

Protectors of the Great Victory Commemoration of World War II in the Russian Community of Toronto

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Résumé de l'article

La mobilisation politique de la communauté des immigrants russophones au Canada est un phénomène relativement récent, mais elle a imprégné de multiples sphères de la vie communautaire au cours des dernières années. Cet article examine : la manière dont les immigrants russophones du Grand Toronto (Greater Toronto Area, GTA) ont utilisé l'histoire et la mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale pour mobiliser leur communauté de 2014 à 2021 ; leurs organisations de commémoration de la guerre ; et ce que ces pratiques de commémoration signifiaient pour la communauté et les individus qui y ont participé. Les pratiques et les performances commémoratives au sein de la communauté russophone du Grand Toronto sont restées controversées car elles empruntaient largement à l'imagerie et aux rituels politiques soviétiques et post-soviétiques. Pourtant, comme je le soutiens dans cet article, l'activisme politique des immigrants russophones était également nourri par les politiques canadiennes de multiculturalisme et les discours politiques internationaux, tout en étant intimement lié à leurs demandes de citoyenneté à part entière et à la culture de leurs identités dans la société canadienne.

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Protectors of the Great Victory

Commemoration of World War II in the Russian Community of Toronto

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Abstract: Political mobilization of the Russian-speaking immigrant community in Canada is a relatively recent phenomenon, but it has permeated multiple spheres of community life in recent years. This paper examines how Russian-speaking immigrants living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) used the history and memory of World War II to mobilize their community from 2014–21, what forms of war commemoration they performed, and what these commemoration practices meant for the community and the individuals who participated in them. The commemorative practices and performances in the GTA's Russian-speaking community remained controversial as they borrowed extensively from Soviet and post-Soviet political imagery and rituals, yet, as I argue in this article, political activism of Russian-speaking immigrants was also informed by Canadian multiculturalism policies and international political discourses and was intimately linked to their demands for full citizenship and cultivation of their identities in Canadian society.

Keywords: diaspora; citizenship; war commemoration; Russian-speaking immigrants

Résumé: La mobilisation politique de la communauté des immigrants russophones au Canada est un phénomène relativement récent, mais elle a imprégné de multiples sphères de la vie communautaire au cours des dernières années. Cet article examine : la manière dont les immigrants russophones du Grand Toronto (Greater Toronto Area, GTA) ont utilisé l'histoire et la mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale pour mobiliser leur communauté de 2014 à 2021 ; leurs organisations de commémoration de la guerre ; et ce que ces pratiques de commémoration signifiaient pour la communauté et les individus qui y ont participé. Les pratiques et les performances commémoratives au sein de la communauté russophone du Grand Toronto sont restées controversées car elles empruntaient largement à l'imagerie et aux rituels politiques soviétiques

et post-soviétiques. Pourtant, comme je le soutiens dans cet article, l'activisme politique des immigrants russophones était également nourri par les politiques canadiennes de multiculturalisme et les discours politiques internationaux, tout en étant intimement lié à leurs demandes de citoyenneté à part entière et à la culture de leurs identités dans la société canadienne.

Mots-clés : diaspora ; citoyenneté ; commémoration de la guerre ; immigrants russophones

Preamble

I finished what I thought were the last revisions of this article a day before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. My first thought was to withdraw it, as the political mobilization among Russian speakers in Canada that I discuss in the article would have a very different meaning were it to happen today, which warrants a thorough re-evaluation of both the mobilization itself and my analysis of it. However, this article can serve as an important first step in this re-evaluation process, and while it does not give us answers to why Putin's regime has become so strong and its propaganda so powerful and effective, it provides insight into some of the diasporic practices that were shaped by the official Russian ideology and also helped to maintain and manifest it. It is important to note that the events I discuss in this article took place before the current war broke out, namely, in 2016–17. It is unlikely that these events, including the Immortal Regiment, would ever take place in Toronto (or elsewhere in Canada) again, as all public activities among Russian Canadians will from now on undoubtedly be informed by the tragedy of Russia's war in Ukraine. Yet I believe that there is a scholarly value in an anthropological analysis of my respondents' attempt to build a new community based on shared historical imagination and immigration experiences. In the end, this is why I decided to proceed with the publication of my article: after all, what I discuss here is a short-lived effort of Russian-speaking immigrants to engage in a Canadian public sphere as a diasporic group that transcended the ethnic, cultural, and religious differences of its members. The war shattered this effort and put an end to the political mobilization of the Russian-speaking community in Canada as we had known it before February 2022, and any further civic participation by this group will have to take new forms that would engage with the current role of the Russian state as an aggressor.

