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Putin mixes pomp with politics in victory parade snubbed by the West

by [Michael Birnbaum](#)

MOSCOW — Russia's vast celebrations Saturday to mark the 70th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany had nearly everything: 16,000 marching soldiers, medal-bedecked veterans and families carrying photographs of those who died long ago.

But conspicuously absent from the memorial of the Soviet Union's joint victory with the West were the leaders of those wartime allied nations. A year into a conflict in Ukraine that the West says is fueled by the Kremlin, the tribunes in Red Square were stocked with officials from nations that had little association with the Soviet Union's painful wartime sacrifices. Even some Kremlin critics said they were disappointed by the snub.

A decade ago, President George W. Bush sat next to Russian President Vladimir Putin on stands in front of Lenin's Tomb to observe the 60th anniversary. A decade before that, President Bill Clinton came to Moscow in an emotional post-Cold War visit. But on Saturday, the most prominent visitor's seat went to Chinese President Xi Jinping, with whom Putin has tried to build bridges as relations with the West have soured because of the war in Ukraine.

In brief remarks on Red Square ahead of a bristling review of Russian firepower that included high-tech new tanks, anti-missile systems and even a few ICBMs, Putin bridged commemoration of the past with anger over the present.

"We are grateful to the people of the United Kingdom and France, and the United States of America for their contribution to this victory," Putin said, speaking in front of a screen that covered Lenin's tomb, where the embalmed remains of the founder of the Soviet Union are still on display.



Somber ceremonies in the United States and across Europe mark the 70th anniversary of the fall of Nazi Germany.

“But during the last decade, the basic fundamental principles of international cooperation were increasingly ignored,” he said. “We saw attempts to set up a unipolar world order. We see the use of force. This kind of mentality undermines global stability.”

The United States was represented by Ambassador John Tefft, a low-key presence. Britain sent a grandson of Winston Churchill. China and India were the only major nations to send their heads of state, alongside about two dozen other leaders including U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. German Chancellor Angela Merkel plans to lay wreaths at a Moscow war memorial Sunday, but she steered clear of Saturday’s parade.

Putin has mixed remembrance with harsher modern-day rhetoric during his 15 years in office, expanding what had been a quieter parade in the 1990s into a muscular display of military strength reminiscent of the Soviet era. On Saturday, several new heavy military vehicles rolled through Red Square, the product of an expensive modernization that Russian leaders have bragged will spook the West. Russian state media touted that the new Armata T-14 battle tank, unveiled for the first time for the occasion, “sends shivers down Washington’s spine.”

World War II — known here as the Great Patriotic War — reaches far more deeply into Russia’s psyche than it does in the West. [Nearly every family in the Soviet Union lost someone](#) in their effort to defeat Hitler’s Germany. Many families, including Putin’s, lost most of an entire generation. An estimated 27 million Soviet citizens perished, an unparalleled toll.

Ordinary Russians mark the Victory Day anniversary far away from the rumbling tanks in Red Square with solemn visits to cemeteries to lay flowers on the graves of family members. As if to bolster the greatly diminished ranks of surviving veterans, thousands of people marched down a central Moscow boulevard after the parade Saturday carrying photos of departed veterans in their families.

Moscow authorities said more than 500,000 people had taken part, a measure of the near-universal sacrifices made here. Young children dressed as miniature Soviet-era soldiers handed flowers to the few remaining veterans. In front of the Bolshoi Theatre, crowds gathered to listen to wartime songs.

Many veterans spoke fondly of old memories of cooperation with the United States. Evgeny - Bocharov, 87, said U.S. rations — especially canned meat and preserved bread — were a “tasty” godsend near the end of the war, when he was working on a minesweeper in the Baltic Sea.

But little of the wartime cooperation was visible Saturday, as most of the 70-odd leaders who were invited stayed away, fueling a sense here that Russia had been slighted on what will probably be the final major anniversary at which more than a handful of surviving veterans will be present.

“We lost 27 million people so that we could live in peace,” said Col. Andrei Pavlenko, 87, who was walking in his medal-bedecked green uniform in front of Moscow’s main war memorial at Victory Park ahead of the ceremonies. He said he had lied about his age to join the Soviet army at age 15 and was part of a home guard near Kharkiv in Ukraine.

“It was our victory. But the fact that no one is coming to our celebration is a humiliation,” he said. “Now Russia is being called the aggressor.”

After a year in which World War II-era rhetoric has been revived to justify Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, many in the West were cautious about reviewing a military parade. On the streets of - Moscow, the term “fascist” now refers not just to a cruel regime defeated 70 years ago but also to Ukraine’s current leadership and to Kremlin critics more generally. More than 6,100 people have died in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, according to U.N. estimates.

The orange-and-black-striped St. George’s Ribbons that are a symbol here of the World War II victory are also an emblem of the rebels in eastern Ukraine and an expansionist Russian nationalism. The ribbons now flutter from Russians’ lapels and from rear-view mirrors and even adorn cushions inside the Kremlin.

After the military parade, Putin and the world leaders who joined him laid red carnations at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier outside the Kremlin’s crenellated walls.

Within the Soviet Eastern bloc, Victory Day has long been a fraught occasion, where some people resent that the celebrations paper over a moment that for some people exchanged Nazi brutality for nearly a half-century of Communist repression.

In Ukraine, where millions of soldiers were also killed fighting in the Red Army, solemn commemorations also took place, although they focused on the sacrifices of battle, not on modern-day military prowess. In a symbolic move, President Petro Poroshenko rescheduled Ukraine's celebrations a day earlier, alongside the rest of Europe and away from Russia, and called it World War II — the Western term — rather than the Great Patriotic War.

Some in Russia who remember the war said they had little use for the military aspects of the parade.

“I hope there will be no more victory days, no more victories to celebrate, that there will be no more wars,” said Boris Zaretsky, 78, who grew up in a Nazi-held children's prisoner camp near Odessa in modern-day Ukraine and later joined Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

“It wasn't a childhood,” he said. “It's better to talk than to fight.”

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