Commemorations and Ethnicity: Victory Day Celebrations Among Elderly Russian Jews in Brooklyn

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COMMENORATIONS AND ETHNICITY: VICTORY DAY CELEBRATIONS AMONG
ELDERLY RUSSIAN JEWS IN BROOKLYN

By

AMY EMERY KRAIZMAN

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts, The City University of New York

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Amy Emery Kraizman

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Commemorations and Ethnicity:

Victory Day Celebrations Among Elderly Russian Jews in Brooklyn

by

Amy Emery Kraizman

Adviser: Professor Mehdi Bozorgmehr

Victory Day on May 9th is known by Russians as “the holiday with a tear in one’s eye.” But in south Brooklyn, many miles away from their “motherland,” confers the Russian Jewish immigrants a freedom to express allegiance on their own terms, choosing their own set of songs, emblems, and activities by blending premigration symbolism from the Soviet era with adaptations to American society. This study demonstrates that in the post-Soviet era, Victory Day remains an important yet contentious holiday commemorating the end of fascism and World War II. My methodology includes the use of secondary data, textual analysis and non-participant observation. I draw upon four Victory Day events which I attended as a non-participant observer to explore how the emphasis on Victory has shifted in the local parades and social events in south Brooklyn, where those who celebrate it publicly express an ethnicity and identity that is distinctive to their shared past as Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union.
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INTRODUCTION

Victory Day, known by Russians as “the holiday with a tear in one’s eye,” is an important celebration, commemorating the end of fascism and World War II. May 9, 2015, marked the 70th anniversary of Victory Day, and the parade in Moscow was the largest parade since the collapse of the Soviet Union. My thesis explores the mnemonic praxis of commemoration of World War II for Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union. I will demonstrate how symbolic ethnicity and collective agency is expressed during public Victory Day celebrations in south Brooklyn, where, away from the motherland, Russian-speaking Jews have considerable freedom to express their allegiance to one another on their own terms, utilizing ethnic symbols and Soviet artifacts to create a unique blend of ethnic identification.

I am interested in how cultural artifacts, such as songs, from the period of the Soviet Union are reappropriated or omitted in the context of commemorations in south Brooklyn. Whether one refers to the war as The Great Patriotic War or World War II, or the end as V-E, as is common in England, there is an innate perspective that determines ordinary language choices. Americans typically cannot understand the rhetoric behind Russian language choices in the same way an older Russian has internalized cultural subtexts. That comment may seem obvious; nevertheless, I think it is important to acknowledge the distinction of who are the beholders, as well as my positionality as a non-native Russian speaker.

My familiarity with Soviet war songs was actually the departure point for my research that segued into the broader topic of Victory Day celebrations. In 2011, I led a singing group of older Russian immigrants at an independent living facility in Sea Gate, Brooklyn. My hope for
the singing group was to bring together people who enjoyed singing popular Russian songs. I was intrigued by the integration of oral history into their songs. The profound power of music is without question. I began to ask: how do music and symbols, particularly Soviet symbols, engender connectivity and historical reinterpretation? By examining Soviet artifacts utilized during Victory Day I have gleaned participants’ beliefs and identifications. For example, one of the narrative threads amongst older Russians is “We all lost someone,” a thread emphasized at Victory Day commemorations.

At the first session at Seagate, I was asked to sing a song “as a warm up.” Although my intention was not to perform solo, I sang “Dark Nights” – my favorite song – one I felt comfortable playing the guitar and singing. One participant began to cry as I sang. It was difficult to continue singing after I noticed her tears. After I finished the song, she explained that her father had written the lyrics verbatim in a letter he sent to her mother while he was fighting Nazis on the front. Such mimesis is common with this song. The lyrics of “Dark Nights” which for example, “In the dark night, I know you my love are not sleeping, and at the child’s crib, out of sight, you wipe away a tear,” resonated for many in the all-women group.

I noticed the participants' affinity for the songs of their past, even when these songs triggered painful memories about war, loss, and survival. I utilized songs as a medium, or a tool to engage in discussions of shared experiences and memory. Soviet songs incited my interest in the ways older Russians referred to their past within the broader context of Victory Day celebrations. I became fascinated with the songs and symbols embedded in the yearly ritual of Victory Day commemoration.
BACKGROUND

Victory

How can Russia claim “victory,” some ask, considering that total casualties (military and civilian deaths combined) are estimated at 20 million, whereas in Germany the total was considerably less at approximately 4,200,000? Events in Russia following WWII were not aligned to uphold the dignity of Soviet soldiers and people. Soviet atrocities before WWII, such as Holodomor (1932-1933), Bykivnia (Stalinist purges from the early 1920s until the late 1940s), Katyn (1940), and Babi Yar (1941) have not been recounted by the government with explicit accuracy or admission. Victory Day, as a commemorative ritual, draws its power from multiple contextual meanings and historical events, such as Babi Yar, nameless atrocities that have been silenced. People knew of these events but were not granted full access to the details. Like Babi Yar, the historical record on Russia’s WWII conflict is incomplete.

“Victory” in the “great Patriotic War” is significant in Russia and throughout the world for Russian immigrants. That is also true for members of other countries, yet for one country to claim victory dismisses the massive war efforts of other countries. There is much at stake in upholding the potent symbol of victory. “Victory” overshadows the multiple narratives that surround WWII and the events following the end of the war, when individuals did not have the volition to share their experiences. Victory is unquestionably a value to be celebrated in the historical framework of World War II, but there is also a flipside to the narrow renditions. There are parades celebrating Victory Day in hundreds of places in Russia and former Soviet Republics (basically, wherever a municipality exists, there will be a master parade). The ultimate parade is held on Red Square, a space with great historical significance.
On a more local level, there are yearly Victory Day parades and commemorative events in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. Weeks prior to May 9th there are preparations for performances at selected senior citizen centers throughout Brooklyn and repertoires of songs are rehearsed for the performances; instead of singing an entire song, a medley of some of the most popular songs are sung. In 2015, I attended a rehearsal at Bensonhurst Jewish Center, where all those rehearsing were women. I was greeted with skepticism; it was not until some participants noticed I knew certain songs, that my presence seemed slightly acceptable. Russian speakers attend these commemorative events, the majority of whom are well over the age of 70. Among the yearly concerts at prominent Russian venues, I attended one at Master’s Theater in Brighton Beach dedicated to the veterans. Music is highly valued amongst older Russians. Songs express their unique cultural heritage.

Since this year (2016) there was not an official parade, the culminating event was the banquet. I had been casually invited the year prior, but decided not to attend in 2015 because I did not want to be intrusive. This year I attended with my husband, who is from Kiev. Both of his grandfathers were soldiers during WWII and my American grandfather was a navigator in WWII. We were amongst the several few of those in our age group. Although we stood out, being younger and without uniform, we were immediately welcomed at the table we were assigned.

My aim is to provide an exploration of the types and sources of ethnicity amongst older Russian-speaking Jews in Brooklyn. My methods will include analysis of cultural artifacts such as songs, slogans, symbols, and cultural events. I will illustrate the distinct bonds of older Russian immigrants in the context of Victory Day to argue that older Russian-speaking Jews
from the former Soviet Union in Brooklyn demonstrate collective agency in ways aligned with the true function of commemorative rituals. In Brooklyn, away from their “motherland,” they are able to determine their own set of songs, symbols, and activities, blending premigration symbolism from the Soviet era with more recent adaptations.

In order to provide background information, the historical shifts will be briefly addressed by outlining the long-term process of Victory Day commemoration during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, along with the 65th and seminal 70th anniversary. Within this periodization, I include a confluence of push factors that account for the mass emigration of Soviet Jews to Brooklyn. A brief look at the formation of the Soviet Union, including metaphors of family and patriotic education, is included in the background section following the periodization.