Introduction

On the Saturday afternoon of 6 May 2017, a large group of people gathered in the very center of downtown Toronto, at the intersection of Yonge and Dundas streets. Shop signs and large screens advertising popular clothing brands and new Hollywood movies became mixed with Russian and Soviet flags, white balloons, and portraits of Soviet servicemen and servicewomen, many of them featuring the orange and black stripes of the St. George's ribbon, a popular symbol of World War II remembrance in Russia and the Russian-speaking diaspora. People were wearing clothes portraying Russian and Soviet symbols as well as elements of Soviet military uniforms. Some participants held banners such as “Stop Sanctions against Russia!” and “Thanks to the Red Army for the Victory over Fascism! 1941–1945.” A large banner stretched over the group read “Immortal Regiment Toronto” in Russian. People were waiting in small groups and talking to each other, distributing balloons and flowers, and rearranging posters. At some point, someone brought a sound system and turned it on, and conversations and urban noise were drowned out by Soviet-era war songs. At one pm, police officers blocked a section of Yonge Street, and people started walking in an organized procession. It continued for about an hour, moving along several of downtown Toronto's major streets and finishing at Old City Hall. This event, the Immortal Regiment, originated in Russia in 2012 and has since become a transnational Russian-speaking diasporic ritual practice to commemorate Soviet veterans' sacrifices and heroism in World War II. First organized in Toronto in 2015, it is now one of the most important events in the city's Russian-speaking community.¹



Figure 1. The Immortal Regiment at Toronto's Old City Hall, 6 May 2017.
Photo by the author.

Activities commemorating World War II play a key role in the expression of patriotism in Russia and the global Russian-speaking diaspora today. As a celebration of the Soviet and Allied victory over Nazi Germany, Victory Day takes place in Russia on 9 May, and is a massive public event drawing millions of people to commemoration ceremonies and parades across Russia and abroad. In recent years, however, Victory Day became heavily politicized both by Russian authorities who are eager to use its potential for unifying and mobilizing the nation and for pushing forward their political agendas, as well as by the critics of Russia's current government, who emphasize the political abuses of the war commemoration (Walker 2018, 21–41). In the Canadian context, these public celebrations are also criticized by various groups. In May 2018, the *Toronto Sun* published an article by Marcus Kolga in which he called the World War II celebrations organized by the Russian-speaking immigrants “Putin’s bareknuckled propaganda” (2018). This article is just one example of the widespread understanding of World War II commemoration events as no more than a propaganda tool of Russian authorities, even when organized by Russian-speaking immigrants outside of Russia. This understanding is also shared by some groups of Russian-speaking immigrants themselves who are opposed to these celebrations. They often express their disapproval of these events in rather harsh terms, claiming that their organizers and participants support an oppressive regime in Russia (Nasha Canada 2016). This perception of the Immortal Regiment as a propaganda tool is extensive and, while it is important to acknowledge that these celebrations reflect and reinforce the official ideology of the national war memory, this approach is also problematic as it denies participants of such celebrations any independent agency and ignores their efforts to critically engage with a politics of war commemoration.

While my goal in this paper is not to endorse the practices and narratives that I describe, nor to justify them, I argue that it is important to develop a more nuanced understanding of what motivates the organizers and participants of the World War II-related commemorative events in Canada. What is often lost in the battles of political interpretation pursued by politicians and the mass media are the actual people who celebrate this day, take part in the parades, and wear the Saint George’s ribbon. This paper examines how immigrants make sense of World War II and its significance today, what forms of war commemoration Russian speakers in Canada perform, and what these commemorative practices mean for the community and the participants. I also focus on how

Russian speakers' engagement with history is related to their experience and performance of citizenship.

This paper is based on the material collected as a part of my dissertation research on the Russian-speaking immigrant community mobilization in Toronto during my fieldwork completed from November 2016 to August 2017. I attended two Immortal Regiment processions in May 2017, conducted formal interviews and had multiple informal conversations with community members, participants and organizers of the Immortal Regiments, and leaders of immigrant organizations. I also used social media in my research to supplement data collected during traditional ethnographic work in the community. In addition to being a source of information about various events, social media represents an important part of immigrant community life and is particularly important for diasporic groups in creating and supporting transnational networks, as well as for establishing connections in their new locations (Bernal 2005; Coleman 2010; Schrooten 2012). I found that digital media played an important role in the mobilization of the Russian-speaking community as well, including their organization of war commemoration events that I discuss in this article. Integration of online and offline ethnography was not only effective, it was also, to a certain extent, required, as their online presence was an inseparable part of the offline activity for Russian-speaking Canadians. Facebook and YouTube also proved to be particularly helpful when writing about the early days of Russian-speaking immigrant mobilization, acting as de-facto digital archives documenting their events, including the first Immortal Regiment procession. These materials provided a unique opportunity to create a somewhat limited, but immediate access to those events that I could not attend myself.

