

DO RUSSIANS WANT WAR?

ANDREI KOLESNIKOV | JUNE 2016

War and terrorism have become increasingly routine facts of life in Russia. Since 2014, this reality has been an essential tool for stimulating popular support for Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The mechanics of how this support is cultivated and mobilized are now fundamental to the Kremlin's day-to-day agenda. At the same time, Moscow's new (and sometimes novel) approach to warfare, which runs through the conflicts in Georgia, Crimea, the Donbas region of southeastern Ukraine, Syria, and now Turkey, has become central to the future development of Russian domestic and foreign policy.

It is difficult to overstate the impact that war has on the mass consciousness of the Russian public.

The memory of the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War, continues to provide a powerful basis for national unity. Ideological differences aside, successive Soviet and Russian governments have sought to legitimize themselves through mythologized interpretations of the war. Themes that were developed during the Soviet era are being recycled in an entirely new context.

Peddling threats, external and internal, including the threat of war, to the Russian people is a key tool of the Putin regime's political strategy. At the same time, the Kremlin has embraced the so-called virtualization

of war. For a large majority of the Russian population, war is experienced solely through mass media. Meanwhile, the appeal of modern war is driven largely by the absence of significant losses on the Russian side, something that directly plays into the level of popular support for the government.

Russia's recent military operations in Crimea, the Donbas, and Syria, as well as the information and trade war with Turkey, serve as a form of symbolic compensation to the Russian populace for swelling economic hardships. However, public opinion data suggest that Russians continue to perceive these contemporary wars differently from earlier conflicts. Most Russians don't regard Russia's recent wars as real or big wars,

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on a par with earlier conflicts like Afghanistan. Likewise, because of its continued reliance on state media for information about Russia's military operations, the public's interpretation of war remains distorted.

The Kremlin's mythmaking regarding war relies on three key elements, some of which have clear antecedents in the Soviet-era discourse about war:

- Moscow's wars are just, defensive, triumphant, and preventive.
- Nearly all of Moscow's modern wars are linked, thematically or otherwise, to the Great Patriotic War. By blurring realities on the ground, government propaganda is able to portray any domestic opposition to war as inherently immoral.
- War is now part of a so-called marketplace of threats from which the Kremlin can choose on a whim, helping mobilize popular support for the regime.

Focus groups held at the Levada Center on December 21, 2015, confirmed all this.¹ And the focus groups, selected according to the professional rules of the only independent sociological organization in Russia, highlighted the fact that the public is unable on its own to readily grasp the logic behind Moscow's military moves; participants tended to simply regurgitate the Kremlin's propagandistic clichés. The Syria operation, for instance, is supported by the general public because it is a preventive war that will, as one of the participants in the focus groups said, "destroy terrorists in their hole."

The political class's continued grip on power depends on the Kremlin's ability to sustain current levels of political mobilization. That suggests that the permanent war against perceived enemies who are supposedly besieging Russia will

have to continue. But before the September 2016 Duma elections, the Kremlin is likely to focus primarily on wars against internal threats—namely, opposition activists and nongovernmental organizations that are not controlled by its political machinery. At the same time, the general public remains decidedly skittish about a real or big war, which highlights the intrinsic limits on the Kremlin's militarization and heavy-handed propaganda.

WAR IN THE SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

In 1961, Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote a particularly wonderful poem—"Do Russians Want War?"—that later became a smash hit for crooner Mark Bernes.² The poem's text was a handy encapsulation of the Communist Party's peace-loving policies. In Yevtushenko's telling, external circumstances—and the need to prevent larger wars—consistently provoked the Soviet Union into action. As the lyrics explained:

It is not only for our country
That soldiers fell in this war,
But so that all the people of the earth
Can sleep peacefully at night.
Just ask those who fought,
To those who kissed you on the Elbe.
We believe in that memory.
. . . The Russians, do they want war?³

The popular propaganda song "The March of the Soviet Tankmen" from 1939 echoed this defensive ideology perfectly ("We don't want a single bit of another's land, / But we won't give up any of ours").

This defensive logic undergirded much of Cold War-era nuclear policy. Moscow's nuclear arsenal stood as the last

line of defense preventing a catastrophic war between the USSR and the United States. As the irradiated physicist Dmitri Gusev explained in Mikhail Romm's *Nine Days in One Year*, one of the most popular Soviet films of the 1960s, "If we didn't make [the atomic bomb], we wouldn't be having this conversation, pops. About half of humanity wouldn't exist, either."⁴

As viewed through the prism of such ideology, all of the Soviet Union's wars in the pre-perestroika era were both preventive and defensive. This logic is being revived by the Putin regime. The Kremlin's current wars, after all, are being waged under a Soviet adage: "So long as there's no war." That is, the Kremlin's military actions have the explicit goal of preventing a big war among nation-states. Of course, Vladimir Lenin's and Joseph Stalin's concept of waging war for the sake of war's prevention remains inherently paradoxical—but for the Russian public, no such paradox exists.

