

25. Soviet Memories

Patriotism and Trauma

Catherine Merridale

Citizens of the former Soviet Union, the men and women who grew up under Communism, share many extraordinary experiences of hardship, violence, and trauma. They have also spent the greater part of their lives interpreting and discussing their experience in a language almost entirely shaped by ideology. These aspects of their mental world lend special resonance to the work of collecting and analyzing their memories. In their case, too, the controversial term “collective memory” has real meaning. The Soviet state was very largely sealed from outside influences for several decades beginning in the 1930s. Official discourse was carefully shaped and monitored. As a result, millions of people learned to see and understand the universe using words, expressions, and even values that now appear remote, misguided, and frequently bizarre. As well as helping to define them as a collective, this uniformity points to one of the first lessons that their story has to offer now. Among the many privileges of listening to their accounts of life, their witness to the power of mass-mobilizing politics stands out as a reminder that all assumptions, and especially the most fashionable, demand constant question.

It is in part because of this that I find the current vogue for writing about memory, and even for treating it as some kind of key to our humanity, so troubling. The fashion has the same universal appeal, and the same arrogance, as conventional political correctness. All too often, young researchers are diverted from the task of understanding events (hard work, and full of pitfalls), preferring the soft and slippery world of “memory,” a subject-area that currently promises an easy moral authority (since it allows the writer to appear so liberal, so human) as well as a comforting fuzziness (so you can’t easily get it wrong). It is tempting, these days, to study memories of war (or interpretations of Jane

Austen, as Edward Said once remarked) rather than look at the original for oneself. This essay is written with that uneasiness in mind. I came to memory by accident, reluctantly, and I write about it equally unwillingly. On its own, without other evidence and other techniques of research, it may be a distraction for historians. The Soviet case, moreover, stands testimony to the power of politics to distort and even replace collective, shared, and individual memories, making the value of interpretation ever more precarious.

The accident that brought me to the topic was my interest in Russia's violent past. At the time (the mid-1990s), historians of the subject were still preoccupied with recovering the details of what happened from newly-opened Soviet archives, a research task more important, and more telling, than almost any other after so many decades of lies. Among their priorities was the need to estimate numbers. Russia fought in the first world war, losing millions in its own trenches, until the revolution of 1917. The infant Soviet Union then suffered a civil war and devastating famine, the trauma of social revolution and the collectivization of peasant agriculture, a further famine, political repression, including mass executions and forced labor, and then, most devastating of all, the catastrophe of total war against Nazi Germany. In each case, the Soviet state, which controlled information about population statistics, had underestimated (for public purposes at least) the number of human casualties. Even the scale of Soviet war losses, which we now believe to have exceeded twenty-seven million between 1941 and 1945, was originally presented at a fraction of its true measure. The number of Stalin's more obviously political victims, meanwhile, was seldom referred to by Soviet sources, let alone estimated, until the second half of the 1980s.¹

All this made statistical and demographic research vital as soon as the possibility appeared. But numbers, though crucial, said little about the human impact of catastrophe. My interest lay in exploring that story, in building on the work of those who had cleared so much ground. As a historian, I was able to use a wide variety of sources to inform myself. Letters and diaries from the Soviet period, political reports about the public mood, literature, even art and memorial sculpture all told me a great deal about the Soviet past. Sources created at the time have drawbacks, especially in a society where words had to be weighed, but they are almost always valuable. Like memories, indeed, their silences can be as telling as the things they state.