I will outline six major periods of Soviet and post-Soviet eras to illustrate the historical shifts of Victory Day. Although my primary focus is on older Russians in Brooklyn, New York, a brief periodization is necessary to frame the contextual and historical importance of this particular holiday and the subsequent migration to Brooklyn many years later.

The Postwar Period: “Celebrate the Work of Great Stalin”

The post-World War II era was a very happy period for Russia. In 1945, the parade stood for Stalin’s personal triumph. The initial commemorative narrative established by Stalin excluded personal accounts from veterans or families. Some of the performative images that demonstrate this include: Georgii Zhukov, who rode on a white horse and galloped across the Red Square, and soldiers who placed captured Nazi banners at Stalin’s feet. Norris cites, a
*Pravda* article from 1945, which printed, “Red Square is an old sacred site and witness to imperial glory of the Russian nation [narod].” “Here today, the nation met Stalin.” The boldest print declared, “The Soviet people celebrate the soldiers of the valiant army, the army of victors, and celebrate the work of the great Stalin” (2011:205).

In 1947 Stalin decided to downgrade Victory Day from a state holiday to a working holiday. Then in 1950, he tried to justify his pre-war policies in a speech entitled “The Great Victory of the Soviet People.” One wartime strategy for victory included, Заградотряд, (the unit that was given clear directives by Stalin to fire on any soldier who retreats, for whatever reason, whether injured or scared. As Norris (2011:205) notes, the mythic “Soviet People,” in short, had triumphed because of the social system that the Party, Lenin, and Stalin had created.

*The Khrushchev Era "оттепель" (Translation: Sometimes in between winter there is a thawing period, climate warms and the snow begins to melt.)*

Khrushchev attempted to reconstruct the meaning of victory in WWII, yet the same commemorative narratives of “the great victory of the Soviet people” and the role of the communist party continued along with images of Lenin and Stalin. Only the articles in *Pravda* did not mention Stalin by name. A year later, the secret police denounced Stalin’s cult of personality and manipulative use of victory to build and uphold his public image. Just as monuments can be tools of political manipulation, so, too, can symbols and commemorative holidays. Khrushchev removed Stalin’s name from the day of remembering and redirected the focus from Stalin to a mythic victorious people and the Soviet soldier. His policies maintained that the system built by Lenin and led by his party inspired the people.
Norris (2011:206) notes that on May 9, 1956, Pravda featured the new law on government pensions that was an attempt to rectify Stalin’s poor treatment of Soviet veterans, though this attempt hardly addressed the full extent of Stalin’s crimes against his people. The closest to an apology by government leaders to the Soviet and post-Soviet people came from Dmitry Medvedev on the 65th anniversary of Victory Day (2010). I assert that placing attention on victory, with Stalin establishing that definition, displaced the many claims and unanswered questions, which were not granted proportionality and appropriate respect.

Brezhnev Era "Застой" (Translation: not moving forward, staying in one place)

In 1964, party conspirators led by Leonid Brezhnev removed Khrushchev. Brezhnev capitalized on his wartime experiences as a commissar and required that all high school students read his wartime memoir, Malaia zemlai. (Translation: small land.) Brezhnev utilized Victory Day as an opportunity for a renewed sense of patriotism. For the first time, in 1965, Brezhnev held a parade in Red Square. Though he restored the Stalinist-era parade, he did not restore Stalin. He also restored Victory Day as a state holiday.

For the next 20 years, Victory Day parades and holidays, as Norris (2011:207) points out, served as a ritual performance designed to forge late socialist unity. Brezhnev visited the United States and also paid respect to visiting dignitaries and other allies. Victory Day, after 1965, was likened to a ritual myth: it involved what Wolfe claims is “a presentation of a narrative in such a way as to erase everything that separates this event from the present; so that the past becomes something experienced, rather than understood or examined” (2006:266).
Although this period is also considered an era of stagnation, dissenting desires amongst Soviet Jews reached the attention of Soviet leaders. During the Brezhnev era, Orleck (2001) points out that Jews voiced their desire to immigrate to Israel in unprecedented demonstrations. Hostility toward the Jews became more public in response to their demonstrations. Orleck (2001:114) cites (Levin 1988 and Low 1990) to point out that Brezhnev’s government reacted with anti-Semitic pronouncements and publications, equating Israel with the Third Reich and the Israeli army as Hitler’s S.S. The period of stagnation gave way to Перестройка.

*The Gorbachev Years: "Перестройка" (Translation: Resetting, remodeling all structure of the country)*

After 1986, Glasnost’s "transparency" gave space to other groups in Soviet society. In a speech, Gorbachev recited the quotes from a veteran who stated, “they’ve (Soviet government) stolen our Victory and that’s the whole story” (Norris 2011:208). Gorbachev, on Victory Day in 1990, called for Soviet citizens “to overcome any difficulties and resolve any problem.” Clearly, the rhetoric shifted during Gorbachev’s leadership, but the lack of clear initiatives toward admission, reparation, or restorative justice warrants his call as empty and thwarted; he was not reelected despite new presidential terms.

With the internal collapse of the Soviet Union, memories of the war gave way to other pressing issues that disrupted lives and challenged preconceptions of the stability of the Soviet Union. There certainly was a major historical shift away from the secretary of the communist party and the establishment of new presidential terms. During “Перестройка" anti-Semitic tension increased amongst the general population, subsequently leading to a watershed moment
in terms of emigration policies. In 1986, Gorbachev made emigration easier and also released prisoners.

*Sixty Fifth Victory Day Anniversary Parade in Moscow*

President Medvedev provided his own answer to the “Stalin Affair” when he stated to Vitalii Abramov of *Izvestitiia* that “our people won the war, not Stalin and not even our military leaders” Norris (2011:214) cites Medvedev in evaluating Stalin’s leadership acknowledged that “it’s obvious… [that] Stalin committed mass crimes against his people.” He also acknowledged that there are many people, including veterans, “who love Stalin or hate him,” and that “they have the right to their point of view.” Medvedev concluded: “in no case should it be said that Stalinism is returning to our daily life, that we are returning its symbolism, or that we intend to use or make some posters. This is not the case and will not be the case” (Norris 2011:214).

This period also saw a demythologizing of the veteran superman that had served as the standard for Stalinist and post-Stalinist celebrations. Norris (2011:217) writes “Soviet-era Victory Days had always celebrated veterans, but typically promoted a mythical image of a Red Army superman that had heroically defended his motherland and then helped to rebuild socialism after 1945 (women veterans were usually excluded from these remembrances).” There is a long-standing debate as to whether veterans were victors or victims after WWII in the authoritarian regime (Edele 2009).
It is arguable that such a display on May 9, 2015 in Red Square is a manufactured constellation of memories more aligned with mythmaking. The expansive show of old and new warfare diverts attention from veterans and triggers deep-seated alarm in many citizens. Prior events and relations between Russian president Vladimir Putin and Ukraine leading up to the master parade only intensifies the contentious element of Victory Day. The compounding aspect of multiple memories and the multiplication of memories without admission are beyond disheartening.

In a totalitarian system, memorials are often not meant for purposes of fidelity to truth, but representative of the motives of the governing party, more ceremonial. The event is a spectacle, which nevertheless remains enormously popular, despite or because of the formidable display of power. The bravado and unabashed style of Putin is a persona that many respect; he unflinchingly does what he wants and is not held accountable. Some like him for this reason, while others are opposed to his leadership operatives. As in the past, a dissenting citizen’s security can be jeopardized. Annihilation is not out of the question in terms of eliminating dissenters.