The Immortal Regiment

Dmitriy, a former Donetsk resident and one of my neighbours in Toronto, always seemed to me like someone who carefully maintained a distance from the local Russian-speaking immigrant community and avoided any form of political engagement with it. He was in his early forties and self-identified as an Eastern Ukrainian; building a career in the construction business consumed most of his time, and family took up the rest. I knew that he attended Russian Orthodox Church services on important religious holidays, but it seemed to be his only form of involvement with the area's larger Russian-speaking

community (apart from occasional shopping in Russian grocery stores). I was, therefore, surprised when early in May 2017 he asked me if I was planning to participate in the Immortal Regiment procession in Downtown Toronto, as he was eager to take part in it and was looking for company.

The Immortal Regiment is a public procession of people carrying portraits of their relatives who participated in World War II. Initially a grassroots phenomenon that emerged in 2012 in Tomsk, Russia, it soon became a nationwide movement in Russia and some other post-Soviet states, as well as among the Russian diaspora. This initiative appeared as an attempt to oppose state practices of war commemoration. The three Tomsk journalists who came up with the idea of the Immortal Regiment said they were “frustrated with the political, commercial, and militaristic overtones of the standard commemorative events and wanted to create an alternative to the usual military parades which, in their view, celebrated the state and its leaders rather than the common people who fought in the war” (Gabowitsch 2018, 307). The format turned out to be so appealing that over the next years the movement attracted more and more people and was eventually incorporated into the official program of the Victory Day celebrations. In 2015, a procession in Moscow drew half a million participants, including the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, who joined the Immortal Regiment with a portrait of his father, which caused some observers to conclude that the Immortal Regiment had turned into a state initiative. According to this view, those who join the procession are manipulated by widespread state propaganda and provide, voluntarily or not, a symbolic legitimation to President Putin and his political agenda (Gabowitsch 2018). While it is important to note that these celebrations are part of the ideological infrastructure of the Russian neoliberal state and they do endorse the official historical narrative, participation in these practices and rituals cannot be reduced to a desire to communicate political loyalties, to make a statement, or to claim identity and belonging to a larger national unity (Arkhipova et al. 2017). Dmitriy’s sudden decision to take part in the Immortal Regiment procession in Toronto suggests that the motivations pulling people to join the Immortal Regiment, as well as other forms of war commemoration, are more complex than demonstrations of political allegiance. While these motivations might be, indeed, important for some people who take part in Immortal Regiment processions around the world, I suggest that we need to look more specifically at how the political and the personal are intertwined in this practice of war

commemoration to better understand why these events became so appealing for their participants.

The current scholarship on the forms and practices of commemorating World War II in Russia and among Russian diasporas addresses various aspects of these celebrations and their controversial character. One of the pioneering and most influential works that established this trend was Nina Tumarkin's *The Living and the Dead* (1994). Tumarkin (1994, 189) focused on the official Soviet memory of World War II and claimed that it was a product of the manipulation of history by Soviet propagandists, "a carefully orchestrated symphony in a major key, promoting an image of national harmony and unity", an interpretation that, as she argued in her later writing, also holds true for Russia after Vladimir Putin's ascension to the presidency in 2000 (Tumarkin 2010). A similar approach has informed a lot of other scholarship on World War II commemoration, including a large-scale research project, *Memory at War: Cultural Dynamics in Poland, Russia and Ukraine*, which discusses public celebrations of Victory Day in Russia in terms of the politics of memory and memory wars where political elites were represented as the dominant players (Fedor et al. 2017). Other scholars have complicated the role of the state and political elites, arguing, in particular, that there is an intricate and non-linear system of relationships between different state actors and people who participate in these celebrations and emphasized that it is not possible to understand the meaning of the World War II celebrations if we simply oppose state-endorsed historical narratives and the "authentic public memory" (Gabowitsch 2015; Kurilla 2018).

Another approach to understanding the commemoration of World War II focuses on the performative character and the affective potential in communities producing commemoration. The affective and performative aspects of commemoration, especially in regard to community building, have long been the subject of scholarship on the Holocaust, in particular, and historical trauma more generally (LaCapra 1996). In the context of post-Soviet Russia, Serguei Oushakine discusses the different ways in which the Great Patriotic War, which is how World War II is known in Russia, is remembered, showing how historical reconstructions are used to demonstrate a link with the past, "to provoke a sense of authentic connection with the past" (Oushakine 2013, 270). In his discussion on the Pearl Harbor memorial, Geoffrey White also emphasized the role of emotional response in bridging "past events and present-day selves" (White 2000, 526). Scholars have addressed how these practices have recently started to

include more and more theatrical and even carnival elements, aiming at evoking an emotional response from their participants, such as historical re-enactments, where people wear war-time uniforms, dress children and even babies in uniforms, and decorate their strollers as military machinery (Arkhipova and Kirziuk 2015; Brown 2015). This latter trend emphasizes performance and affective elements of commemoration, and a focus on these aspects allows us to better understand the meaning of war commemoration for participants of these events and, in the case of my research, its importance for immigrant community mobilization.