To understand why, it's worth explaining the logic's origins under the Soviet regime. Lenin—referencing Friedrich Engels—wrote extensively on the topic of defensive wars and managed to construct a national theory of justifiable wars waged by the proletariat. As Nikolai Voznesensky, the onetime chairman of Gosplan, the state planning committee, wrote in 1947, "[On] numerous occasions Lenin and Stalin warned the socialist homeland of the inevitability of a historical battle between imperialism and socialism, and they prepared the people of the USSR for such a battle. Lenin and Stalin explained that wars waged by a working class that has defeated the bourgeoisie—and waged in the interests of the socialist homeland, and in the interests of the consolidation and development of socialism—are just and holy wars."⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, this rationale provided

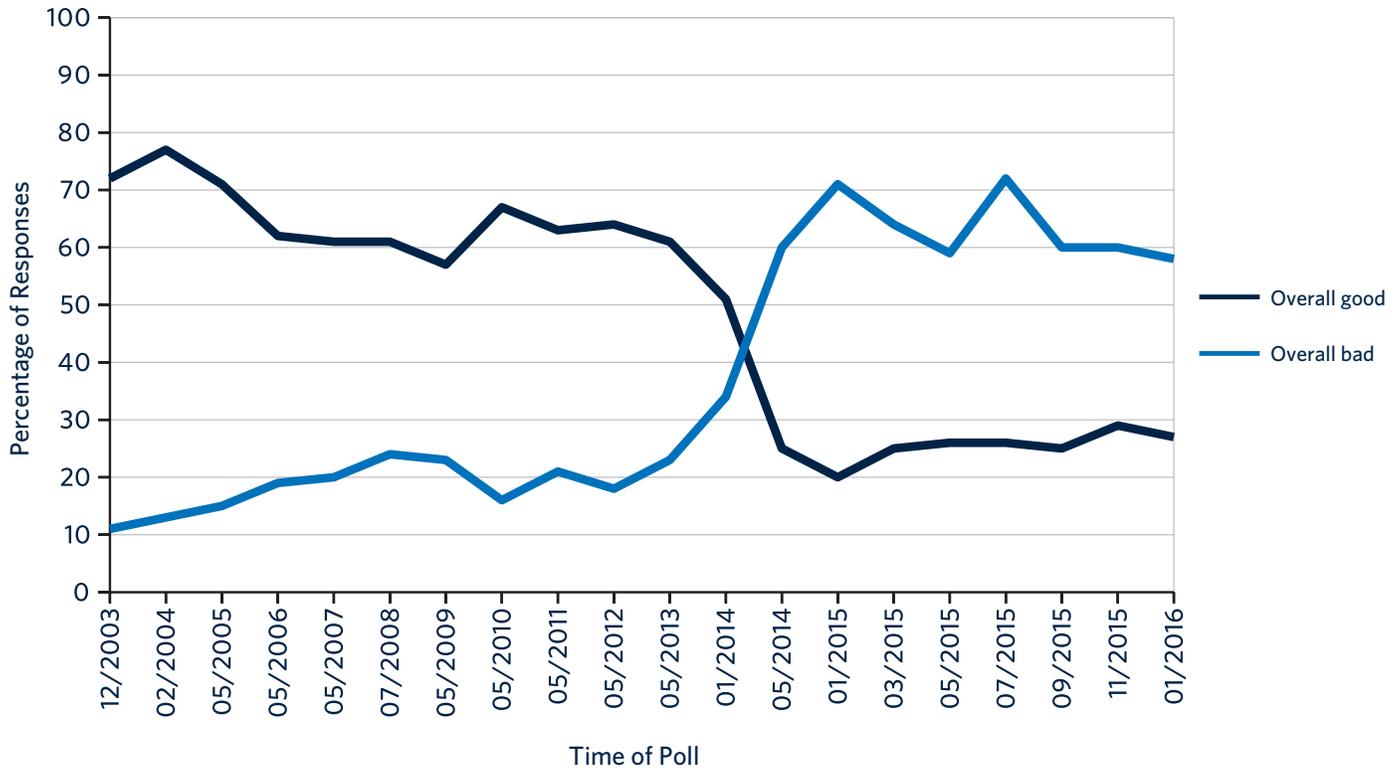
an additional layer of justification for Moscow's decision to back revolutions in Cuba and elsewhere.

Yet it was the Great Patriotic War that offered the Soviet regime an opportunity to apply this defensive logic theory on a grand scale and to graft it onto Moscow's eventual victory. And while Joseph Stalin later sought to distance military leaders from his regime, the memory of the victory eventually became the foundation for the Soviet Union's legitimacy during the Brezhnev era of stagnation, surpassing even Marxism-Leninism itself. Leonid Brezhnev leaned on the memory of the war because, as Peter Weill and Alexander Genis later noted, the victory stood as "a reference that can be used constantly. Unlike the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station and collective farms, the victory is difficult to interpret from different angles. It exists, and that's it. All other questions are secondary."⁶ Or, as Brezhnev said, "The main truth is that we won. All the other truths fade before it."⁷

Unsurprisingly, the Putin regime has consistently cited the Great Patriotic War in pursuit of its own legitimacy. Consider, for a moment, the enormous celebrations in 2015 for the seventieth anniversary of Moscow's victory. And since most Western leaders turned down the invitation to witness the festivities in person, the event became a kind of celebration of Russian isolationism, an endorsement of the Kremlin's shift away from integration with Europe.⁸

Of course, external Soviet military action continued in the years after the Great Patriotic War. Indeed, the war in Afghanistan (1979–1989) perhaps bears the closest resemblance to the Kremlin's current model—as well as to the outcome it is most keen to avoid. The Afghan war played an outsized role in the USSR's eventual collapse,

Figure 1. Russian Attitudes Toward the European Union, 2003–2016



Note: The data come from a survey of 1,600 urban and 800 rural Russian citizens over eighteen years old. The urban group had a 3.4 percent margin of error, and the rural group had a 4.1 percent margin of error.