Political leaders are not the sole owner of what is remembered. Objects hold memory, trigger emotions, and conjure stories. There is also a division of labor in how others can remember events that may have been overlooked or glossed over by another. For older Russians—most of them Jews from Ukraine, living in Brooklyn—there has been a consistent mnemonic praxis of commemoration every year during the first week of May. Such remembrances draw upon the past within the contextual setting of Brooklyn.
The complexities surrounding Victory Day as a commemorative ritual in Russia include: historical concerns that were never properly addressed, expansive display of military power and the continued rhetoric that detracts attention from the war efforts by veterans and citizens. Typically, Russians call friends and family on May 9th to greet them with the usual holiday greeting; not all people are interested in watching the parade in Moscow. For the many who could not remain in Russia and are still alive, Victory Day remains an important holiday.

Public parades in Moscow instrumentalize history in order to promote internal patriotism and garner public support for the current regime. The celebratory interpretation of Russia’s “glorious past,” and its victorious role in ending WWII display the politics of history that has not shifted throughout the past 70 years. The traditional national narrative is narrow and limited. Leading historians such as Andreas Kappeler (2009) argue for a “transnational” or “transcultural” approach to history based on “multiperspectivity and comparison,” which investigates interactions, communications and overlapping phenomena and entanglements between states, nations, societies, economies, regions, and cultures.”

The current authoritarian political culture of United Russia is reluctant to adopt a transnational approach to history. If one looks at the low number of international diplomats who attend the Victory Day parades in Moscow, one can easily infer that Victory Day remains a contentious holiday. One might even question the ethics surrounding the commemorative role and function in Moscow. However, immigrants in south Brooklyn who publicly commemorate Victory Day express an ethnicity and collective agency that is distinctive of their shared past as Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union who survived WWII.
Formation of the Soviet Union

The objective of uniting a vast multi-ethnic territory amongst people who did not define themselves in nationalistic terms began with the 1926 Census. Hirsch, (2005) notes that nationality had become a fundamental marker of identity, embedded not just in the administrative structures of the Soviet Union but also in the people’s mentalities. Primordialism as a concept was adapted and popularized during the mid-1930s in Russia for the utilitarian purpose of unifying a vast multi-ethnic nation. Russian social scientists seem to be overlooked when, in actuality, they had a formative workable viewpoint of primordial ethnicity that was incorporated in the consensus of 1926.

I will present several ubiquitous slogans during the formation of the Soviet Union and during World War II. The main slogan I will focus on is “motherland.” Slogans and symbols illustrate calculative attempts made by Stalinist leaders to unify a vast multi-ethnic territory of people. During WWII, the focus was on the front. The leaders of the Soviet Union were pragmatic and conscious of the iconic symbolism employed in various art forms. The rhetoric displayed in posters evokes a primordial sense of belonging, of kinship, despite ethnic differences.

Metaphors of Family

Soviet citizens were encouraged and expected to celebrate their ethnic cultures; yet set aside ethnic differences for the greater good of the union. Primordial properties are seen as fundamental in the larger collectivity as well as in the family. Patriotic education during the Soviet Union began during the formative years of childhood. It was an integral tool in
developing one’s sense of belonging despite ethnic differences. Bezvogov (2012) points out “love of motherland means loyalty to the state and its political leadership. Man has only one mother in the same way, he has only one motherland.” There are many posters illustrating patriotic education, I have chosen only a few. Figure 1, in the Appendix shows an image of a woman holding a document. Calling men to defend the motherland merges the embodiment of the female mother and the engendered territory of the motherland. Her large opened hand reaches upward, pointing directly to the word “mother.” Multiple textual symbols are at play: the many, pointed Nazi bayonets behind the female figure indicate an outflowing of response to arm, to defend, both land and persons.

These engendered terms have multiple meanings in varied contexts, yet all of them tap into the sanctity of life: the primordial beginnings of creation. In this way, patriotic education had several functions, as Bezrogov (2012:115) notes: “the basis for the preservation of the country’s sociocultural space”. In the quotidian of older Russians, the remnants of this “sociocultural space” have migrated to Brooklyn. Victory Day celebrations exemplify their “sociocultural space.” Roberman (2007:1057) notes that the “evoked past provides the elderly immigrants with inspiration and strength, allow past and present to meet, and create life worlds of coherence and continuity.” Instead of preserving a country, commemoration acts as collective action to acknowledge one another and to remember the past in the present context of migration to a safer place, to Brooklyn.

During the Soviet Union, patriotic education was intensified. Curriculum-based themes required approval by the government. Censorship and biased interpretations were the norm; all the textbooks were required to be aligned with patriotic education. In this manner, the indoctrination of the Soviet ideology began at an early age. Celebratory school functions
emulated ceremonal processions in Moscow. Rhetoric was codified to fit the Soviet ideology, however unstable it may have been. Let’s examine several key themes that many older Russians still recall with both nostalgia and skepticism.

*The Rhetoric of Patriotic Education*

Pedagogy in Soviet schools emphasized the exceptional status of the territory ubiquitously labeled “the motherland.” The expansive landscape could contain three United States; there were 11 time zones, 15 republics, and it claimed to hold the richest resources in the world. Different regions held specific functions; for instance, Georgia was the resort area with special mineral water and sanatoriums to regain health, Ukraine’s fertile land created the breadbasket. Schoolchildren celebrated each area with planned cultural events. Each class represented a different republic and different culture, with distinct songs, dance, reciting poems, and cuisine.

In the Soviet Union, schools held special events promoting national patriotism. For instance, on May 9th Victory Day, schoolchildren dressed in military uniforms; one class as infantry, another pilots, marines, and so on. They marched like soldiers while the local veterans were invited to stand alongside as in a tribune. Such school events were basically emulating parades in Moscow, where leaders would wave as the military troops passed in formation.

On May 9th, children were encouraged to invite their grandparents. There is a common joke that illustrates the complexities of that particular time period in Soviet history. A grandson invites his grandfather to attend the special festivities.

Grandfather: What are you talking about? I was in jail this whole time.
Grandson: Please come!

Grandfather: Okay, I'll go.

The children, pleading, wanting to hear a story: Tell us what happened

Grandfather: We were in the tank, it stopped, bullets hit the engine and I wanted to get out. So I go to the top door, I open it. There’s Germans. So I close the door. I go to the side door and open it. There are Germans. I go to the bottom door and open it. There are cops.

The irony of the cops as countrymen illustrates the paradox of the “imagined community.” Despite the popular Soviet slogan *druzhba narodov* (friendship of the peoples), one could never be guaranteed individual safety, and this tension was not isolated amongst the general public. One could not be certain of his stability even amongst the political elite. Despite the utopian ideals during the Soviet Union there were constant fears of being taken away from the family. One had to be guarded. Yet, as SUNY (2012:6) points out,” millions of people felt attachment to the Soviet Union, ready to defend it, die and kill for it, and embrace it as *Rodina* (Motherland.)”

The typology of ethnicity requires an interdisciplinary approach. Interestingly, Hale points out that surprisingly few of the works regarded as landmark studies in political science, anthropology, sociology, and history engage the extensive research done on the topic in the field of psychology. Political psychologist, Paul Stern questions: *Why Do People Sacrifice for Their Nations?* Stern’s theory suggests plausible mechanisms for nationalist emotionality, rooted in evolved human predispositions and asserts “the role of rhetoric in nationalist mobilization.” His account “predicts that elites seeking support for war will increase their use of nation-as-family and nation-as-community metaphors and de-emphasize mention of differences between subnational groups” (1995:232).
Figure 2, in the Appendix, “Love the Motherland” illustrates several of key motifs: the expansiveness of the Soviet Union’s place on the globe, the sun is shining through the window, each child wears the Young Pioneer uniforms, they are in close proximity to one another, looking out through the window where upon the landscape exhibits modernity with bridges and industry. Metaphorically, there is an element of looking toward the future in their glances out of the window of the classroom, while under the guidance and instruction of the teacher who holds a book, the textual key to indoctrinate young minds to Soviet ideology. Looking forward symbolizes the process required to actualize the utopian ideal, the socialist schema. Everyone was to consider one another as brothers, an official solidarity that did not exist. Nevertheless this ideal was significant and can be observed amongst older Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union in Brooklyn. To further illustrate the significance of motherland, the following is an abridged translation by Bezrogov (2012) of verses printed inside textbooks.