That said, I knew that hearing stories directly from the survivors of Soviet power would open new vistas of understanding. I did not—could not—predict what insights they might offer, not least because almost no one had worked in this way with Soviet citizens before. The timing was fortuitous in the best sense of the word. It was my privilege to talk to people who would not have been able to speak of private matters to a foreigner before, to travel on my own to places where outsiders seldom visited, and yet to speak to people who were still young enough to recall clearly, healthy enough to face the strain of the tormenting past. Two separate projects followed. The first was a general investigation

into the twentieth-century Soviet experience of mass death, trauma, and bereavement, the second a more focused study of Red Army combatants in the Second World War.²

Before looking in detail at some of these projects' findings, it might help to take note, as I had to do at the time, of some of the general problems of oral history. These directly govern the question of memory, for oral history is little else. Even researchers who make appointments with elite political actors, hoping to gain extra insight into narratives of events, need to remember that they are working with nothing more substantial than memory, and memory is biased, personal, fallible, and subject to moods. Similar remarks, of course, apply to documents—they are seldom objective, seldom complete, and often reflect the author's situation, prejudices, fears, and basic analytical competence—but memory, because it varies from day to day and from interview to interview, can seem slighter than any document. It is also a two-way process. People are not merely respondents. They are human, as are interviewers, and the dynamic between each pair will influence the types of memory that emerge. I have often found myself answering more questions than I could put as some magnificent octogenarian quizzed me on my social origins, political views, race, religion, and dietary habits. Humor is vital, as are patience and humility. These are not words that spring to mind when planning archival research of more conventional kinds.

Forgetting, the obverse of memory, is also important. A person's silences are often as important as the tale they choose to tell, but by their nature they will never advertise themselves. Interviewers have to be well briefed, and more than briefed, for they will also have to judge whether to raise the missing issue (seeming pushy, maybe even causing distress) or let the silence hang. A related problem is confabulation, the exaggerations, distortions, and downright falsehoods that people construct, consciously or not, in order to live with the past. Like silence, these may follow patterns that tell us as much about the impact of history as any timetable or stenographer's report.

When it comes to the stories themselves, it is important to listen for narrative patterns. Here again, patience is vital. An eagerness to cover the ground or to make sure of the facts can result in disruption, breaking the narrator's concentration and imposing a pattern of the researcher's making (or, more frequently, no pattern at all). Interruptions also involve specific choices of words. Conducting interviews in a foreign language raises this issue more starkly than usual, but it is a universal one. I may choose to talk of the Holocaust, for instance (and there is a direct Russian word that corresponds to the term), but survivors from Soviet lands may prefer "genocide." They may even choose to evade a specific name for the mass murder of Jews, preferring circumlocutions that leave the unspeakable unlabelled. In either case, the point is that it is their choice, their language, that is of interest, and not their ability to fit their stories into a pattern imposed by their interviewer.

Trauma itself is central to the understanding of memory. For decades now, psychiatrists have been aware that some traumatic memories can be stored in a part of the brain,

the hypothalamus, that is separate from the location of banal recollections.³ This separation may enable appalling images to be overlooked most of the time so that life can go on without an endless reference to terror and flight. The traumatic memories' use, as information, will come if the threatening event is repeated, perhaps enabling the survivor to endure a second time. Meanwhile, the images are not easy to assemble in ordinary circumstances. When someone says that they cannot remember battle, starvation, or extremes of pain, they are not necessarily lying, either to their interviewer or to themselves.

In many cases, however, persistent prompting can retrieve some memories of pain, while certain triggers—loud noises, for instance, or perhaps the smell of rough vodka—can bring traumatic memories rushing back. Photographs may also act as prompts, especially if they are new to the respondent and spark memories they had forgotten to lock well away. If this sounds like advice for interviewers, however, it should not. The retrieval of traumatic images is not cost-free, above all for the survivor involved. People forget, in part, in order to protect themselves. There are genuine ethical questions facing any historian who asks individuals to try to reassemble memories of war, torture, or bereavement. At worst, they could push that person back into the nightmare they hoped to escape, at best they are likely to leave behind confusion, distress, and renewed pain.

I was fortunate to have been advised of all this before I began my work, but the reality of it was made clear to me as I traveled around western Ukraine in 1998 in the wake of a team of interviewers who had been collecting data about the Holocaust. I never encountered the interviewers involved, but it was clear that they had conducted rapid sessions with survivors of the Jewish genocide, many of whom were left confused and even sick as a result. Apart from the sheer stress of recollection, the problem was that elderly people had been left without support, comfort, or companionship as the interviewers drove away. Whatever the fruits of the project, its subjects were left more unhappy than they had been before, still balked of justice after half a century.