Source: Levada Center, “Monitoring vospriyatiya drugikh stran. Rossiya i Zapad” [Monitoring other countries’ perceptions. Russia and the West], February 2, 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/04/monitoring-vospriyatiya-drugih-stran-rossiya-i-zapad>.

and it also exposed the inherent fallacies embodied in the Soviet regime’s defensive logic. As Yegor Gaidar wrote in *Collapse of an Empire*, “The decision to send troops into Afghanistan would cost the Soviet regime dearly up until the last years of its existence. Privates and officers killed in Afghanistan, their grieving families, the injured—all that against the background of the war, incomprehensible for Soviet society, was an important factor that undermined the fundamentals of the regime’s legitimacy. In addition, the war was costly.”⁹

The Afghan war was, without question, a traumatic event for the general public. However, the current whitewashing of Soviet history may be paying off. In public opinion polls by the Levada Center, the proportion of citizens who describe the Afghanistan intervention as a state crime has fallen from 69 percent in 1991 to 44 percent in 2014, and the share of Russians who view the war as a necessary move to protect the country’s geopolitical interests against the United States has inched up.¹⁰ And while a majority of Russians likened Moscow’s first wave of air strikes

in Syria to those in Afghanistan (78 percent of respondents didn't exclude the possibility that the new campaign could potentially turn into "a new Afghanistan"), that didn't prevent some 46 percent of Russians from voicing support for the authorization by the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament, to use troops abroad in connection with the Syria operation.¹¹

Levada Center sociologist Alexey Levinson has explained the apparent contradictions in the public's stance, specifically the juxtaposition between the general lack of support for foreign military intervention prior to the Syria campaign and the public's ability to fall in line quickly with the Kremlin's, and especially Putin's, policy pronouncements. In the past, a turnaround of that kind in public opinion would have taken upward of two months. Now, it can happen in less than a week.

The increased speed in the formation of public opinion is another important manifestation of Putin's remarkable popularity, according to Levinson. Putin's popularity outstrips that of all other Soviet and post-Soviet leaders and, conveniently enough, is a by-product of his leadership during Russia's military campaigns.¹²

SELLING THE WAR

During Russia's immediate post-Soviet period, traditional war and militarization appeared to take a backseat, even as new forms of war emerged in Chechnya. Of course, the Kremlin's second Chechen campaign (1999–2009) under Putin—specifically, the use of overwhelming force—served as one of the foundations of Putin's popular appeal, and war has bolstered the legitimacy of his regime from the very beginning. Deadly terrorist attacks (the mysterious apartment explosions in Moscow in 1999, the hostage crisis at the Dubrovka Theater in 2002, and the Beslan school siege in 2004) helped cement support for the Putin

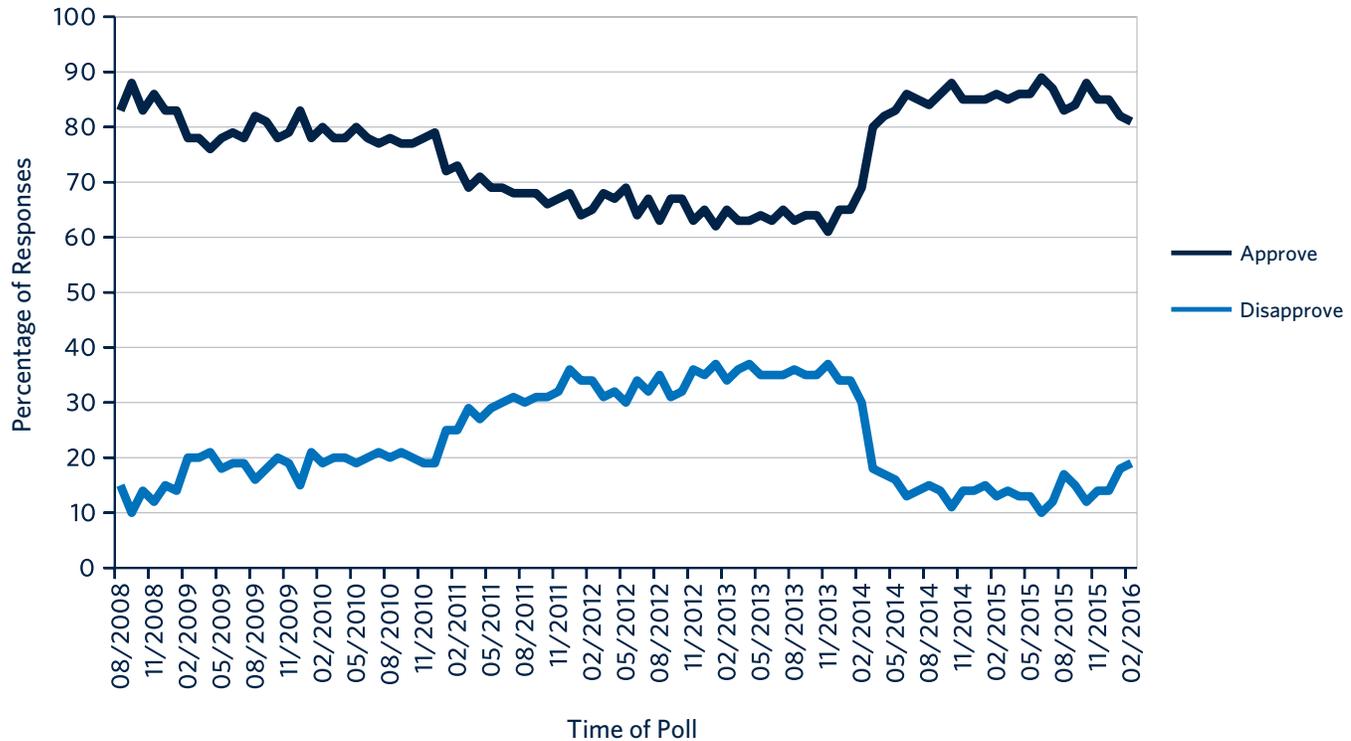
government. Terrorism gradually faded as a key political theme for the Kremlin during the mid-2000s but returned with a vengeance in 2015 as the main justification for the Syria intervention.