“Our fatherland, our motherland is Mother Russia. We call Russia our fatherland, because our fathers and grandfathers lived there from the dawn of time. We call her the Motherland because we were born there, we speak our native tongue (rondoi iazyk) and everything there is dear (rodnoe) to us, and she is our mother because she has fed us with her bread, given us her water to drink taught us her language, like a mother, she defends us and protect us from all our enemies, and when we fall asleep forever, she will also cover our bones. Our motherland is great - our mother the sacred land of Russia!” (2012: 125).

The loaded metaphor of the mother is multi-dimensional; she is both a protector and a final resting place. The rhetorical usage of mother during the war years also symbolizes the desire soldiers experienced to return home a hero and make one’s mother proud. This metaphor is granted an exceptional status of respect. Later, in the second song analysis, I will revisit lines “when we fall asleep forever, she will also cover our bones.” Though this is an obvious point, everyone, especially for those who have not lived through a war, does not understand wartime
experiences. Soviet symbolism does not translate to everyone. There could potentially be an alienating result for Westerners, who may be unaware of the cultural subtexts that incite situational cues. Hence, there is a tendency to connote older Russians as a certain type with nostalgia, to substantially disregard their experiences. As SUNY notes, the regime employed the language of emotions in its campaign. He cites an excerpt from an article *Pravda* editorialized in 1935, “Soviet patriotism is a burning feeling of boundless love, a selfless devotion to one’s motherland and a profound responsibility for her fate and defense, which issues forth like mighty spring waters from the depths of our people” (2012: 25). Like posters and texts, music was instrumental in garnering support for the war efforts and for propagandist purposes. There were many war songs with “mother” in the title, however in my thesis I will not analyze such songs as they were not performed at the commemorative events I attended.

*Soviet Music*

Mass songs were instrumental in promoting patriotism and unifying millions to defend the motherland. As a genre, the general populace easily understood mass songs. Such “low culture” effectively stirred patriotic emotions. The fervor was so intense, young teenagers would lie about their age to enlist in the army. For some of the youngest Soviet-Jews enlisting in the army seemed to be one way to survive the war. Music historian Boris Schwarz (1983) estimates that in the first days of the war hundreds of song were sung and written down. The majority of the mass songs sung by the Red Choir evoke themes of primordialism. Being in the army intensified the sense of camaraderie and brotherhood. The emphasis of brotherhood also overshadows the instrumental role of women in military combatant.
One of the dominant images during WWII, a woman at home with a baby, gave a false semblance of familial stability despite the massive disruption of WWII. I will analyze this later in greater detail. Schwarz notes that the half-century of Soviet rule was a period of immense suffering and proud accomplishments. Armenian musicologist Hakobian points out the war of 1941-1945 affected the country’s spiritual life in a very peculiar way. “It channeled the thoughts and feelings in a single and precisely circumscribed direction: the artists, having taken the chief war slogan “Vse dlya fronta, vse dlya pobei” (“Everything for the front, everything for victory”) (1988:183).

Soviet music was to be aligned with the Stalinist dictum “art national in form and socialist in content.” Francis Maes (1976) writes that the Stalin cult reached its apogee at the beginning of World War II. An instrumentalist viewpoint stresses the propagandist purposes of many of the songs written during WWII. Whether the purposes were for sheer motivation to fight against the enemy or to offer some hope that the war would end with Russia as victorious. Music is universal, however the meaning of a song is not. Vladimir Zak, (1982:110) a Russian musicologist who immigrated to New York writes: “Song is a concentration of human vitality.” Not even the grim realities of the anti-Hitler war could change the optimistic vein of Soviet song; on the contrary, they intensified it. Asaf’ev, another Russian musicologist writing about the role songs played on the battlefields of World War II, could assert that (1952:11) “the more brazen the death, the more victories the life.”

Songs can be a form of remembrance, performative acts that illicit situational cues that only selected people intuit. Songs are passed on to other generations. Just as photographs and place can invoke memories, so can music. Music can be used to enhance memories, especially
as they relate to weddings, wars, holidays, religion, or popular songs of a particular era (Karman, 1991). Songs can be ethnic symbols, linking generations and outliving generations. Similarly, my experience with the songs I will focus on are embedded with a history, although brief in comparison with veterans. I do not sing or listen to the songs without recalling that history. But for older Russians the songs have an accumulative effect, tapping into a collective memory that I cannot fully comprehend or internalize in the same visceral way.

I will analyze two songs: "Dark Nights” and “Cranes”; both are within the genre of mass culture and were introduced to the general public through film. The lyrics remain poignant and are still sung today. “Dark Nights”, written in 1942, is typically sung in Victory Day performances. Both songs are popular in everyday settings. Zak (1982:110) asserts the importance of analyzing the popularity of songs, asking: “what does the song’s address to the listener mean? We should probably bear in mind the fact that a song is born of human optimism. Is not the reason why heroic motifs penetrate into lyrical songs, so as to fill human hearts with courage?” Zak cites (Asaf’ev 1963) A popular song becomes “dear to the heart and mind” he continues, “Sociologist or psychologist could consider it as a laconic record accurately representing the emotional atmosphere of the age” (1982:111).

As an ethnic symbol, certain songs have a life of their own. How does a simple song like “Dark Nights” and “Cranes” become emblematic? Neither song was sung by the Red Army choir; paradoxically, both were made popular by the same Jewish singer, Mark Bernes. These songs are contextualized in war with primordial themes related to kin, death, and territory, yet there is a more nuanced sensibility of love, abandonment, fidelity, and
survival. First, we will analyze “Dark Nights”, followed by “Cranes” to understand the symbolism and sustaining popularity of these songs.

Dark Nights

“Dark Nights” evokes emotion in many older Russians today, begging the question: how could such a simple song become so popular and endure for so long? Immediately popular upon film release, Stalin later denounced “Dark Nights” for its “escapism and tavern melancholy,” and the poet of the song was imprisoned. Could the denouncement of the song and the imprisonment of the poet add meaning to the song? “Dark Nights” was made for the movie “Two Warriors”, and may not have had such a strong initial response without the transmission of cinema. “Dark Nights” was written quickly during a film shooting in Tashkent. The solo singer who introduced this song, and the other I will analyze, is Mark Bernes, whose persona contributes to the popularity of his music.

Mark Bernes captivated the Russian audience; he had a cult following. His real name is Mark Naumovich Bernes; he was a Soviet actor and singer of Jewish ancestry (his father’s last name was Neumann). “Dark Nights” is about a soldier in WWII, whose thoughts at night and between battles is about his wife at home, sleepless, and their baby in his crib. The lonely soldier writes in his letter that as long as he knows her love, he is sure to come back to her. Loyalty on the part of the wife is also implied. She remains at home with a baby and her sadness is lessened by hope and encouraged by her husband’s tender letter. The lyrics of the song are the letter.
“Dark Nights” lyrics translated from Russian
http://lyricstranslate.com
The night is dark, only bullets are whistling in the steppe,
Only wind is wailing through telephone wires, stars are faintly flickering…
In the dark night, I know you my love are not sleeping,
And, at the child’s crib, out of sight, you wipe away a tear.
How I love the depths of your gentle eyes,
How I long to press my lips to them!
This dark night separates us, my love,
And the dark troubled steppe has come to lie between us.

