriotic War is priced at just 25,000 roubles. Anyone who wants can buy it.

Thousands of people are engaged in this trade – representatives of monument-owners, bankruptcy officers, court officials, and numerous creditors who hope to retrieve debts by selling the memorials. It is hard to imagine that they have somehow managed to escape the strong propagandistic wave of patriotism and reverence for the Great Patriotic War. Many of them will probably take part in the May 9th demonstrations, genuinely rejoicing in another anniversary of Victory Day. Everyone connected to the monument trade will probably assert that preserving the memory of the War and Victory is the most important goal, but...

All these stories have a similar moral: ideology and reality are in two different dimensions in today’s Russia, with rhetoric and facts in obvious contradiction to one another. To tell the truth is to spoil a spectacle.

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