Apart from Chechnya, Russia's use of war as an effective mobilization tool was hard to miss in August 2008 during the war with Georgia. Notably, the Georgian conflict coincided with a sharp decline in positive attitudes toward the EU (see figure 1). This pattern was repeated in 2014 with Russians displaying a sharply negative attitude toward the West after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Putin's own poll numbers reacted in similar fashion (see figure 2).¹³ Immediately after the Georgian campaign, Putin, prime minister at the time, saw his approval rating soar to 88 percent. His rating, however, slowly declined in the years that followed, a period characterized by the lack of aggressive, overwrought patriotism and artificially motivated isolationist sentiment. By December 2011, Putin's approval rating stood at only 63 percent. Just over a year later, his rating was basically unchanged, even in the face of his May 2012 presidential election victory. By early 2014, Putin's popularity had crept up only slightly to 65 percent.

The tensions swirling in Kyiv in February buoyed his approval rating to 69 percent. A few weeks later, after the toppling of Ukraine's president Viktor Yanukovich and Russian military moves on the Crimean Peninsula, Putin's approval rating spiked to 80 percent. The war in southeastern Ukraine further propelled his rating, which climbed to 86 percent by June 2014. In the nearly two years since, against the backdrop of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and Russian intervention in Syria, Putin has maintained an approval rating of more than 80 percent, spiking

Figure 2. **Putin's Approval Ratings, 1999-2016**



Note: The question asked was, "Do you generally approve or disapprove of the activities of Vladimir Putin as president (or prime minister) of Russia?"

Source: Levada Center, "Odobrenie organov vlasti" [Public approval of the authorities], accessed June 2, 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti>.

at 89 percent in June 2015 and at 88 percent in October 2015, after the start of the Syria operation.

By early 2016, war had effectively become routine and a key element of what's known as the Kremlin's "besieged fortress" strategy, legitimizing authoritarianism by playing up the threat of an attack and/or pressure by the West.¹⁴ This state of affairs helped reinforce the Kremlin's self-isolation and justify both massive spending on defense and security and the country's declining living standards. Conveniently enough, the Kremlin could point to a nefarious

swirl of external and internal enemies, effectively taking itself off the hook for Russia's internal stagnation.

Russia's recent wars—or "displays of force," as the Kremlin intoned—have been justified using the Soviet-era logic of waging war in order to avoid war. Official rhetoric and propaganda emphasize that military operations are swiftly victorious. The Crimean Peninsula was taken without firing a single shot. Moscow's Syria campaign, as justified by the Kremlin, was the only means of effectively combating the self-proclaimed Islamic State. At the same time, these

wars are both defensive and preventive—a wholesale continuance of Soviet-era logic—but they are also triumphal. Success has come easy, as seen in the Kremlin’s rhetorical fixation on the lack of significant Russian losses.

One question leaps out from this account of recent history: why has the Kremlin’s propaganda been so successful, especially at a moment when most European nations are so wary of war and international conflict?

THE END OF THE POST-HEROIC ERA

Historian Michael Howard has described how developed nations in the post–Cold War period (which he dubbed the “post-heroic age”) think about war, highlighting the “reluctance common to all Western urbanized societies to suffer heavy losses.”¹⁵ Of course, it has been hard to square this notion with the situation in the Middle East, where plenty of people are all too prepared to die in the name of the Prophet Muhammad, let alone in the fields of the Donbas, where obscure pro-Russian fighters are lionized as the rightful heirs of Red Army soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Great Patriotic War. In modern Russia, where propaganda seeks to equate the government with the nation as a whole, it’s obvious that the post-heroic age either never happened or has already passed.

Moreover, as Moscow’s behavior has made abundantly clear, trade interdependence and globalization—what the French philosopher Montesquieu termed “doux commerce” during the Enlightenment—no longer represent a guarantee of peace. The British academic Christopher Coker has repurposed an overused Carl von Clausewitz quote to sum up a very important psychological aspect of Russia’s approach to modern war: “Many, in fact, only knew of war from what they had watched on TV. In other

words, some people were prepared to go to great lengths, at some risk to themselves, to experience war. In this particular case, to invoke Clausewitz, we could say that war had become ‘the continuation of tourism by other means.’”¹⁶ For Russia, the necessity of melding war and tourism becomes that much starker when viewed in light of the current sanctions and countersanctions regimes. As real incomes have been pinched, so, too, have most Russians’ opportunities to travel—unless, that is, the armchair experience of watching the Kremlin’s militarized exploits in Syria and the Donbas is considered travel.

Reactions to the sanctions regime provide another illustration of how Russians think about war—and their battered wallets. In early 2015, according to a Levada Center poll of 1,600 people, 34 percent of Russian respondents noted that Western sanctions had had serious ramifications, and a further 47 percent believed that the sanctions would have serious repercussions in the future. At the same time, a large majority of Russians (69 percent) said that they supported the Kremlin’s desire to “continue our policies despite sanctions.” Indeed, as time wore on, the deleterious effect of sanctions on households appears to have decreased. By August 2015, only 27 percent of the population said that Western sanctions posed serious issues for their well-being, and just 29 percent expected serious issues in the future. Meanwhile, 58 percent of Russians were convinced of the countersanctions’ effectiveness and “positive political results.”¹⁷ In a sense, the public seems to believe that even the war over sanctions is a war that can—and should—be won.

THE TELEVISION REMOTE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF MILITARY CONTROL

Popular perceptions of war, tourism, and sanctions are, of course, heavily shaped by the Kremlin’s broad-ranging

Table 1. Shifts in Attitudes Toward Southeastern Ukraine as a Percentage of Responses

	April 2014	May 2014	July 2014
Southeastern Ukraine should become part of the Russian Federation	35	26	23
Southeastern Ukraine should become an independent state	25	36	41
Southeastern Ukraine should remain part of Ukraine, but get more independence from Kiev	21	17	17
Southeastern Ukraine should remain part of Ukraine under pre-crisis conditions	6	6	7
Hard to say	13	15	12

Notes: The questions asked were, “What do you think about the political future of southeastern Ukraine (the Donetsk and Luhansk regions)? Which of the following would you prefer?” The poll was conducted with 1,600 respondents, and it had a 3.4 percent margin of error.