I have faith in you, you, my sweetheart.
That faith has shielded me from bullets in this dark night…
I am glad; I am calm in deadly battle:
I know you will meet me with love, no matter what happens to me.
Death does not frighten me; we’ve met with it more than once in the steppe.…
And here it looms over me once again,
You await my return, sitting sleepless near a cradle,
And so I know, nothing will happen to me.

This gentle lyrical song without accents or attacks does not vary much from low and high note. It is in the key of C minor with 4:4 time signature; quarter note gets one beat; there is a time change in the 5th line down, to 3:2; half note gets one beat 7th chord composer makes use of naturals and accidentals, in 4th score. At the end there are ties going across the measure to prolongate the words.

Cinema was a critical factor in the dissemination of many popular songs during the Soviet Union. Geldern (1995) notes that during this battlefield cum-romance film, Bernes sang “Dark Nights” in the dugout against the background of his fellow soldiers. He was literally in the trenches, thinking about family and whether he would ever return home. The contrast between the dark and dangerous war zone on the steppe and the picture of wifely fidelity at home far away fit perfectly with the melody. It did not fit the Stalinist ideology of the times. Yet “Dark Nights” is one of the most recognizable and beloved Soviet World War II songs; its
intimate theme demonstrates a common tendency during the Soviet Union toward social realism – inverting the private into public sphere.

The desire to return home was a motivational pull for soldiers on the front and a popular theme of many songs. The rhetoric utilized and commoditized during WWII to increase personal motivation, hope, and patriotism still resonates over 70 years later. Toward the end of Mark Bernec’s life, he sang “Cranes”, and publicly expressed affinity with its lyrics.

*Cranes*

Another immensely popular song introduced to the public through cinema and popularized by Mark Bernes is “Cranes”. The world-renowned Soviet film *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*) was released in 1957 and became a sensation at home and later in the West, where it won the Palme d’Or at the 1958 Cannes Festival. (Shrayer, 1997) The metaphorical implications of “Cranes” are relevant in the pervasive desire older Russians share to be remembered. *The Cranes Are Flying*, Shrayer claims is a filmic narrative of betrayal. He asserts a reoccurring V formation of the cranes flying as a “Soviet propaganda; the crane metaphor stands for victory over the powerful Nazi enemy (Churchill’s famous V gesture) and sends a message to the world about the “strength and unity” of the Soviet people.” Soviet critic, Iurnev (1981) interprets the flying cranes as a metaphor of hope and renewal. However one interprets the film’s poetics, the popularity of the song continues in the repetitive singing at Victory Day celebrations. In analyzing the lyrics a variety of interpretations and reasons for the song’s sustaining popularity are evident. Shrayer shares:
In 1991, “The Cranes Are Flying” was shown in Providence, Rhode Island, Public Library as part of a spring festival of Russian culture. Present in the audience—composed heavily of Russian émigrés—was my eighty-year-old grandmother, Anna M. Studnits. Later, I asked her whether the film—now viewed from the estranged vantage point of a Russian émigré in the U.S.—still had a powerful impact upon her. “The print was scratched, the sound was poor, but I still wept like back in 1957. All of us did,” was her assessment of the film’s continuing impact (1997: 425).

Similar reactions occur in Brooklyn; “Cranes” is a beloved and emblematic song amongst older Russians, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The image of cranes has been utilized at memorial and burial sites in Russia. At the concert I attended in Brighton Beach, various images of cranes were portrayed on the big screen, while the song was sung. Some of the images were of cranes in flight and others of sculptural war memorials and burial sites.

This musical piece is in the key of E minor, just above middle C; the melody range is from a D note to one octave higher for a higher for a high D. The rhythm is a rumba pattern. “Cranes” is a lovely melancholy tune, which is suited to the lyrics.

“Cranes” / Zhuravli lyrics translated from Russian
http://lyricstranslate.com

Sometimes it seems to me that the soldiers,
Who haven’t returned from blood’s fields,
Haven’t laid in our land,
But have turned into white cranes.
From those distant times
They fly and we hear their voices.
Is it because so often and so sadly
We are falling silent and looking into heaven?
The tired crane flock flies, flies through the sky,
Flies in the mist at the end of the day.
And it is a small gap in this order –
Perhaps this place is for me.
The day will come, and in such crane flock
I’ll swim in the same blue-gray haze.
Calling out like a bird from the heavens
All of you who are left on earth.
Sometimes it seems to me that the soldiers,
Which haven’t returned from blood’s fields,
Haven’t laid in our land,
But have turned into white cranes

There is an echo of the verses printed inside Soviet children’s textbooks: “when we fall asleep forever, she (motherland) will also cover our bone” within the second and third lines of the “Cranes.” “Who haven’t returned from blood’s fields, haven’t laid in our land.” This metaphor of the final resting place holds significance for older Russian-speaking Jews in Brooklyn. Does the metaphor of returning to the motherland upon death grant a degree of comfort during life?

Russian-speaking Jews from the Soviet Union have expressed their desire to be buried together. “During WWII, millions of Soviet soldiers, among them those of Jewish descent, did not merit a burial place and their sites of death remain unknown” (Roberman, 2007:1055). The older Russian-speaking Jewish populations, especially members of the veteran community, frequently reunite at funeral homes when a fellow veteran dies. Many of them would like to know before they die whether there would be a place allotted for their burial amongst other veterans.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My literature review examines three main and interrelated topics: memory, various concepts of ethnicity, and Russian-speaking Jews in Brooklyn. The meanings and aims of mnemonic practices conducted by ordinary people (Bodnar, 1992), particularly those who are socially marginalized, such as elderly immigrants, have been underrepresented. For that reason, special social events commemorating
Victory Day unite older Russians in Brooklyn. The focus population includes veterans and nonveterans alike. The events are not aligned with those in Moscow. However, there are remnants of a Soviet past. A *New York Times* article cites a younger participant at the Brooklyn parade. Gene Rubinshteyn, age 44, held aloft a red Soviet flag “not as an ideological symbol, but as a reminder of the sacrifices soldiers like his grandfather made” (2015:3).

Alliances and symbols are not immutable; Russian-speaking Jews in south Brooklyn exercise “enhanced agency” as Gold (2013) purports. They draw upon old symbols/alliances and interject new alliances and symbols within the context of Victory Day. Having survived WWII and the atrocities of the Soviet era, Russian Jews uphold Victory Day with a sacredness that is symbolic and ethnically unique. Memory, commemoration, and ethnicity are the three unifying topics surrounding the mnemonic praxis of Victory Day celebration in South Brooklyn.

Memory is multifarious and often elusive. Pierre Nora paraphrases Maurice Halbwach: “that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority” (1989:9). Nora points out “memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory is blind to all but the group it binds - which is to say,” as Nora points out:

Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and object; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things….

Each gesture, down to the most every day, would be experienced as the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning. (1989:9).
Memory politics has become increasingly global and pluralistic interpretations are celebrated. I wonder if “sites of memory” (Nora, 1989) such as Victory Day festivities thrive because of their capacity for change, their ability to recount old meaning and interject new meaning. I contend that away from the “motherland,” Russian speaking Jews are permitted the license to utilize symbols and virtues of the past. Political actors aside, older Russian-speaking Jews can determine the focus and theme of each event. Whether they display allegiance with United Russia, New York, or Israel is their choice. Outside of Russia there is more liminal space to commemorate on one’s own terms. They have reasons and motives to differentiate themselves from the broader Memorial Day celebrations and Jewish holidays that commemorate the past.