The Immortal Regiment in Toronto

The first Immortal Regiment in Toronto took place in May 2015, and it was one of the first events that brought together a large segment of the Greater Toronto Area's Russian-speaking community in a public space. Marina, one of the organizers, described in an interview with me how the first event was planned:

We heard about it in 2014, and we got excited. We only managed to organize it in 2015, though. Nobody knew anything about what we were doing. There were like five of us, all women, and we went to the Russian stores, printed some flyers, and were just telling people about it, about what the Immortal Regiment was, why we wanted to organize it, why we had to bring portraits. Nobody knew anything about it.

Marina admitted that the biggest fear of the organizers was that only a few people would show up, but instead, they had an impressively large procession of several hundred participants. The Immortal Regiment has since become particularly important for the mobilization of the community. Since 2015, the event has been organized every year in early May² and has become so popular that, beginning in 2016, several Immortal Regiments have been held on the same weekend by different immigrant groups. For example, in May 2017, during my fieldwork in Toronto, three Immortal Regiment processions were organized by the groups that had failed to negotiate a common time and venue.³

I attended two of the Immortal Regiment processions in 2017. One of them took place in Toronto's Russian neighborhood on 7 May 2017. It began with Vasily Lebedev-Kumach and Alexander Alexandrov's song *The Sacred War*, an unofficial Soviet World War II anthem, played over giant loudspeakers. People started moving along the streets; a large poster on a red background proclaimed in Russian "No one is forgotten. Nothing is forgotten," and was carried at the



Figure 2. The Immortal Regiment in Toronto's Russian neighbourhood, 7 May 2017.
Photo by the author.



Figure 3. The Immortal Regiment in Toronto's Russian neighbourhood, 7 May 2017.
Photo by the author.

front of the procession along with another red poster reading “Immortal Regiment Canada” in both English and Russian. “We want our children and grandchildren to remember this, too. We will pass our memory to them. Hurray!” one of the organizers said over a loudspeaker while walking along in the procession. Most people in the procession chimed in when she exclaimed, “Hurray!” In addition to portraits, people also carried other kinds of posters. One of them was a large banner with a mixture of Russian and English stating: “I remember! I am proud” (in Russian: “*Ya pomniu! Ya gorzhus*”); “Remember the Soviet soldiers who died in WWII”; “Liberating Europe from fascism and Nazi genocide!” and the numbers showing how many people had died during the war in the USSR (26 million) and in other countries by comparison.⁴ The procession’s final destination was a local neighbourhood park, where the Russian Congress of Canada, one of the Russian-speaking immigrant organizations in Toronto, had prepared a large celebration that started with a short parade by a group of war reenactors clad in full World War II-era uniforms. The parade also included Soviet war veterans living in Toronto.

The organization of these events requires a fair amount of effort, and during my fieldwork, I heard numerous accounts of the labour and personal finances people invested in carrying out their initiatives. Like most community organizations, their operation expenses were generally small, as were their budgets; they relied on membership fees, donations by community members or sponsorship by small local businesses, as well as on other small sources of income, such as selling food during their events. Their relationships with the Russian embassy and consulate were also rather superficial, in spite of multiple yet mostly unverified claims that the Russian authorities stood behind the organization of these celebrations (see Kolga 2018; Levin and Becker 2017). Representatives of the Russian consulate were invited to these events, and they often attended; however, as a participant of these events, I had the opportunity to observe interactions between the consulate representatives and community members, which clearly positioned those officials as honourable guests rather than hosts or influencers.

Another Immortal Regiment procession that I attended that year took place in downtown Toronto, an event I briefly describe at the beginning of this article (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Parade at Earl Bales Park, 7 May 2017. Photo by the author.



Figure 5. The Immortal Regiment in downtown Toronto, 6 May 2017. Photo by the author.

For the 2017 event the organizers brought two long pieces of fabric, one in the colours of the Russian national flag (white, blue, and red), and the other in the colours of the St. George's ribbon (yellow and black). These enormous banners were about one metre in width and long enough to stretch for about a block. People on both sides of the procession were carrying them, with others walking in the centre, between the two banners. The lengths of fabric were not long enough to enclose all participants of the procession, but they covered a large segment of it. Others walked behind with flags and portraits. The demonstration proceeded along the streets, accompanied by police officers who stopped the traffic to allow people to walk.