Source: Levada Center, “Situatsiya na yugo-vostoke Ukrainy” [Situation in southeastern Ukraine], press release, July 29, 2014, <http://www.levada.ru/old/29-07-2014/situatsiya-na-yugo-vostoke-ukrainy>

Table 2. Attitudes Toward Syria in September 2015 as a Percentage of Responses

	Definitely yes	Rather yes	Rather no	Definitely no	Hard to say
Political and diplomatic support	24	43	12	8	14
Humanitarian aid	18	37	16	13	15
Military technical support (consultations, equipment)	16	27	26	15	17
Economic aid	13	28	25	15	20
Direct military support (sending troops)	6	8	30	39	18
Refugee assistance and resettlement	4	17	30	27	22

Notes: The question asked was, “Do you think that Russia should provide the authorities of Syria with. . . ?” The data come from a survey of 1,600 urban and 800 rural Russian citizens over eighteen years old. The urban group had a 3.4 percent margin of error, and the rural group had a 4.1 percent margin of error.

Source: Levada Center, “Voyna v Sirii: vnimaniye, otsenki, IGIL” [War in Syria: attention, estimates, the Islamic State], press release, September 28, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/old/28-09-2015/voyna-v-sirii-vnimanie-otsenki-igil>.

domestic propaganda apparatus. Television continues to enjoy pride of place in the propaganda tool kit. From the start of the Ukraine conflict, millions of Russians were instantly submerged into the atmosphere of war by simply turning on the television.

After the triumphant annexation of Crimea, the notion that war in southeastern Ukraine would be quick, easy, and effectively bloodless was propounded via continued television coverage. Indeed, on television, the conflict in Ukraine didn't seem dangerous. This perception stood as one of the likeliest reasons that many Russians—64 percent, according to a June 2014 Levada Center poll—supported the participation of Russian volunteers in combat.¹⁸ Direct intervention in the conflict through the entry of regular Russian troops was supported by 40 percent of Russians.¹⁹

But one of the most remarkable shifts in public attitude—buoyed by television coverage, doubtlessly—affected views on southeastern Ukraine's status. Over the course of just three months in mid-2014, the number of supporters of independence for Donetsk and Luhansk grew dramatically (see table 1). Support for annexation in eastern Ukraine quickly faded—in large part because Putin failed to communicate any wholesale vision for the region, leaving his supporters slightly disoriented. At the same time, it became increasingly obvious that the conflict would be neither quick nor easy and that escalation might lead to significant losses.

Nonetheless, support for Russia's military campaign in Ukraine and for Putin didn't shift. Even after the destruction of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over southeastern Ukraine, support remained high. According to a Levada Center poll conducted almost immediately

after the tragedy, 46 percent of respondents believed that the plane was shot down by a Ukrainian surface-to-air missile and 36 percent blamed the Ukrainian Air Force. Only 3 percent blamed the separatists. An even smaller percentage blamed the Russian military. Sixteen percent struggled to answer.²⁰ (Respondents could pick more than one answer.) Once again, a sizable majority of Russians stayed in sync with the state line—and the propaganda streaming from their television sets.

THE SYRIA CASE

The Syria case presents perhaps an even finer example of the Kremlin's escalating militarism and the public's reaction. In September 2015, not long before the Russian air strikes started, only 22 percent of respondents backed the idea of supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to prevent the spread of the Islamic State, while support for outright military involvement stood at only 14 percent (see table 2).²¹

After the air strikes started, however, public opinion rapidly shifted. By October 2015, in a new Levada Center poll of 1,600 Russians, 72 percent of respondents supported air strikes against the Islamic State's positions, and 47 percent agreed that Russia should continue to back Assad in his fight against the Islamic State and the opposition.²²

Why did public opinion shift so quickly? For many Russians, the Syria intervention served as an important illustration of their country's might and status as a great power. For many, the use of force far from Russia's borders was reminiscent of the Soviet era. The Syria intervention was also portrayed as another quick, victorious war initiated and controlled by Putin. As sociologist Alexey Levinson wrote, "Attempts to turn the attention of the population to the losses of Russian troops weren't just rigidly

suppressed by officials—they didn't even really resonate with the people. Why? Because the people wanted to see the war in the Donbas as a repeat of Crimea, where no losses were suffered. The so-called 'polite people' did their thing quickly and quietly. The Syria intervention initially seemed to be the same thing: we effectively bombed an enemy that wasn't well understood from the skies and the sea, again with no casualties and with impunity."²³

THE THREAT OF TERRORISM

Worries about terrorism increased after the Kremlin's intervention in Syria. According to a Levada Center poll of 1,600 urban and 800 rural citizens in November 2015—that is, shortly after the terrorist bombing of a Russian passenger airliner over the Sinai Peninsula near Sharm el-Sheikh, followed by the coordinated attacks in Paris—82 percent of Russians said they felt anxious regarding possible terrorist attacks in Russia.²⁴ Moreover, 73 percent thought that a terrorist attack could happen soon, a significant jump from 48 percent in October.

Yet the threat of terrorism didn't shake public support for the government. Some 59 percent of respondents agreed with the notion that Russia's "security services have a very important role, and their current powers support this role"—a notable jump from 2007, when only 42 percent of Russians agreed with this statement.²⁵ Trust in the security services also rose, swelling from 36 percent in 2013 to 50 percent in 2015.²⁶ Such numbers reflected a general increase in trust for both governmental institutions and Putin.