It is important to note that there is a lack of research into the social value and meaning of commemoration of war experiences in the lives of veterans. Public representations in Moscow have consistently been more indicative of the power of memory politics, than that of popular memory. There has certainly been a sustainability of memory, but that memory is marked by the repeated omission of atrocious historical events surrounding the events of World War II. Let us consider what constitutes an activity as commemorative.

Gillis notes that:

Commemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the products of processes of intense contest struggle, and in some instances, annihilation (1994:5).

Remembrance and paying respect are two main aims of commemorative rituals. In remembering and sharing life experiences, veterans attempt to inscribe their past in a national narrative, while
constructing individual, collective, and civic identities. Along with veterans, all participants have an opportunity to remember, learn, and to show their recognition of the sacrifices made by veterans. Throughout the historical shifts of Victory Day, the appropriate recognition and treatment of veterans has been lacking. To this date, it is a contentious holiday.

Gillis writes:

Popular memory appears to have differed from elite memory in important ways. While the latter attempted to create a consecutive account of all that had happened from a particular point in the past, popular memory made no effort to fill in all the blanks, if elite time marched in a more or less linear manner, popular time danced and leaped.

Content to live in a present that contained both the past and the future, ordinary people did not feel compelled to invest in archive, monuments, and other permanent sites of memory, but rather they relied on living memory (1996:6).

Living memory will soon pass; dwindling number of veterans present at the parades indicates that history will replace memory. To “ritualize and dematerialize remembering, thus closing the gap between the past and the present, between memory and history,” as Gillis (1994:17) asserts. “By dematerializing memory they also wish to strip it of all appearances of objectivity, while at the same time acknowledging a civic responsibility not to let the past repeat itself.” Rituals such as Victory Day celebrations assert a performative stance, which is analyzable through a framework of ethnicity.

One of the ways memories are retained is through symbolic ethnicity such as commemorative rituals, popular songs, and objects. Herbert J. Gans introduced the concept of symbolic ethnicity in 1979: “Ethnic identity is solely associated with iconic elements of the culture” of origin. Min (1999:35) distinguishes the terms “ethnic attachment” and “ethnic
solidarity.” “Ethic attachment is the degree to which members are culturally, socially, and psychologically attached to the ethnic group.” Whereas, ethnic solidarity is the “degree to which members use ethnic collective actions to protect their common interests.” A unifying interest for the population in Brooklyn is to be remembered for their massive human sacrifices involved in the ending of WWII. At Victory Day events, ethnic groups and solidarity are expressed as the collective agency to commemorate on their own terms.

Ethnicity

I will explore primordial and instrumental sources of ethnicity amongst older Russians in south Brooklyn through the lens of Geertz's notion of primordialism, which asserts that humans in general attribute an overwhelming power to primordial human "givens," such as blood ties, language, territory, and cultural differences. In Geertz' opinion, ethnicity is not in itself primordial, but humans perceive it as such because it is embedded in their experience of the world. Eller points out that “one of the first and most influential scholar-activists of what we could call “ethnic consciousness” today is the German nationalist philosopher Johann Herder (1744-1803). Suny paraphrases Herder’s assertion that: Humans and the world were united in feeling, which then could be expressed through words, but every signification initially involved an emotional attitude toward the world (2012:19). Suny continues, asserting that Herder was “in many ways the author of nationalism, feeling, (Gerfuhl) was the means to thought and understanding. Through language, feeling apprehended reality with an immediacy that the sense could not achieve” (p.19).
Shils (1957) uses a similar language to explain the attachment based on ethnic group membership. Shils suggests that modern society is “held together by an infinity of personal attachments, moral obligations in concrete contexts, professional and creative pride, individual ambition, *primordial affinities* and a civil sense” (1957:131, italics added). His conceptualization of primordial relations was developed largely as a result of books on the sociology of religion, such as A.D. Nock’s *Conversion* and Martin P. Nilsson’s books on Greek religion. Eller purports that “the mystical and spiritual language Shils uses to describe the attachment to family and kin may well have emerged as a result of the influence of these books.”

These congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves (Geertz 1957). “The chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force, in whatever form and in result of whatever skill it may come, is how to place it within other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life.” Geertz (1976) points out “an artist works with signs which have a place in semiotic systems extending far beyond the craft he practices.”

My song analysis and analysis of poignant Soviet symbols will demonstrate the significance of semiotic systems. A critical analysis reveals why older Russians are ethnically dissimilar to Westerners. To claim that older Russians are arcane or simply nostalgic is to dismiss their Soviet indoctrination. Amongst older Russian-speaking Jews there is sense of collective and civic duty that is unique for reasons that date back to their formative years living
during the period of the Soviet Union. A close consideration of cultural artifacts sheds light on the solidarity amongst this ethnic urban population.

The ties championed in primordialism—such as kin and blood—overlap and merge with the political rhetoric in the USSR, especially the patriotic theme of the motherland. Grosby (1994:52) asserts the significance of “ubiquitous use of terms like home in ‘homeland’, father in ‘fatherland’, or mother in ‘motherland.’” Germaine to this thesis is a brief review of the utilitarian approach to ethnicity in post-Soviet history and terminology. First, let us look at the history and concept of primordial ethnicity. Martin asserts that in the mid-1930s the Stalinist Soviet Union made a shift from constructivism to primordialism. In Martin’s words:

Soviet primordialism, then, can be explained by a number of convergent factors, the pervasive Soviet practice of labeling individuals by national identity to administer Affirmative Action programs helped turn nationality into an ascribed hereditary status. Passportization reflected and exacerbated this trend. In addition, Stalin’s status revolution from above produced a paternalistic cult of the popular, which in turn encouraged a celebration of primordial, volkish national culture. Finally, the emergence of the category of enemy nations both exemplified and further reinforced the tendency to think of nations primordially rather than instrumentally (2001:451).

Martin notes “The promotion of distinctive national identities actually intensified after December 1932, as the Soviet discourse of the nation shifted from an insistence that nations were modern constructs that emerged as a consequence of capitalist production to a primordial, essentialist conception of national identity that emphasized the deep historic roots of all Soviet nations” (p.81).
Hirsch offers a counter-argument aligned with constructivist theory to Martin’s assertion of a primordial approach to the formation of the Soviet Union:

State-sponsored evolutionism was thus premised on the belief that “primordial” ethnic groups were the building blocks of nationalities and on the assumption that the state could intervene in the natural process of development and “construct” modern nations. Indeed, discussions in the post-1991 literature about whether the Soviet regime had a constructivist or a primordialist conception of nationality created a false dichotomy given the Bolsheviks’ Marxist-Leninist view of the world (2000:8).

My strategy is to avoid the debates surrounding the various ethnicity theories, however, I will contrast the age-old comparisons of primordialism and instrumentalism. To enumerate the differences between primordialism and instrumentalism: instrumentalism also utilitarian is posited as pragmatic and situational, wherein ethnicity is not a “given” set or eternal. Ethnicity can change. Primordial is a horizontal approach accentuating the kinship. Constructivists theories posit that ethnicity can change, counter to primordialist assumptions that ethnicity is fixed.

Soviet leaders as actors seized the opportunity to construct ethnicity, tapping into the emotive realms of the people. Ethnic differences were celebrated, while the Russification of millions of people aimed to unite a vast multi-ethnic territory. The role of emotions ought not to be neglected in theorizing ethnicity. The unstated assumption that emotions are void of rational thinking is problematic leading to a devaluing or dismal of primordialism. I agree that primordialism has a potentially coercive element; nevertheless, the leaders in calculative ways are manipulating the populist, nevertheless, are leaders unaffected by the valence of their own emotive effects? Recent scholarship of Soviet ideology has not been viewed in the typically stark fashion. Revisionist view the Stalinist period as “more ambiguous, even some assert, as symbiotic” (Buckler 2009:258).
Eller and Reed Coughlan summarize the concept of primordialism as containing three major ideas:

(a) Primordial identities or attachments are underived, prior to all experiences or interactions - in fact, all interaction is carried out within the primordial realities. Primordial attachments are "natural", even "spiritual", rather than sociological. Primordial identities presumably have long history and they have no social source.