So interviews do not "help" their subjects, and historians who undertake them need to think hard about their work. It seems a small point by comparison, but they must also think about its impact on themselves. Interviews, after all, are two-way things. The past does not sit still and wait while we take notes. It answers back, corrects, pleads, prompts, and scolds. It also presses cake, tea, vodka, and the neighbors on its visitor. Less tangibly, it casts a shadow, leaving us to deal with our own guilt, pity, and a gathering depression.⁴ I can think of no more rewarding aspect of my research in the past decade than the hours I have spent in the company of Soviet veterans of every kind, but nor can I think of anything more taxing.

Those are the universal perils, common to research of this type anywhere. What I want to do now is to look at things that are specific to the Soviet case. Taking memory, and specifically its traumatic aspect, as my theme, I will follow two main lines of discussion. First, I will suggest that the classic story of trauma's legacy, the medical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) now so universally accepted, simply misses the

point in the Soviet case. It is irrelevant because it is an import to the Soviet situation, a discovery that suggests that, while suffering is universal, the reactions to it, especially at the social level, are culturally specific. Only an interview project could have established this. No documents hear the patterns of ordinary people's speech.

Second, I will compare two kinds of respondent and show how their status within postwar Soviet society—and the stories that their society told about their lives at the collective level—affected not only their personal, private memories but also the ways in which they built their lives in the shadow of catastrophe. Again, this amounts to an exploration of possible social and cultural responses to trauma, as well as to the recollection of it in the longer term. I will then draw these points together to consider the value of such recollections to the study of humanities.

In view of the near-total acceptance of PTSD as a diagnostic reality, a universal human issue, the Soviet attitude to trauma, at least as the survivors and their carers communicated it to me, came as a surprise. Before I left for Russia I had been prepared—very carefully, by people with a lot of expertise working with survivors of the Nazi genocide—for the idea that the majority of my respondents would be suffering from some form of mental trauma. I was advised to look for persistent anxiety, irritability, sleeplessness, and depression. It was suggested that I ask people about their dreams. For a few weeks, my first as an interviewer, I looked diligently for these signs of trauma. My notes, a parallel text accompanying transcripts and tapes, were, like a psychiatric commentary, semi-medical, and, like a lot of doctors' notes (I think), they purported to know the minds of the respondents better than they did themselves.

It was not difficult to see the traces of their harsh lives in the stories Soviet people told, nor was it hard to discover how state control of language and expression had shaped their perceptions. Elderly and frail, survivors of the Gulag often found it awkward to talk about their suffering. Alternatively, they could talk of little else, repeating the same tropes with increasing intensity, as if sheer effort would lift some burden from their hearts. Some were tearful, others—and one in particular—were angry. The angry man cornered me in the workshop where he now does carpentry and hammered with his fist right next to my face, telling me that the message Stalin had conveyed to him—and that, by implication, he was now conveying to me—was that we were dust. Nothing but dust. The Russian word is as emphatic a monosyllable as the English, and I can recall it now as vividly as if he were hammering beside me as I write.

There was plenty of evidence, then, that people suffered emotionally as well as materially as a result of oppression and violence, and many have continued to do so, in various ways, throughout their lives. What I cannot say is that they appeared to be ill. The trauma model posits mental illness, even disability, which is, of course, why PTSD has become so familiar, even popular. Because it carries potential compensation in Britain and the United States, it is, as one psychiatrist pithily remarks, the one diagnosis of mental illness that people actually want to receive.⁵ But the survivors I met and interviewed were neither

mentally ill nor deluded about the impact of stress upon their lives. On the contrary, they were often models of resilience, their courage and their grace inspiring.

Of course, the survivors still living in the 1990s were among the most resilient. Stress may have driven thousands of those who did not survive to take their own lives, or to succumb to other hardships and disease, while wartime trauma was concealed within the appalling casualty figures. Who can tell if this or that infantryman died because of bad luck or the carelessness that arises from nervous exhaustion? The point is not to question the ubiquity of suffering and trauma in Soviet Russia but to see that people regarded them differently. Just as crucially, moreover, any exclusive focus on mental suffering seems absurd when material problems continue to loom so large.