In the immediate wake of the Sinai attack, the Russian government actively sought to play down any possible connection to the Syria campaign. A British move to evacuate citizens from Sharm el-Sheikh was treated

by some people as a deliberate attempt to embarrass Russia. As Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Federation Council's Foreign Affairs Committee, put it, "There's a geopolitical resistance to the actions of Russia in Syria. It might sound sacrilegious, but there are many in the world who would prefer to chalk up this catastrophe to a jihadist response against Russia, without sufficient foundation."²⁷ But even after the government officially acknowledged that the Sinai incident was a terrorist attack, only 3 percent of respondents thought that Russia should reduce its military presence in Syria or halt its air strikes. Meanwhile, 21 percent said that Moscow's military presence in Syria should be increased.²⁸

FOCUS GROUPS: THE WORLD LIVES UNDER ORDERS FROM THE UNITED STATES

To get a better handle on Russians' views on war and terrorism, the Carnegie Moscow Center in collaboration with the Levada Center convened a pair of focus groups in Moscow in mid-December 2015. Participants in both groups (ten people in each) came from a variety of professions; had steady, middle-class incomes; and had completed secondary or higher-level education. The groups were divided by age. Participants in one group were between twenty and thirty-five years old. The second group consisted of people between forty and sixty years old.

Despite the range in age and professions, members of both groups were nearly unanimous in their strong support for the Putin regime and its actions, including the Kremlin's enormous defense spending, the ongoing military operations in Syria and Ukraine, and the sanctions against Turkey. Russia, according to the participants, is a great power that is consistently—but unsuccessfully—pressured from all sides by apparent enemies. Yet it was hard for the respondents to identify specific countries responsible

for this pressure—they made it sound like a near-universal effort that even included Eastern Europe. On the side of the “good” were China, India, and, surprisingly, Iran.

Both groups viewed Washington and its allies as Russia’s primary enemies—with participants offering little more than clichés to support their views. Only one person, a twenty-three-year-old female business analyst, stood out from the group with her comment regarding Russia’s military moves: “Low mortality, education levels, and income are things to boast about, not the fact that our taxes are being used to bomb some poor people.”

Throughout the rest of the responses, there was little evidence of broad-based awareness of the external situation, as if the participants had simply filtered out that which didn’t fit their views. For example, few had heard much about Putin’s readiness to place nuclear forces on alert during the operation in Crimea.²⁹ Even if they had, the seriousness would have been lost. As one respondent stated, “I think this was said in a humorous context.” And with the exception of a handful of participants, hardly anyone drew a connection between the country’s economic struggles and Moscow’s foreign and internal policy decisions.

Both groups fully accepted and repeated Putin’s November 2015 rhetoric accusing Turkey of inflicting a “stab in the back” for downing a Russian fighter jet near the Turkey-Syria border and cited the existence of a burgeoning oil trade between the Islamic State and Turkey. Indeed, participants traced many actions in the broader Middle East to a battle for oil. Most portrayed Russia’s operations in eastern Ukraine as a success—even as they suggested that any Russian soldiers who’d ended up in the region had simply gotten lost. Remarkably, the respondents—who again offered little more than

propagandistic clichés instead of their own views—accepted these contradictory statements wholesale.

The participants characterized the Islamic State as the main terrorist threat to Russia and the world. In a nod to Kremlin propaganda, some of the respondents asserted that the Islamic State was originally created by the United States only to spiral out of control. While the participants acknowledged their fear of terrorism, they were divided on the likelihood of an attack in Moscow, and the views were often quite contradictory. Some said the threat to the capital was lower because Moscow is Russia’s biggest city and, not coincidentally, houses the headquarters of the Federal Security Service. Others believed Moscow’s preeminent status made it an attractive target for terrorism. Interestingly, some of the younger participants supported the government’s limitations on protests, claiming that large groups of people might attract terrorists. Respondents’ fears centered on the Moscow subway, and many noted that they generally try to avoid riding in the first or last cars. Still, the impression was that the threat of terrorism had become routine, part of the background to everyday life.

The participants mainly didn’t consider the Kremlin’s moves in Crimea, southeastern Ukraine, or Syria to be “war”—even though the word itself was often used throughout the discussions. As one respondent said, “Crimea remains ours, and it’s good that it didn’t lead to war.” Another added, “The Minsk accords will be implemented, of course, unless [Ukrainian President Petro] Poroshenko does start a war.”

Moreover, respondents cycled back to the Soviet-era logic, which the Kremlin has used to characterize its military operations—that is, that Russian actions are preventive,

defensive, and just. As one respondent observed, “We’re not attacking—we’re defending.” Another noted, “War is protecting the interests of the weak.” The Kremlin’s military exploits offered participants a certain source of pride. As one respondent put it, “Such a huge country can’t have a weak army.” The responses conveyed the clear impression that war—at least, in the Kremlin’s particular version—isn’t a terribly dangerous thing but is more like an easy, triumphant stroll.

The following exchange with the younger group highlights this line of thinking:

MODERATOR: Anton, what would you consider a shortcoming of our foreign policy?

ANSWER: I don’t think we reacted strongly enough to the Turkey incident. That was a shortcoming.

MODERATOR: What should we have done?

ANSWER: I think that we should have . . . (*pause*). Well, to be honest, I think that NATO wouldn’t have supported Turkey, and we should have reacted, responded more aggressively.

MODERATOR: How, specifically?

(*Female voice, quietly*) Bomb Istanbul?

ANSWER: Specifically? It’s hard to say.

Respondents also saw a threat in the abstract notion of a caliphate and displayed high levels of mistrust toward Muslims—even though they described migrant workers from the Caucasus and Central Asia, whom they also mistrust, as simply a workforce. As one respondent put it, ably mixing Soviet and post-Soviet rhetoric, those pushing a caliphate supported “mass sabotage and the destruction of the Russian people.” The stability of Chechnya and Dagestan, meanwhile, is “hanging by a thread,” respondents noted.