For the entire duration of the procession, music was played over portable speakers. Music is an important part of the war commemoration in general, and most of the events employ music, inevitably creating a strong emotional response among participants (Oushakine 2013, 289). Music has also become an important element of other forms of civic engagement and political participation in the Canadian public sphere for Russian-speaking immigrants. For example, one of the first events I attended when started my fieldwork in the community was a performance of the Soviet song "*Khotiat li russkie voiny*" ("Do the Russians Want War?" with lyrics by the renowned Soviet poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and music by Eduard Kolmanovsky) by a group of Russian-speaking immigrants at Toronto's central railway station.⁵ For this group of people, this public performance of the song was a form of protest against what they perceived as an unfair treatment of Russia by the international community in the aftermath of war in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Songs were also widely used during a number of political rallies organized since 2014 against Canadian support of the Ukrainian government.

I came to take part in that procession as a researcher, and while I spent some time observing from a distance, remaining on the sidewalks, there were several times when I was included in the procession as a participant. It was this experience of participant observation that I found very important for my understanding of this event as a commemorative ritual. I followed the procession for some time, but then I joined it and found myself walking in the very middle of a large crowd of people. I did not have a portrait to carry, but there were many other people without portraits, so this did not set me apart. Then somebody invited me to join a group of people carrying a large banner. It was not something I had planned, but at that moment, it did not feel right to refuse, so I ended up holding the banner portraying Russia's national colours.



Figure 6. The Immortal Regiment in downtown Toronto, 6 May 2017. Photo by the author.

While I continued with the procession, I was thinking about my own experience of being a part of this large group of people gathered together to celebrate the memory of their parents and grandparents. Like most of them, I also have great-grandparents who died in World War II and grandparents who lived through World War II as children and lost their fathers and siblings. My great-grandmother lost her husband, and then their daughter died when they were evacuated to the Kola Peninsula. She once told me matter-of-factly how her daughter got sick and ended up in the hospital, while my great-grandmother had to keep on working. Since the hospital was far away, she could not stay with her daughter or even visit her every day, and one day she arrived at the hospital only to learn that her daughter had died the previous day. I was thinking about her experience while we were walking past Toronto SickKids where I had taken my own child for a critical medical treatment just a few weeks earlier. This was a very strange experience that I could not articulate at that time, but that I wrote about in my fieldnotes after I came home. I continued to think about what it meant to me personally to be a part of that event, and to what extent my experience could be extrapolated to the experience of the other people I was walking next to.

There are two main approaches to how war memory and commemoration are studied (Ashplant et al. 2000). One of these approaches, developed first in the works by Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, is political (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1983), where war commemoration is analyzed primarily as a

part of nation-building projects controlled by the state, “as a practice bound up with rituals of national identification, and a key element in the symbolic repertoire available to the nation-state for binding its citizens into a collective national identity” (Ashplant et al. 2000, 7). The other approach focuses instead on the psychological meaning of commemoration as a human response to the experiences of war, death, and suffering (Winter and Sivan 1999). Jay Winter (1995), in particular, emphasizes the need to address how war commemoration translates individual grief into public mourning for the dead. Ashplant et al. (2000) criticize these two approaches for constructing themselves as mutually exclusive, with the first one focusing on how war memories are shaped by the state, and the other addressing individuals and civil society and how they remember. In contrast, they argue that these processes are interrelated and constitutive of each other and that “[t]he politics of war memory and commemoration always has to engage with mourning and with attempts to make good the psychological and physical damage of war; and wherever people undertake the tasks of mourning and reparation, a politics is always at work” (Ashplant et al. 2000, 9). In his more recent book, Jay Winter (2006, 276) also emphasizes the interrelatedness of state politics and individual agency in the work of remembrance. He continues his analysis by claiming that “remembrance is a facet of family life and of civil society, that space which reaches from the family to the state”. Although his research focuses on the period immediately after the war, which was a different context from current World War II commemorations in Russia, this perspective provides an important insight into understanding war commemoration and Victory Day celebrations in Russia, as it reflects complicated relations between individual memory, family history, and state-initiated and supported practices of remembrance. There is a lot of discussion on the relationship between public and private domains of World War II memory in the Soviet Union and today’s Russia. As David Hoffmann (2022, 5) argues in the introduction to his recent volume on the memories of World War II, “people’s memories are shaped by the narratives they have heard and the representations of the past they have seen”. The role of official narratives in shaping personal memories is important to consider when discussing forms of World War II commemoration, as they provide people with a language to express their memories and their family histories and give meaning to their experiences (Hoffmann 2022).