Survivors of the Gulag were usually deprived of everything, including educational opportunities. Most were penniless when they were released, and many have stayed that way into old age. When I asked them to tell me what their problems were or are, they seldom talked about nightmares. Poverty—a legacy of violence, oppression, and a criminal state—figures far more significantly. Some are concerned that they cannot afford to feed and clothe themselves in the newly-minted capitalist Russia. Others are more troubled by the fact that they cannot buy presents for their grandchildren. Hunger is something many can take, for themselves. But to be unable to buy branded foreign chocolate for their grandchildren—the poverty is often that basic, not a matter of PlayStations or bicycles—feels intolerable. The exploration of memory, oral history, here brings the researcher face to face with the human legacy of political events. No books or documents teach the past like this.

That said, the issue of trauma still remains. I am not a psychiatrist, and I cannot make judgments about the mental health of random populations around the world, but I have spent a lot of time talking to Russian psychiatrists and their patients, and also to the people who might be deemed to be at risk. The impression that emerges is one of a society—and I mean the Soviet one, for the wealthiest of today's Russians are beginning to discover the attractions of western-style therapy—that dealt with hardship and with extreme suffering in ways that were different from those currently favored in my own. To some extent the techniques were coercive, though hardly less than the more totalizing cognitive therapies now available in Britain. To some extent, too, they were inhumane, since they made no allowances for weakness. Instead of pitying the mentally impaired, indeed, Stalin's regime locked them up. Well into the 1980s, a diagnosis of clinical depression was enough to guarantee that the sufferer would not be granted a driver's license.

Two points emerged from the things that people said, from their choices of words and images. First, it became clear that the western European emphasis upon the ego is entirely foreign to the Soviet generation. Their communist culture, and—more or less in harmony with it—their older, collectivist culture, emphasized membership of the group, not the analysis of individual feelings. The group provided support in return and even a

sense of personal worth. Rather than looking inward, then, survivors of Stalinist bloodshed turn to each other. In the past, they went on parades and waved flags. Now they sing songs together and tell old stories. The old way was to assert that life was getting better—Stalin himself was fond of the phrase. Today, despite the collapse of Soviet power, they still use more or less the same technique.

The appalling truth—appalling to an outsider, that is—is that these collective statements worked. Morale really was improved by propaganda. Listening to the stories people told, many of them speaking after decades of arbitrary suffering, I was struck by the fact that so many of the victims of one of the cruelest regimes of the twentieth century were actually homesick for it. The traces were there in the way the people talked, in their enduring love for communist slogans and festivals. When a gallery in St. Petersburg mounted an exhibition of socialist realist art entitled, ironically, “agitation for happiness,” a large proportion of people who commented in the visitors’ book expressed their pleasure at seeing such cheerful images back on display, their nostalgia for communist truths still innocent of any sense of rage.

Most of those I met would also balk at the idea of medicalized therapy for what they would call troubles of the soul. Many survivors of the camps tell their stories repeatedly—the horror is their albatross, and they need an audience even today. But they would reject the notion of a “cure” for something that they do not see as illness. Indeed, some regard their painful memories as a resource. I want to tell my story, they would say, you people have to know. It is essential that, collectively, we do not forget. Such voices sound frail when set against the clamor of contemporary Russia, but the contrast only serves to emphasize the courage of the elderly, to say nothing of their generosity at a time when the young are too busy to sit and talk. It is a significant act, in a troubling and fast-moving world, to pause and reassemble stories from the past.

When I got to know some of them well, I did ask some of the elderly about the idea of therapy, of paying someone to listen to the stories. Back in the mid-1990s, a group of psychiatrists who had trained during the Second World War completely failed to understand my question. “We had contusion, of course,” one of them said, referring to mechanical damage to the skull and brain. “But what is this post-dramatic [*sic*] stress?”⁶ More recently the arrival of British, American, and German aid teams in the former USSR has spread awareness of PTSD widely among the psychiatric profession, but older people remain skeptical. “Therapists?” One elderly woman was amazed when I explained what they were. “Don’t you go on railway journeys in England? What are railway carriages for?”

