Parade of Fear

Russia's Memory Policy Under Ukraine's Drone Attacks

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Since May 2026, Russia's war against Ukraine has entered a new phase. Ukrainian long-range drone operations are increasingly reaching targets deep inside Russian territory, following a familiar pattern of war: sooner or later, it returns to the place from which it was launched. Whether these attacks will prove to be a strategic turning point remains unclear. One consequence, however, is already visible. The war is beginning to affect Russia's state rituals and commemorative practices.

For Russia, a state deeply invested in protecting what it calls "historical truth" – an official narrative centered on military victory, sacrifice, and national greatness – Ukrainian drones do more than damage physical infrastructure. They challenge the symbolic foundations on which contemporary Russian statehood increasingly relies.

This becomes particularly visible in the 2026 celebrations of two important dates in Russia's commemorative calendar: Russia Day on 12 June and Victory Day on 9 May. One marks the uncertain birth of post-Soviet Russia; the other celebrates the moment of greatest Soviet triumph. Together, they reveal both the internal logic of Russia's memory policy and the ways in which Ukrainian counterstrikes are beginning to disrupt it.

Between Birth and Collapse: Russia's Uneasy Independence Day

Russia Day provides a useful starting point because it reflects a persistent tension within Russia's commemorative landscape. Although intended to celebrate the emergence of the Russian Federation, the holiday has never acquired a clear and uncontested meaning. Russia Day refers to the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and is intended to symbolise the birth of modern Russian statehood.

When the holiday was first introduced in May 1991, it had no clear name. The Supreme Soviet of what was then Soviet Russia simply declared 12 June a non-working day in connection with the 1990 Declaration. A year later, in June 1992, it was given the formal title "Day of the Adoption of the Declaration on State Sovereignty of the Russian Federation" — a name so long and unwieldy that it never functioned as a public label. Instead, a different term quickly entered common usage: "Russia's Independence Day." Only in 2002 did the state settle on the current simplified name for 12 June: *Russia Day*. Yet the change in terminology did not resolve the holiday's underlying problem: Russia presents itself as the "successor" and "continuator" of the Soviet Union (Art. 67.1 of the Constitution), while the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty is widely seen as the first step toward the USSR's dissolution. The question that follows is therefore unavoidable: what exactly is Russia celebrating — the birth of modern Russia, or the beginning of the process that culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event Vladimir Putin famously described as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century"?

Notably, Russia Day occupies a peculiar position not only politically, but also legally. Under the Labour Code, 12 June is a non-working public holiday. However, unlike many other commemorative dates, it is not included in the Federal Law "On the Days of Military Glory and Commemorative Dates of Russia" (*Law*) – a statute that structures the official hierarchy of national remembrance and determines which historical events are elevated into state-sanctioned memory. The dates listed in that law are

embedded in a legally protected memory regime reinforced by Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation ("Rehabilitation of Nazism"), which criminalises, among other acts, "public expressions of clear disrespect" toward the days of military glory and related commemorative dates. The Law interprets Russia's history as a chain of military triumphs and achievements through different historical periods. The list of Days of Military Glory stretches from medieval battles such as the Battle on the Ice (1242) and Kulikovo (1380), through imperial victories at Poltava (1709) and Borodino (1812), to Soviet wartime battles including Stalingrad, Kursk, and the Siege of Leningrad. Together, these commemorations construct a continuous narrative of Russia's military strength and national survival across centuries. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Russia Day, with its internal controversies, remains outside this legally protected framework of Russia's "historical truth".

Yet, despite political and legal marginality, 12 June has the ceremonial form. Since 2003, Russia Day has been marked by presidential speeches, the presentation of state awards, and large public events in central Moscow. A concert on Red Square has become part of the established programme. In 2026, however, this format was altered: the concert was scaled down and moved to a smaller venue amid heightened security concerns linked to Ukrainian drone strike threats against the Moscow region.

Tellingly, the official sources did not mention these threats directly. Instead, the changes to the celebrations were explained by the so-called "current operational situation". It is common practice in Russian official discourse to translate politically sensitive developments into neutral administrative language. In this framing, the adjustment is presented not as a response to external pressure, but as an internal organisational decision. The disruption itself disappears from view. What remains is a narrative of continuity – as if nothing unusual had happened, and only minor technical alterations to the concert program were required under normal conditions.

Downplayed by Russian official accounts and taken in isolation, the changes to Russia Day celebrations might look insignificant. Yet they point to a wider tendency that a month earlier had already affected Victory Day – the most important celebration in Russia's political calendar.

From "Never Again" to "We Can Repeat It": The Evolution of Russia's Victory Cult

In Putin's Russia, Victory Day occupies the highest position within Russia's memory regime. The parade on Red Square on 9 May – the Victory Parade – is more than a commemorative ceremony. It symbolically connects present-day Russia to a centuries-long narrative of military triumph. In this way, it projects Russia's great-power status, historical legitimacy, and state authority.