(b) Primordial sentiments are "ineffable", overpowering, and coercive and cannot be analyzed in relation to social interaction. If an individual is a member of a group, he or she necessarily feels certain attachments to that group and its practices (especially language and culture).

(c) Primordialism is essentially a question of emotion or affect and the concept has most often to do with feelings or identities, which are qualitatively different from other kinds of identities. This aspect of primordialism could be called "affectivity" (1993:187).

Interestingly, one of the major criticisms of instrumentalism is inversely related to primordialism, that it downplays the emotive, affectivite quality of ethnicity. I want to find out if the ineffable quality attributed to primordialism can be analyzed through analysis of songs, social actions and symbols. By understanding the meaning of ethnic symbols, one can gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Russian-speaking Jews’ mentality. Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov (2004:45) write about ethnicity as cognition. “Ethnicity, race, and nationhood exist only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representation, categorization and identification. They are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world.” Ethnic symbols demonstrate a unique perspective and incite situational cues as will be illustrated in the last section, which focuses on the mnemonic praxis of Victory Day. Soviet symbols from the past are re-appropriated and contextualized in ceremonies that are relevant to
the concerns of the present. My methods will elaborate on certain Soviet symbols to illustrate distinctive cultural traits and affinities with of Russian-speaking Jews shared past.

The insular nature of some Russian neighborhoods is indicative of the unique challenges older immigrants face. Cultural differences are glaring in their language, mannerisms, and degree of dependency on public assistance. Straight-line assimilation is not apparent; on the contrary, Conzen et al. (1992:11) that ethnicity is not a “collective fiction,” but rather a process of construction or invention, which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories. That is, it is grounded in real-life context and social experience.”

Unlike young immigrants, older immigrants tend to retain their ethnic markers. Their cultural traits are not attenuated; they do not blend in and are easily identified. During the warm weather many older Russians sit in front of their buildings along with home attendants or in Seth Low Park or on the boardwalk in Brighton beach and Coney Island. Close relationships between English speakers and Russian immigrants are difficult due primarily to language barriers. Joshua Fishman (1980:66) writes that ethnicity is “knowing,” pointing out that “language permits an exquisitely refined and unique awareness of eternal verities so it contributes a unique meaning to life and deserves a unique devotion and dedication from the living.” I want to assert that a non-Russian speaker who has not lived through the period of the Soviet Union cannot in effect “know” in the same degree as an older Russian speaking Jew from the former Soviet Union. I can analyze. I can empathize, yet I cannot “know.”

Lacking the repetitive exposure to symbols presented in real time during the Soviet Union and contextualized within the immediacy of war, my distance sets me apart from this
population. Also, I am not ethically or religiously Jewish; therefore my perceptions and critical analysis will inevitably remain oblique. There are many dissimilarities, including how I view the role of government. Nevertheless, my attempts to understand, learn, to know are not entirely without gain. Essentially, I am trying to understand my neighbors, and the family I married into.

Criticism of primordialism involves the aspect of its affectivity and ineffable quality; some, including Eller, argue that primordialism ought to be removed from sociological lexicon. Derivatives of Nock’s ideas are also those of emotional attachment (affectivity). Many scholars, including Eller et al., (1993) find reason to claim that primordialism is a vacuous and unanalytical concept. Eller and other scholars would like to remove primordialism from sociological lexicon. However, when members of an ethnic category self-identify and are identified by others as “belonging” to a “group” with little ambiguity, when they share easy-to-identify cultural repertoires of thinking and acting, and when they are tied by strong alliances in day-to-day politics, we expect strong emotional attachment to such ethnic categories” (Brubaker 2004: 46-47).

Theorists on the subject of primordial ethnicity tend to attribute more emotive qualities to the primordial schema; often undermining the valence of emotions surrounding the ethnic symbols that illicit situational cues amongst people. For an American, a Soviet war song may ring flat, its lyrics unintelligible, whereas for an older Russian the song’s contextual meaning is embedded in multiple memories that are tied to other symbols and remembrances of family and friends, who are no longer alive.
Categorizing the functions of ethnic symbols as either primordial or instrumental is difficult; there is an overlap. Since ethnicity is an abstract concept, the beholder could interpret the functionality of symbols differently from another person. There is also the potentiality of misinterpreting the intention a participant may have in displaying a particular symbol. Grosby (1994) and Brubaker (2004) stress the role of emotions that are aroused by the cognition of an object. However, the primordial aspects of ethnicity during the Soviet Union are blatant; Stalinist leaders utilized rhetoric and symbolism to unite a multi-ethnic expansive territory. Their aim could be viewed as initially both primordial and instrumental. Leaders are not devoid of emotive responses to their own creations or directives. In this way I would agree with the analysis of a symbiotic interaction at work during the Soviet Union.

*Russian-Speaking Jews as “Twice Minorities”*

Russian Jews were identified as such on the fifth line of their passports during the Soviet Union. Orleck (2001:125) asserts that “Soviet Jews were highly aware of being Jewish, and were forced to carry internal passports with the letter J emblazoned on them.”

According to Min:

Twice minority immigrants such as Jewish immigrants from Russian arrive into the U.S. with already –established moderate levels of ethnic identity and solidarity. Twice-minority groups have already experienced discrimination as minority groups prior to migration (in contrast with other immigrant groups, who have yet to change their status from majority to minority groups) (1999:20).
Min makes the distinction between the premigrant historical experiences in the home country—or in a third country in the case of “twice minorities” (minority groups that remigrated from another country). Min asserts, “Members of an ethnic group have emotional ties, not only because they share commonalities in physical and cultural characteristics, but also because they have lived through the same historical experiences” (p.19). Gold (2013) cites Goldscheider and Zuckerman (1984) “Historically, most Jewish migrants have been defacto or dejure refugees, stateless people who have fled oppression and violence in search of a safe have.” This is an important issue that will be addressed in the subsequent sections that focus on my observations at all Victory Day festivities in south Brooklyn.

Gold (2013) stresses that unlike Jewish migrants of earlier periods, a significant fraction of contemporary Jewish immigrants occupy a status characterized by considerable agency. Gold writes:

As “a migrant population selected their own patterns of national, political, linguistic, cultural, and religious identity - conforming to the agendas of host communities only in ways that they themselves chose. Their social position is characterized by the possession of considerable agency, a sociological concept that describes access to social and economic resources and a level of self-determination that allow a group to achieve desired goals and ends despite the impediments of social structure (2013.3).

Emirbayer and Mische assert that agency refers to “The engagement by actors of different structural environments…. which through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situation” (1998:970). For Russians speaking Jews in
Brooklyn the ritualistic habit of conjoining together to celebrate Victory Day in a public manner displays creative agency.

From the various social actions commemorating Victory Day, Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union express unique cultural and ethnic differences embodied in mnemonic praxis of Victory Day in south Brooklyn. They do not all stay at home and watch the grand parade in Moscow. Instead, many come together to share food, sing, and remember the past at different venues throughout Brooklyn. Roberman cites Jeffrey “The elderly do not turn to the past for the sake of social escapism and seclusion in reminiscence: rather, the past becomes a site of creative activity and civic involvement” (2007:1056). Their self-determination to commemorate demonstrates collective agency. Brooklyn community leaders also join in the celebrations. Swidler asserts:

Culture provides resources for constructing organized strategies of action. Particular cultural resources can be integrated, however, into quite different strategies of action. For research is to understand how cultural capacities created in one historical context are reappropriated and altered in new circumstances (1986:283).