In the 1990s, then, Soviet survivors of trauma did not believe themselves to have mental health problems—the idea was anathema—and even if they felt that they carried a burden from the past, they did not consider that it could, or even should, be cured. As medical fashions gradually change, the universality of this kind of view is dissolving. Increasingly, wealthier people in larger cities are encountering Anglo-American discourses

Gulag survivors, poorly educated, poor in other senses, too, present themselves in interview exactly as good Soviet citizens were taught to do. That is, when asked informally about their lives, most respond with the same set piece.

It is poignant indeed to sit with a frail and elderly person and hear them declaiming in this way. They start with their year and place of birth—which seems natural, if precipitously self-revealing—but then they talk about their social origin, identifying themselves according to the class hierarchy that Lenin established and Stalin refined. It is better, by these rules, to state that one's parents were poor peasants than to admit, perhaps, that one's father was a shopkeeper or, worse, came from a family of priests. The fact that "poor peasant" is not a statement about life but a political claim ("middle" peasants were less well-regarded, and kulaks, supposedly the wealthiest peasants, were social pariahs), the fact that it conceals layers of injustice (the labels were ascribed from outside and bore little relationship to economic reality in the villages), even the sheer redundancy of the language—all these things speak of Stalinism's enduring and poisonous hold upon citizens' minds.

After social origin comes education. This, too, is strange to British ears, since few of my colleagues would state how many years of schooling they had received if asked about their lives by a total stranger. Oddest of all, however, is the brief statement about party membership. "I joined the party in 1934," one veteran might say, while another might state that he was "non-party." Either way, what was happening was a self-location with reference to a value system and language that have vanished—and that had also punished them for their whole lives. Here again, of course, no British respondent would automatically state what political party they belonged to (and there is a choice, including that of joining none and caring for them not at all). For Soviet citizens, party membership was a defining measure of citizenship, privilege, and prospects.

The irony is cruel already, then, but there is worse to come. Gulag veterans always insist upon their innocence. At one level, such a statement is obvious. Stalin's repressions swept through the Soviet population with apparent irrationality (the rationale lay in the fear that they created, not the choice of victim) and almost no one who suffered was "guilty" of a recognizable offence. The whole system was outrageous, illegal, its charge sheets and interrogation records monstrous fabrications. The point is that few of the elderly can see this clearly in their own cases. When they recount their arrest and interrogation, and then the appalling tale of their exile, they keep a close eye on the criminal code. "They tried me under article 58 section 10," they will say. "But when you look at the article itself, you can see that in my case . . .," and then follows the self-justification, the appeal to rationality. The message is that a mistake was made. But the deeper implication is that in other cases, arrest and outrageous sentence may have been justified, since few then make the next step and declare that the whole system was absurd, brutal, and inhumane.

Few survivors would follow their own logic to this point. The implication hangs mutely in their choice of words, their silences. At its core, the problem lies with Stalinism's saturating propaganda, not with their failure to think harder about the world. And there is one more key to the power of the past in their lives. For whatever doubts might have been possible in the 1930s, whatever anger smoldered among displaced peasants or impoverished clerks, the cataclysm of the Second World War would transform everything. It was the watershed in everybody's lives, and survivors of the Gulag are not exceptions.