In the context of the Immortal Regiment celebrations, the personal and the political get so closely intertwined, and it is not always possible to delineate

one from another. Personal and family memories are extremely important for the participants, but it does not strip these celebrations of any political dimension. In the cultural logic of these people, their parents and grandparents who had lived through World War II were undoubtedly heroes. Many assumed that the current criticism of the Russian government in Canada threatened their heroic status, and so it was not a loyalty to the Russian political system that forced them to organize the Immortal Regiment, but rather a strong urge to protect their family history and the memory of their loved ones. People who walked the streets of Toronto with portraits of their parents and grandparents needed others to witness and affirm their experience in order to remind the world of what their relatives had accomplished. In a 2016 video recording from the Immortal Regiment procession in Toronto, one of the participants, a man in his fifties, explained his motivation to participate: “We are here to draw attention to our history, to let the world know that we care about our history. It’s not just about facts, it’s a personal matter to everyone here” (Art Vision Production 2016). This is a common sentiment, as many immigrants perceive the Immortal Regiment as a “personal matter,” and when I was talking to people who were involved in organizing the Immortal Regiment in Toronto, one of the most important motivations they expressed was a very personal feeling of being hurt and offended by what they perceived as the unjust treatment of Russia by the international community.

One of the main aspects of this perceived injustice was a large-scale diminishing and re-evaluating of the role the Soviet Union played in World War II in the western political and popular culture. Scholars of modern citizenship such as Benedict Anderson and Katherine Verdery have suggested that patriarchal family relations often serve as models for national communities (Anderson 1983; Verdery 1996). Verdery, in particular, has argued that the gender regime of socialism implied strong paternalism where individual families “were bound into a larger familiar organization of patriarchal authority with the ‘father’ Party at its head” (Verdery 1996, 64). This is what makes “incursions” on Russia’s national historical narrative so personal for many of my respondents and further blurs the boundaries between the personal and the political. There is a significant difference between immigrants’ knowledge of the Soviet experience of World War II (including the death toll, the scale of wartime occupation, and the degree of devastation in the USSR) and the critical perspectives that they encounter in western political discourses and mass-media coverage. These western perspectives, also transmitted through much of the

western popular culture, usually include minimizing the role the Soviet Union played in the defeat of the Axis Powers and a much bigger emphasis on the negative aspects of the Soviet role in the war and post-war periods, including the occupation of Eastern European states. Informed by the gender regime of (post)-socialism, my respondents extrapolate these perspectives as an attack on their own family legacies.

Many of my respondents believed that these critical perspectives were further reinforced in Canada by political and cultural elites from post-socialist countries such as Ukraine or the Baltic states, as their perspective on the role the Soviet Union played during and after World War II was very different from that of the official Soviet version of history that shaped the historical knowledge of the average Soviet person. This critical version of history became especially pronounced in Canada after Russia became involved in the military and political conflict with Ukraine in 2014, and the increased visibility of the Ukrainian Canadian community and the continued military and humanitarian support provided by Canada to the Ukrainian government caused many Russian-speaking immigrants to fear that this would lead the Canadian public to embrace a widespread support of dominant Ukrainian perspectives on Soviet history.

Being closely entangled with the political domain, individual and family histories play a significant role in the celebrations, even if they are formed to a large extent by official Soviet and post-Soviet war narratives and relived in the context of a formal event with its abundance of state symbolics and the official formulaic language. When I was walking in the procession carrying the banner, it was not Soviet or Russian flags that evoked my emotional response but rather very personal memories of my great-grandmother, her suffering, and my pain that I, as a mother myself, felt when thinking about her losing her child. Being a public event that is inserted into the official national narrative, the Immortal Regiment cannot be stripped of its political meaning, but it is at the same time a personal and even intimate event, which provokes a strong emotional response from its participants. Discussing the interplay of personal stories and collective histories in the context of the Pearl Harbor memorial, Geoffrey White (2000) shows the role of emotions in the production of national narratives and national identity. He explores how emotions work “to link interlocutors, social categories, and represented events” (2000, 512) and shows their importance in the process of shaping social identities. When analyzing war commemorations in Russia, Serguei Oushakine (2013) also emphasizes their ability to produce strong emotional states and affective solidarity. The main aftermath of the

Immortal Regiment event for its organizers and participants was the emotions they experienced and tried to capture and express in later conversations, as well as the feeling of belonging that they experienced when walking together with other people and holding the portraits of their loved ones. When people discussed the first Immortal Regiment held in 2015 on Facebook a few days after it took place, most posts were about emotions. “I’ve been living with the feeling of happiness since yesterday,” claimed one of the participants, while another recollected: “We were standing there and crying, and those were the tears of joy.”