Against this backdrop, participants fully supported Russia’s intervention in Syria. They repeated numerous propagandistic clichés verbatim, ranging from the notion that Syrian territory is “being liberated” to claims that Russia is “showing the world our modern weapons.” Ever-present was the seeming paradox that respondents used a non-militaristic refrain along the lines of “We don’t want war,” “A ground operation in Syria is unnecessary,” and “Let the Syrians fight it out themselves.” Clearly, the historical memory of the Afghan war is still very much a factor.

The idea that the government may be using foreign policy adventures and war to distract people from economic issues closer to home likewise found little resonance. Respondents simply repeated propagandized myths about “destroying the enemy on the approach”—all while claiming to see no connection to the country’s economic challenges.

On the domestic front, participants also stuck close to the Kremlin’s line—for instance, when agreeing with the recent decree that information on peacetime combat losses should be concealed. Some respondents noted the necessity of the move “so that there’s no panic.” Others cited claims that, as one put it, “people will become resentful” of the deaths. Others thought such information would lead “the public to oppose the government,” as another participant said.

All told, the responses highlighted the fact that Russians value domestic stability above all else. It remained important to the participants that there be no disturbances, demonstrations, or manifestations of social and political unrest. That, in fact, was even more important than dealing with declining living standards or questions about the morality of Russia’s military actions. Indeed, stability—and

the related immutability of the political regime—remained more important to the respondents than all other factors.

And while participants were worried about domestic problems, for example, access to affordable healthcare, they were not overly concerned by the government’s massive defense spending. In fact, when asked to allocate the government budget in key categories, respondents generally called for spending 50 percent of the budget on defense, even if it came at the expense of education or the healthcare system. Restrictions on civil liberties were acceptable to deal with the increasing threat of terrorism. The younger group felt that limits on the freedom of speech online were acceptable. However, respondents were not comfortable giving up certain rights, including the right to travel abroad.

The focus group discussions also tested the hypothesis that the political opposition is seen by Russians as accomplices of terrorists. While attitudes toward the opposition were largely negative, and even though participants believed opposition politicians were being financed by the United States, nobody saw them as terrorists. Members of the opposition are still “Russian people,” the respondents said—and, notably, not Muslims. Likewise, the opposition was often viewed as quite respectable—one of the younger respondents drew an opposition figure wearing a nice suit—as well as wealthy. (As one of the participants noted, “They’re stealing what’s been stolen.”) Some saw the opposition as purely political adversaries, and little more. According to one respondent, “They’re for changing the government of the country. I don’t agree with that since I’m happy with the current government.” Likewise, few of the focus group participants, regardless of age, had a clear understanding of the terms “national traitors” or “fifth column”; some even said they’d

never heard the latter term prior to their participation in the focus group.

As with war, however, the respondents’ attitudes toward the opposition were sometimes paradoxical—a phenomenon that the participants themselves largely ignored. For instance, when discussing the activities of prominent opposition figure Alexey Navalny, one respondent noted that “Navalny gets money from the United States, but he’s telling the truth.”

The following dialogue between a moderator and a respondent—which came after a request that participants illustrate an abstract member of the opposition—helps highlight this paradox:

MODERATOR: All right. Dima, please?

ANSWER: Well, I have a person with an American flag instead of a head. I think the opposition is trying very hard to match America. They want the good life, so that everyone immediately has the good life, and part of their work is being sponsored by the United States.

MODERATOR: So that everyone has a good life?

ANSWER: Well, everyone.

MODERATOR: Everyone. And that’s bad?

ANSWER: No, that’s good. But it can’t be done right away, you can’t snap your fingers and the whole country ends up living in easy circumstances, the good life.

MODERATOR: And America gives them money so people live well in Russia?

ANSWER: No, that’s their wish—they’re just trying to be like America.

MODERATOR: Well? (*pause*) Why does America give them money then?

ANSWER: I don’t know.

MODERATOR: Okay.

ANSWER: I don't know. To overthrow Putin, to change our politics, get their people into government, and so on.

MODERATOR: And this idea of the good life, where is it from?

ANSWER: Well, they. . . . How to say it. . . .

CONCLUSION: THE MYTHOLOGY OF PERMANENT WAR

The modern Russian political regime has elaborated a concept of war that enjoys considerable public support. The Kremlin has been able to foster a mythological sense of heroism when it comes to war. It has helped war to acquire an aura of justice. After all, a besieged fortress needs to be protected. That helps convince the public that external aggression is actually part and parcel of a defensive war—or just part of a series of simple, low-cost military operations. In this situation, the occupants of the fortress—in reality, its hostages—begin to develop a form of Stockholm syndrome toward their ruler, which leads them to offer strong support for the ruler's moves and policies. Notably, the Kremlin's modern incarnation of war harkens to a Soviet-era justification: that Moscow's military moves are undertaken solely to prevent a larger war.

These, then, are the paradoxes of the post-Soviet mind. For Russians, war has replaced the refrigerator and the television. In today's Russia, the so-called struggle between the refrigerator and the TV set describes a possible contradiction between poor economic performance and state propaganda efforts. War, at least for the time being, has outstripped other concerns among Russia's domestic population. It remains important, however, that the nation's attention should never shift to pressing social and economic issues—many of which are the result of war, such as the enormous defense expenditures and the negative impact that a war is bound to have on Russia's

human capital. The death of the Soviet empire under the burden of such extravagant spending has clearly failed to deter those who consider themselves the direct descendants of the defunct empire. Nonetheless, judging from the results of the focus groups, economic issues remain separate from military issues in the minds of the public. Military issues help boost Putin's rating, which further diminishes the need for the Kremlin to shift its attention to economic issues.