The Gulag was a lethal place to be throughout the five years of the so-called Great Patriotic War. Its inmates were forced to work harder than ever, digging minerals, logging, or providing the raw labor for construction sites. Work was presented as their patriotic duty, their chance to make some amends, and they were pressed to do so at a time when even the supposedly free citizens of the Soviet Union labored like slaves. In the Gulag, as everywhere else, meanwhile, rations shrank, and for some prisoners they fell below the level needed for survival. Mortality rates in the camps were always appalling, but they peaked in 1942, the most terrible year in a brutal history.⁹ The prospects for those prisoners who were allowed to serve in the Red Army were hardly better. Many were drafted directly to the front, rattling from Siberia to East Prussia in unheated trains. Without training, without adequate food, clothing, or care, many would die in the first fighting that they saw. It was called "redeeming crimes against the Motherland with one's own blood."¹⁰

With such memories to haunt them, it would be natural for Gulag veterans, doubly victimized by repression and the burdens of the war, to resent everything about the system that they served. Ironically, however, most are proud of their contribution to the war effort, and proud, too, of their enduring patriotism. No survivor conveyed this to me more bluntly than Yudif Borisovna, a magnificent ninety-year-old Gulag survivor, patriot, and former communist.

Yudif's early memories include images of life in the cosmopolitan city of Odessa. It was here that she learned to play the piano, the child of well-to-do and educated parents. During the civil war, Yudif's father worked for the Cheka, the Soviet revolutionary police, and later his career in the service of the new state would take him to an elite administrative post in Moscow. His only daughter flourished at school, receiving the best education that Soviet science could provide, and by the mid-1930s she was contemplating a professional career. No one predicted the catastrophe that broke in 1937. Yudif's father was arrested that February, and her mother disappeared a few months later. In August, it was Yudif's turn. As she huddled in the Butyrki prison, or sweated her way to the Urals in the cramped wagon of a convict train, she did not know for certain that her father had been shot, nor did she know that her mother was still alive. She would learn nothing of their fates for almost twenty years. Her imprisonment, her exile in a series of dismal camps, continued until the amnesty of the 1950s.¹¹ Only then would she discover that her mother was alive, a confused semi-invalid, never able to cope with the reality of life again. The

two women returned to the Moscow region (they were banned from the city itself) and built lives for themselves, but they remained impoverished, outcast, and stigmatized. Even today, Yudif's tiny flat is scarcely furnished, her cupboards empty.

Despite all this—and much that I have no space to describe—Yudif's resilience is inspiring; she is one of the most attractive people I have ever met. She shows me a photograph of herself as a teenager, proud of the thick hair that still graces her head. There are pictures of her father, shot in the neck as a Trotskyist, a photograph of the family before everything was lost. A disaster that would have destroyed weaker people is related calmly, almost without tears. The Gulag might have broken Yudif's health, but somehow she survived. She even conceived and bore a son there, although—like so many women of her generation—she would outlive her child. She talks of the past with little bitterness, but there is one topic that remains both sensitive and irreducible. Yudif regards herself as a war veteran. Her labor was as vital to the victory as any free person's, and it was offered willingly and in a patriotic spirit.

This is the only point where rancor surfaces. Yudif can still picture the scorn that greeted her when she returned to freedom, the whispers, spitting, cold remarks. War veterans of other kinds, she comments, received generous pensions and the plaudits of a grateful state. But Yudif, loyal patriot though she remains, got nothing but cruel disdain and the whispered rumor that there is no smoke without fire. Even in the mid-1990s some kinds of veteran received more generous pensions than others. Yudif's was among the most miserly. While such discrimination lasts, while the divisions that Stalin's state established still endure, it is hard for survivors to transcend their pasts. Touchingly, however, Yudif still treasures one pathetic prize. In 1995, she was among the thousands of Gulag survivors who received a medal from Boris Yeltsin's government for their war service. The state involved had gone—the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991—and its values had been repudiated, but for people like Yudif the recognition was vital. The garish piece of plastic is one of her dearest possessions.

Yudif's patriotism is a poignant reminder of the intensity of the emotion provoked among Soviet survivors whenever the war against Hitler is mentioned. It is sad, then, that her right to be counted among the veterans is dismissed by so many of her fellow survivors. Like her, most ordinary soldiers in the Red Army grew up at a time of state violence and acute social deprivation. Few indeed are the people who can thank Stalin for richer, calmer, more fulfilling lives. Nonetheless, Red Army veterans regard themselves as an elite, more patriotic and more Soviet than the "rats" who stayed in the rear. Many—not all—view former Gulag inmates with disdain, while most would claim that the Red Army carried the main burden of the country's war effort. Sixty years of affirmation, of commemorative ceremonies, medals, speeches, and the like, have turned these former peasants and frightened young conscripts into heroes.