The Immortal Regiment was a way for the Russian-speaking immigrant community to insist that their historical experience should be recognized and to claim the streets of Toronto as their own space. This march allowed people to bring together their Canadian experience with their post-Soviet background as they exercised their presence as political actors and exercised their political power to contest dominant narratives of history. Earlier I mentioned a common critique of the Immortal Regiment processions in Toronto, namely, that those who take part are pro-Putin activists or even Kremlin puppets. This critique, however, misses a crucial point that the celebrations of Victory Day in the Greater Toronto Area are not only about the participants’ Russian identity, but also an attempt to claim their ethnic and cultural heritage in a multicultural Canadian society, as well as full inclusion in Canadian citizenship. It is also important to note here that the organizers of the Immortal Regiment continuously refer to themselves and other participants as Russian Canadians. This sentiment was manifested in an open letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that was posted on Facebook by one of the organizers of the Immortal Regiment:

Russia and the Soviet Union paid the highest price for victory. 27 million people, soldiers and civilians, died across the vast battlefields of Europe. Millions were sent to and died in concentration camps across the continent. We are the children of those who have survived the horrors of war. We have come from near and far. We have become Canadians. Today, together, we remember our heritage.

We wish to send our message across Canada and to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: Canada and Russia stood shoulder to shoulder against Nazi Germany; for the sake of peace, for the sake of freedom. And now, we once again stand together, we continue to honor Victory Day. Today, together, we remember, and we say: “Never Again!” Happy Victory Day!

The letter expresses a feeling of belonging to the global Russian-speaking community and to Canada at the same time. It asserts a genealogical succession and indebtedness of immigrants to the Soviet people who stopped the advance of Nazism, while simultaneously asserting Russian Canadians' present-day place in Canadian society. The symbolic importance of the Immortal Regiment for the Russian-speaking immigrant community in Toronto is that it helped manifest a number of elements, such as: their ethnic, cultural, and historical heritage; connections with other members of the community; and performances of national pride.

In the context of widespread criticism, Russian-speaking immigrants often find themselves in a situation where they have to justify their participation in World War II commemoration events. For several years, Ottawa's Russian-speaking community organized May 9 celebrations at the Canadian War Museum, but in 2019 the museum sent a letter to the organizers of the Victory Day celebrations to inform them that "the museum is no longer the appropriate venue for the [Victory Day] event." The Museum's refusal to host the event was most likely the result of the previous year's incident when a pro-Ukrainian activist provoked a conflict with Russian-speaking participants at the event (addressed in Kolga 2018). A group of Russian-speaking activists prepared a petition to the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism in 2019 (Ottawa Russian Speaking Community 2019). It is interesting to look at the comments left by those who signed the petition to see how they justify their position on the World War II celebrations in Canada:

I am signing this petition because that museum is carrying the memory of humanity for fighting Nazism and fascism cultivated by Hitler in Germany. 27 million Soviet people died in that war. Canadians have to understand these sacrifices. [...] USA AND CANADA WERE ALLIES WITH SOVIET UNION DURING THAT WAR.

Preserving my heritage is important right of a human! These actions are violating my constitutional rights!

More than one million Canadians and Newfoundlanders served in the military —more than 45,000 gave their lives and another 55,000 were wounded. We remember about that. Do you?

The commentators invoked the violation of their rights as Canadian citizens, emphasized the fact that the Soviet Union and Canada were wartime allies, and stressed the role of the Soviet Union in the victory and the need to remember

it. Similar sentiment informs a letter written by a Russian-speaking immigrant organization two years prior in 2017 and addressed to the Canadian Parliament, which was asked to “denounce attempts to besmirch the collective memories of the Great Victory over German Nazism and to stop falsification of history:”

For most people of the former USSR, the Victory Day of May 9 is much more than a calendar date to commemorate the long-gone war. It is not a political event to celebrate this or that historical leader, a political regime, or a system, but a very personal day. On Victory Day we celebrate the bravery and heroism of our veterans and those who worked for the Victory on the home front. We remember our personal family history and teach it to our children. We commemorate and honour the incredibly high price that our veterans and World War II survivors had paid in blood, sweat and tears to stop the global rise of fascism. For the majority of Canadians who came to this country from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, it is common to commemorate the fallen in World War II and celebrate the [sic] Victory Day as a sacred holiday (Russian Congress of Canada 2017).

The authors of the letter above emphasize the non-political character of the celebrations, and claim they are “a personal day,” a day when they remember their “personal family history.” These celebrations are, however, political, as is this letter, as they become a space for immigrants to claim their diasporic belonging. Researchers who study diasporas and transnationalism argue that immigrant groups today remain increasingly attached to their homelands, developing a dual sense of belonging (Basch et al. 2005; Coutin 2007; Reed-Danahay and Brettell 2008; Vertovec 2010). These multiple belongings, participation in ethnic organizations, and ties to their homeland do not prevent immigrants’ civic engagement in their host country and, instead, even help them to develop a feeling of belonging to their new country, or, as James Clifford wrote “to live inside, with a difference” (Clifford 1994, 308). For the Russian Canadians who participated in the World War II commemoration events, these celebrations became a venue to engage in the Canadian public sphere shaped by the politics of multiculturalism, to claim their full citizenship in Canadian society.