Yet this was not always the case. Victory Day did not immediately acquire the status of a major state ritual. The memory of the war and its losses remained too immediate and too painful to be expressed through large-scale public celebrations. Thus, for a long time, 9 May was not marked as a public holiday and remained primarily a day of remembrance and mourning, structured around the idea of "Never again" – a moral injunction against the repetition of total war rather than a narrative of military victory and triumph. Only in 1965, under Brezhnev, was Victory Day reinstated as a public holiday. Even then, however, the military parade retained a limited, anniversary-based character.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the meaning and status of Victory Day shifted again. The holiday remained important but lost much of its ideological coherence amid broader uncertainty over post-Soviet state identity. Even the Federal Law "On the Perpetuation of the Victory of the Soviet People in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945", adopted in 1995 under Yeltsin, which formally institutionalised Victory Day, did not make 9 May a central political ritual. Throughout the 1990s, celebrations were relatively modest in scale and visibility.

The decisive transformation came under Vladimir Putin. During the 2000s, Victory Day and more

broadly, the Great Patriotic War narrative became the main reference point in Russia's official discourse, evolving into the foundational myth of contemporary Russian statehood. Its dominance became so pronounced that it inspired a popular joke: *"Putin's greatest political achievement is Russia's 1945 victory in the Great Patriotic War."*

Over time, a postwar culture of mourning was replaced by the idea of political mobilisation, culminating in the move from "Never again" to "We can repeat it." In Russia's Great Patriotic War narrative, World War II is no longer remembered as tragedy, but as proof of two interlocking ideas: Russia is always right, and Russia always wins. The logic is straightforward: the fact that Russia defeated Nazi Germany – the ultimate evil – implies that Russia itself cannot be evil. Russia liberated Europe; therefore, it is entitled to respect for its geopolitical claims, including "spheres of influence." Because Russia opposed Nazism in the past, those who oppose Russia today are framed as Nazis or neo-Nazis. Finally, the present generation of Russians is cast as the inheritors of heroic ancestors, expected to reproduce victories of the past. From this logic, "We can repeat it" follows. Victory Day and the Victory Parade function as demonstrations of this presumed ability.

The question, then, is what happens when this logic is confronted with Ukraine's deep strikes?

9 May 2026: Parade of Fear

As preparations for the 2026 Victory Parade began, the Kremlin faced an unusual problem. For the first time, the challenges were no longer primarily ceremonial but security-related, as the safe conduct of the event could no longer be taken for granted. Ukrainian long-range drone attacks had turned the protection of Red Square into a central issue in its own right.

Against this backdrop, at the end of April, Putin announced a temporary ceasefire covering the period from 8 to 11 May, coinciding with the 81st anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War. Ukraine rejected the idea of a ceasefire tied to the Victory Day commemorations. Instead, Zelenskyy proposed that any suspension of hostilities should begin earlier and should not be linked to symbolic dates. "We believe that human life is far more valuable than any anniversary celebration," he stated, announcing Ukraine's readiness to observe a reciprocal ceasefire from midnight on 5–6 May. Russia did not accept the proposal or respond to it substantively.

The episode exposed the diverging priorities of the two sides: for Ukraine, the ceasefire was framed as a measure to protect human life; for Russia, it was a short, time-bound pause intended to enable the Victory Day celebrations while continuing military operations. Ahead of 9 May, Zelenskyy repeatedly stated that Ukraine could not guarantee the safety of foreign delegations attending the Victory Parade. In this context, the question of security around the parade was increasingly reframed as a question of symbolic control over the conditions of its possibility. On 8 May, he signed Presidential Decree No. 374/2026 "On the Conduct of the Parade in Moscow" (Decree). The Decree stated:

"Taking into account numerous requests, for humanitarian purposes as outlined in the negotiations with the American side on 8 May 2026, I hereby decree to *permit the holding of a parade in the city of Moscow (Russian Federation) on 9 May 2026."* The Decree further specified that, "for the duration of the event [...], the territorial sector of Red Square shall be excluded from the planned use of Ukrainian weaponry", and provided the exact geographical coordinates of the protected area.

At first glance, the Decree appeared satirical. Yet reducing it to political mockery would miss its broader significance. Its force rested on a new military reality: by spring 2026, Ukraine had demonstrated an ability to strike targets deep inside Russian territory, including the Moscow region. Under these conditions, the statement that Ukraine *"permits"* the Victory Parade to take place in Moscow no longer appeared purely rhetorical.

A combination of irony with a credible military reality – that is precisely what made the decree politically effective. The Decree challenged Russia's Victory cult, showing that Moscow cannot exercise complete control over the very space in which its most important political rituals unfold. In effect, the Victory

Parade, designed to demonstrate power, sovereignty, and control, revealed the Kremlin's vulnerability.

The parade was held, but it was no longer a parade of "victory". The significance of 9 May 2026 lies not in whether Ukrainian drones appeared above Red Square, but in the fact that their possibility shaped political decisions, diplomatic exchanges, and public discourse. Security measures were visibly strengthened, some traditional elements of the military display were reduced, and extensive restrictions were imposed across Moscow. For a memory regime built on narratives of victory and military glory, that alone represented a profound symbolic shift. The celebrations of Russia Day only confirmed this.

The security concerns surrounding both holidays suggested that uninterrupted performance of state rituals could no longer be taken for granted. In this respect, May 2026 may be seen as the moment when Russia's memory regime encountered its first visible erosion.

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