Having interviewed at least two hundred veterans of Stalin's war, I remain amazed by the tales of courage, stamina, and generosity that many tell. But these are almost always

framed by a pervasive myth, a story of the war as a collective exploit, and it dominates the way that the war is remembered and described. The struggle against fascism was the most vivid and demanding chapter in the lives of almost all survivors, but they relate it with surprising uniformity of style and emphasis. I can think of few examples where the state's control over ideas, and even over individual imaginations, has been more pervasive.

Veteran soldiers generally begin their accounts with very much the same biographical details about social origin, education, and party membership as Gulag survivors do. But while each Gulag story is different, and while each contains emotion of the harshest kinds, war veterans' tales tend to be bland. They pick up speed when they reach the moment when the young man signed up for the front, but thereafter there are standard words and images for almost every stage. The emphases follow a pattern, too, and the subjects that most narratives avoid are also identical. Among other things, war veterans will never talk about cowardice, desertion, or crime. Partly because of this, but also because of the uniformity of the language, their stories also have a synthetic feel. They talk as if, almost, they were describing events and emotions that affected someone else.

There are good reasons for their detachment. In the first place, veterans of the Second World War are now remembering events that happened more than sixty years ago. Anyone's memory is unreliable over such an expanse of time (a fact that most interviewers, who will not have lived as long, may easily overlook). People forget, and when they do, they turn to other sources—books and films, but most of all their own favorite and time-honored anecdotes—in order to provide a story. Confabulation is little more, in these cases, than the repetition of tales that were created years ago and that have come to stand for everything, to play the part of memory.

Like Gulag survivors, war veterans are often trying to assemble memories of trauma. In some cases, their minds will block things out, in others, long-established surrogates for memory serve better than the real thing. Not all of these are the result of individual fantasy, either. I often found, when listening to veterans' tales, that the story I was hearing had a strangely familiar ring, and often, later, I would realize that the narrative I had just heard had been written by a war novelist like Konstantin Simonov decades earlier. The point here—and it is another difference between war veterans and other survivors of Stalin's world—is that war veterans have an almost infinite supply of fictional or memoir sources to draw on. They also have an all-purpose collective myth, a morale-boosting narrative of resistance and victory created by their state during the war and sustained by it ever since. They are eager to talk, to share all this, but getting them to think back to reality, to the details of life, emotion, fear, or hope, remains difficult. They were, in fact, more difficult to interview, over and over again, than Gulag survivors.

Other problems also account for this peculiar reticence, a barrier despite the endless torrent of their words. Many claimed that they still felt bound by the oath that all Red Army soldiers had to sign before they could be demobilized. This pledged them to silence on every aspect of military life, including strategic or operational matters but also covering

the poor food and their lack of boots. They were also forbidden to mention any crimes they might have witnessed at the front, a taboo that, among other things, ruled out the whole story of rape in Prussia in 1945.¹² The state to which these people pledged this oath betrayed them terribly after 1945. Some veterans, indeed, ended up in the Gulag, including many of those who protested the army's atrocities in Germany. Moreover, the Soviet state ceased to exist years ago, negating any oaths made to it back in 1945. It is a testimony to the power of these people's loyalty—and also, perhaps, to their fear—that so many demobilized soldiers feel bound by their old promise sixty years later. Patriotism is even stronger among the veterans whose lives Stalin was so willing to throw away than it is among the victims of his vicious purge.

So what is going on, and what do these two kinds of narrative, the war veterans' stories and those of Gulag survivors, tell us about memory, trauma, and oral history? One thing that stands out is that Stalin's people had a clear idea of hierarchy. Anyone who listens to their stories would call it a hierarchy of victims, but to the survivors themselves the differences between a former inmate of the Gulag (with or without a medal for war service), a veteran of Stalingrad, and the last man to escape a punishment battalion and fight on to Koenigsberg are crucial. These differences dictate such things as the size of someone's pension, but that is not the main issue. The real hierarchy was a creation of Stalinist culture, a system that thrived by making everyone feel slightly superior to their neighbor—and desperately afraid of losing the edge that they had over others in their street.