Conclusion

The commemoration of World War II and the celebration of Victory Day have become an important symbolic vehicle for Russian-speaking immigrants to

claim their right to remember their parents and grandparents, to stand against what they perceive as an intentional “tarnishing” of their memory, and to build a local community. In response to perceived threats to their personal and national history, a large part of the Russian-speaking immigrant community of the Greater Toronto Area came together as an affective community of historical remembrance and performance. Borrowing cultural forms that originally appeared in Russia, such as the political rhetoric of the Great Victory, performative rituals, and even monumental forms of expression⁶, immigrant organizations and ad-hoc groups worked to increase the visibility and recognition of Russian-speaking immigrants as full members of Canadian society whose understanding and performance of citizenship include an appreciation of their historical, cultural, and language background. In order to assert recognition of this hybrid form of citizenship, these organizations and groups sought to build a positive image of Russian national history; their efforts were especially driven by a desire to counteract what they interpreted as hostile and disrespectful portrayals of their community circulating in public discourse.

Their performance of Russian identity became for them a necessary element in claiming their cultural citizenship, as well as a basis for their dignified representation and participation in the public sphere. This observation parallels some previous research on other immigrant communities and their participation in ethnic and religious associations as a form of involvement in host societies and of establishing their belonging (Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012; Collet and Lien 2009; Siu 2005). Forms of war commemoration, including the Immortal Regiment I addressed in this article, have been borrowed from current commemorative practices in Russia, and so are part of a globally circulating Russian culture. Yet, at the same time, these commemorative practices became integrated into the Canadian political and social context as a means for Russian-speaking Canadians to perform their cultural rights as Canadian citizens. The Russian-speaking community is part of the global Russian diaspora, but, more importantly, this is a community that seeks to be an integral part of Canadian society.

The involvement of diasporic groups in political life in Canada is a common and established practice, and by borrowing forms of civic engagement from the Canadian political scene, Russian-speaking immigrants are striving to become Canadians. They embrace Canadian citizenship practices, but for them, their allegiance to the new country co-exists with a sense of belonging to their homeland. In a world where nation-states mostly still imagine citizenship

in a singular form, with political allegiance and belonging grounded in one state, the Russian Canadian experience is illustrative of how diasporas over the globe negotiate their multiple forms of belonging and growing investments in exercising their rights as citizens.

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Notes

- 1 I use the term “Russian-speaking” rather than “Russian,” as the people I write about belong to different ethnic groups and hold different citizenships, but they all identify themselves as culturally belonging to a larger Russian-speaking (*russkoiazychnoe*) community, an entity not limited to those who identify as ethnically Russian. The people I write about identified as Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Uzbeks, etcetera; prior to their immigration to Canada they lived in Russia, Moldova, Israel, Ukraine, Lithuania, etcetera. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, the number of Canadians who reported that they primarily spoke Russian at home was 194,310. Most of these Russian-speakers live in Ontario (104,510 people), and 86,495—or 44.5% of all Russian-speaking immigrants in Canada—live in Toronto (Statistics Canada 2016).
- 2 It took place annually until 2020, when the event was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it did not take place in 2021 either due to continuing social distancing guidelines and restrictions in Canada.
- 3 In Russia, these celebrations always happen on 9 May, which is a statutory holiday marking the end of World War II. However, immigrant communities around the world, including in Canada, tend to organize celebrations on the previous weekend in the event that 9 May is a workday, as most people would not be able to attend.
- 4 The widely recognized figure of 26.6 million Soviet casualties (including the armed forces, home front, and occupied territories) was produced in the late 1980s by professional historians and demographers on the basis of thorough archival research.

Some of my respondents, such as in this example, rounded it down to 26 million; and others, including respondents later in this article, rounded it up to 27 million (Krivosheev 1997, 83–84).

- 5 For a larger historical and cultural context, in which this and other Soviet anti-war songs were deployed, see (Braginskii 2011).
- 6 For several years, Soviet veterans and Russian-speaking immigrant organizations attempted to build a monument in Toronto to commemorate Soviet soldiers and civilians who died fighting Nazi Germany. They applied for permission with the city of Toronto but, according to one of the immigrant community activists, in spring 2017 their request was denied. Russian-speaking immigrant activists then decided to build a memorial on private land where they were not required to obtain permission from the city. The monument was built and officially unveiled in September 2017.

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