The Kremlin's permanent war footing has become the primary means for Russian elites to keep themselves in power. And this discourse—of providing wars that are fair, defensive, victorious, and preventive—constructs the foundation for a heavily personalized regime. In effect, the Kremlin is staking its legitimacy not just on the victories of the past, such as the Great Patriotic War, but on losses too, such as the Finnish campaign of 1939–1940. Indeed, Putin effectively justified the latter war—using similar reasoning for the current campaigns—at a 2013 meeting with members of the Russian Military Historical Society,³⁰ despite the shameful characteristics of, as the late Soviet poet Alexander Tvardovsky termed it, the “little-known war”—namely, its pointlessness, its high cost, its aggression, and its ultimate failure.³¹

In justifying such wars both past and present, the Kremlin continues to stake its legitimacy on the conviction that military actions will stimulate broader public support. Big risks are connected with interfering in Russia's triumphal march, after all. Stopping after Crimea, the Donbas, Syria, and Turkey is, if not impossible, at least increasingly difficult for the Kremlin. Still, at the same time, as illustrated by the focus groups, Russians don't want what they call “real” war. A clash of nations with nuclear weapons is off the table. That suggests that

Moscow's militarization and militaristic propaganda encounters at least certain limits.

Still, the government's growing militarization, including the increasingly prevalent use of force and high defense spending, will continue to be supported by the majority of the population in order to maintain that value of utmost importance—that is, stability—as well as to retain Russians' newly found status, and sensation, of being a great power.

In the near term, the picture may shift at least temporarily. The imperatives of the September 2016 Duma campaign almost certainly will dictate a switch to combating internal enemies and fifth columnists. Sadly, these foes are far easier to subdue than those Russia has faced on the wrecked terrain of the Donbas and Syria.

NOTES

- 1 This article wouldn't exist without the active participation of colleagues from the Levada Center, especially Alexey G. Levinson, the head of sociocultural research, with whom the topic of war was discussed at a Carnegie seminar and who came to the conclusion that the topic deserves separate (and urgent) research. Levinson personally held two focus groups in Moscow for the Carnegie Moscow Center in December 2015 that tested Russians' interpretation of war and terrorism.
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- 3 Translation from LyricsTranslate, “Khotyat li russkiye voyny?” [The Russians, do they want war?] by the Red Army Choir, last updated November 24, 2012, <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/хотят-ли-русские-войны-khotyat-li-russkiye-voyny-russians-do-they-want.html>.
- 4 Mikhail Romm, *Nine Days in One Year* (1962; Moscow: RUSCICO, 2004), DVD.
- 5 Nikolai Voznesensky, *Voennaya Ekonomika SSSR v period Otechestvennoy voyny* [The wartime economy of the USSR during the Great Patriotic War] (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1948), http://militera.lib.ru/h/voznensky_n/pre.html.
- 6 Peter Weill and Alexander Genis, *60-e. Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* [Sixties. The life of the Soviet person] (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1996), 92.
- 7 Alexander Bovin, *XX vek kak zhizn. Vospominaniya* [Twentieth century as life. Memories] (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003), 139.
- 8 Mikhail Zygar, *Vsya kremlevskaya rat'. Kratkaya istoriya sovremennoy Rossii* [All the Kremlin's men. A brief history of modern Russia] (Moscow: Intellektualnaya literatura, 2016), 139–40.
- 9 Yegor Gaidar, *Gibel' imperii. Uroki dlya sovremennoy Rossii* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2006), 184. Translated by Antonina W. Bouis as *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 281.
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- 12 From a conversation between the author and Alexey Levinson.
- 13 Levada Center, “Odobrenie organov vlasti” [Public approval of the authorities], accessed June 2, 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti>.
- 14 Leon Aron, “The Problematic Pages,” *New Republic*, September 24, 2008, <https://newrepublic.com/article/62070/the-problematic-pages>.
- 15 Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (Yale University Press, 2000).
- 16 Christopher Coker, *Can War Be Eliminated?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), xii.
- 17 Levada Center, “Vospriyatie sobytii na vostoke Ukrainy i sanktsii” [Interpretation of the events in eastern Ukraine and sanctions], press release, August 31, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/old/31-08-2015/vospriyatie-sobytii-na-vostoke-ukrainy-i-sanktsii>.
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- 19 Ibid.
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- 28 Levada Center, “Terakty v Parizhe i ozhidanie teraktov v Rossii.”
- 29 Neil MacFarquhar, “Putin Says He Weighed Nuclear Alert Over Crimea,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/16/world/europe/putin-says-he-weighed-nuclear-alert-over-crimea.html?_r=0.
- 30 “We will not give a political assessment of Soviet actions in 1939. But even the most superficial analysis of that war allows for the conclusion that state borders 17–20 km away from St. Petersburg are a sufficiently large threat for the 5 million residents of that city. I think the Bolsheviks of that time were attempting to correct the historical mistakes that they committed in 1917, when they used Finnish armed groups that were part of the Russian army but supported and heavily contributed to the October rebellion. Then they remembered that the border is right nearby, they couldn't come to an agreement, and had to go to war.” From a speech by Vladimir Putin; see President of Russia, “Meeting With Founding Congress of the Russian Military Historical Society Participants,” March 14, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17677>.
- 31 “Two Lines,” written in 1943, is one of Tvardovsky's most remarkable military poems, about a sudden memory in the middle of a justified war on the pointless death of a young soldier in the Finnish campaign. “In my notebook I jotted two lines for / A poor fellow they sent off to wage war. / Back in '40 he paid a high price / And was killed on the cold Finnish ice / . . . Amid such a cruel and immense war / I can't really grasp, though I'm trying, / What about this lone fate I'm so sad for, / As if I were the one who's no more, / As if I were the one left there lying / Frozen, small, and dying, / In that war of which no one is talking, / Forgotten and small, left lying.” See: Alexander Tvardovsky, *Stikhotvoreniya* [Poems] (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1975), 2009. Translation in Tamara Eidelman, “The Forgotten Winter War,” trans. Nora Favorov, *Russian Life* 57, no. 6 (November/December 2014).

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