So the power of Stalinist politics is one enduring feature of memory, but it is more important to listen for the accounts of survival. I do not mean the fables that all soldiers tell about their exploits at the front, fascinating though these may be. Oral history is not the place to look, really, for "facts"; at best it is only one of several ways of recovering the past. More telling, for in this case there is no other source, is the question of how these millions of people have managed to live with images—sounds, sights, words—that are supposed to haunt human imaginations to a disabling extent. One answer is that they did it in part by making the stories formulaic and even boring. By being boring about violence—and two hundred stories later I should know—they were also able to distance themselves from the emotional truth at the heart of all their wars.

It is that truth, in the end, and not any trick of Stalin's, that explains their enduring patriotism. Red Army veterans will often say that they fought for revenge and in a spirit of hatred for the fascists, and both those claims are largely true. More complicated, however, is the observation that they also fought out of a kind of love. To appreciate this, you need to go a bit further than the traditional explanations of combat motivation, which state that soldiers fight for their buddies, for the primary group of mates that immediately surrounds them in their billet and on the battlefield.¹³ After all, few infantrymen in the Red Army survived for more than three months at the front line. Comradeship was a transient thing, seldom allowing for enduring friendships between living men.

Death, however, was part of the story. The killing of a close friend, which was a daily, sometimes hourly, occurrence, served only to make the cause yet more sacred. Soldiers whose friends had perished could not betray their country, the patriotic cause, without betraying precious memories. A dead comrade had an even stronger hold on the imagination than a live one, indeed, for the dead can watch one's inner world. A living friend will never truly know what you are thinking, but a dead one, in imagination, sees into your soul. It was death—and comradeship—that made the war sacred, and its sanctity has never lifted. Now that they are old and failing, veterans feel an even stronger obligation to the memory of their wartime mates, to say nothing of a greater sense of their closeness. It is almost sacrilege to talk of this, let alone to question the meaning of an old person's most private sense of loss.

The other thing the war did was to destroy people's pasts. At a material level it often knocked away their homes and their careers, their prewar lives. More vitally, however, war—combat—separated people from their former selves. As every combatant attests, battle is a kind of spiritual Rubicon, to say nothing of presenting a physical challenge that can change a person overnight. Soldiers aged rapidly at the front. They developed new muscles and suntans, but they also acquired scars, injuries, and boils. Many lost teeth (and there were no toothbrushes at the front, so everyone's teeth suffered). Others were shocked to find that their hair had gone white overnight. In their letters to their wives, still others wrote of their fear that they might have become impotent.

What all this means is that the war marked a loss more profound than veterans can easily describe within the space of an interview. Only the belief that the sacrifice was worthwhile can ever make this bearable. If a veteran began to doubt that story, the result would be disabling bitterness. For this reason, too, even survivors of the Gulag turn to the story of wartime service to make sense of loss, disability, poverty, and shame.

These are the real lessons of the memories I heard over the past decade. My observations are not about false or true memory or subjectivity, nor are they about a search for facts. The most important insight that Soviet stories offer is a tale of survival in extreme circumstances, of making something out of almost nothing, and of the dignity that such a choice confers. From a political point of view, as an outsider, I might deplore the refusal to be angry or to act on the insults and injustice of Stalinism. As a listener with an open mind, however, I have learned something about human endurance. Among the people I met were scores of heroes in the simplest and most conventional sense—people who stayed beside their guns while everyone they loved lay shattered beside them, people who slipped through German lines at night, survivors of Siberian ice and darkness. Their stories of the past were inspiring, but more important was the story of their lives. They sat beside me, leafing through old pictures, and as we drank our tea they talked about their grandchildren, about the weather and the news. Despite it all, they had made real lives after the memories, evaded the specter of bitterness, and found a unique and extraordinary peace.