After the war, Russian-speaking Jews began to realize that they were Holocaust survivors. Min notes that, “the Nazi extermination of six million Jews during WWII strengthened the group identity of American Jews more than anything else” (1999:20). This identification links Russian Jews with a wider Jewish community, however Russian Jews often do not express the same religiosity as American Jews. This difference has been a point of contention for years amongst Russian-speaking Jews and American Jews. Gold notes (2013) Eventually American Jewish leaders realized the unique culture of Russian–speaking Jews and accepted their differences in terms of religious practices.
There existed a distinction between being “Russian” and “Jewish.” As Gold (2013) notes, the Soviet émigré community was perceived to be alien by American Jews who labeled certain behaviors as “Russian” not “Jewish.” Gold (2013) cites “American Jews were unprepared to acknowledge that most Russian-speaking Jews love the Russian language, culture, and landscape, enjoy aspects of the Russian lifestyle, and take considerable pride in the accomplishments of the former USSR” (Remennick 20007). This love of Russian culture was evident at all of the Victory Day festivities I observed.

I attended several public events to honor the veterans and survivors of WWII, as a non-participant observer. At each there were Yiddish songs sung, Jewish community leaders present, yet the focus was more on Soviet symbols and a collective remembrance of surviving WWII, as well as the American assistance in their assimilation to Brooklyn. For those veterans present there was a dignified display of shared military allegiance. Antoine Prost, a historian of veterans, maintains that veterans do not exist unless they are conscious of their existence (Edele 2009:149). They only become a social group when they organize an express identity through public discourse. Others have focused on state policies as creating a legal category, which, in turn, created a social reality (Edele 2009:127). Later in the section focusing on veterans’ associations, I will elaborate more on the role of veterans as a social group.

METHODOLOGY

My methodology includes secondary data, textual analysis, and direct non-participant observation. The qualitative data and interpretive approach I used broadly increased my knowledge of the Russian culture and, specifically, the rituals surrounding Victory Day commemoration. I will draw
upon four Victory Day events I attended as a non-participant observer: first, a rehearsal for a Victory Day celebration at the Bensonhurst Jewish Center (2015), which I have already alluded to; secondly, the 70th parade in Brighton Beach (2015); third, a musical concert (2016) dedicated to the veterans at the Master’s Theater; and fourth the annual banquet at Winter Garden in Brighton Beach on May 9, 2016.

Russians celebrate Victory Day at home with their families and friends in a private setting and many celebrate in public gatherings. Many veterans live at home and do not attend public events. Last year, 2016, there was not an official parade in south Brooklyn, as the holiday was on a Monday. From my attendance at each event, I will relay key observations to demonstrate expressions of ethnicity and collective agency amongst older Russians. The Shorefront Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. and The Bensonhurst Jewish Center are pivotal centers for many of these older Soviet Jews. Membership in such centers intensifies the social link with other immigrants from the Soviet Union. There are also activities that unite American veterans with Russian veterans. Although there are other Jewish centers frequented by older Russian-speaking Jews, I am most familiar with the Shorefront Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. and the Bensonhurst Jewish Center.

My field research included naturally occurring social activities. It was impossible at the banquet and at the singing rehearsal not to disclose my identity. When I purchased tickets for the banquet dinner, the woman was curious and surprised to learn of my interest in the praxis of Victory Day commemoration. She shared with others at the Shorefront Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. about my interest and the fact I was an American. I only observed the potential of the Hawthorne effect during the singing rehearsal at the Bensonhurst Jewish Center, as a few participants singled me out of the group. Whether they really behaved differently due to my presence is not certain. Yet those few seemed skeptical. The majority of my observations were non-reactive; I did not stand out, I did not have direct contact with the subjects, and my presence did not alter or influence the participants’ behavior.
Ethical concerns on my behalf involve the element of voyeurism. This was especially the case at the banquet ceremony on May 9th, 2016, when initially I experienced a slight uneasiness. The social event seemed sacred and I did not want my presence to be sacrilegious. Whether it was the overwhelming dignity of so many veterans in uniform or the age difference, I am not certain. I think it was the sense that many of the participants would not be present in the near future. I sat amongst history, living and breathing history. I wanted participants to know I was grateful for their existence and desire to celebrate together. Although I did not want to stand out as an outsider, I probably did since I am much younger and I did not wear a military uniform. The emotional disposition indicated that everyone knew each other intimately. My aim was not to be deemed a threat or a bystander scrutinizing their actions. I believe it is impossible to set aside personal values and agree with Jürgen Habermas (1972) that sociological knowledge is not disinterested knowledge.

My methods also draw upon the organization and work of the American Association of Invalids and Veterans of World War II, founded by Leonid Rozenberg in 1997. Due to time constraints, I did not obtain Instructional Review Board (IRB) approval for interviewing subjects for my Master’s thesis. Instead excerpts from published interviews highlight the unifying cultural differences. Four common narrative threads emerged from content analysis of the interviews: human sacrifice, “we all lost someone,” stolen Victory and allegiance to one another.

My entry into this subject of Victory Day began with music as mentioned earlier: I had a music teacher from Odessa who is well versed in the songs that I wanted to learn. During my guitar lessons, we discussed the history and meaning of the songs. Music is an integral social activity amongst this population; it is common to sing with older Russians during conversation. I would argue that the ease in transitioning from spoken word to lyrical melodies is unique to this culture. I will analyze two solo lyrical songs: “Dark Night” and “Cranes”; both are within the genre of mass culture and were introduced to the general public through film. These songs relate to primordialism as the themes involve family, death, territory, and loyalty. Bassin and Kelly (2012:9) note that Lenin favored cinema as “the most
important of all the arts” for its propaganda values. Slobin (2008:xiv) points out “Soviet cinema also functioned as a regional power from 1917 to 1991, spread across eleven time zones and some two hundred nationalities, creating a gigantic, truly captive audience.”

On several occasions my familiarity with certain popular Ukrainian and Russian songs afforded a degree of acceptance. Given that I am not a native Russian speaker, my appreciation for certain Soviet songs and my rudimentary Russian language abilities acted as a liaison. Although the typology of analysis may seem disparate, the elements are interrelated. Of course there are other popular songs and symbols that warrant analysis, what I have chosen to analyze are highlighted artifacts that stand out amongst other Soviet artifacts. Considering this population through the prism of song and ethnic symbols affords a richer, more nuanced understanding of their shared life experiences and affectiveness.

To counterpoint the idealized solidarity of the Soviet Union one well-known joke is included. This joke demonstrates the unstable Soviet ideology and the element of fear and unease during and after the war. Several famous poems will also illustrate affective ties. Bear in mind, the ideology of the Soviet Union was a utopian ideal; an ideal that was in the making and never fully actualized. Jokes as well as music helped Russians understand and cope with their predicament under various Soviet regimes.

My thesis focuses on two New York community districts densely populated with older New Yorkers; many of them are Russian-speaking Jews. One might be surprised at the numbers of veterans who are still alive in South Brooklyn. Three generations have passed since the end of WWII. Since their arrival in Brooklyn, their impact is tremendous and has left an indelible mark on south Brooklyn, especially in community districts 11 and 13 – the locale
in focus. The shift in my thesis veers now to the localities of south Brooklyn. This population rejuvenated sections of south Brooklyn, especially Brighton Beach or “Little Odessa by the Sea,” since their early arrival in the late 1970s. Many also live in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, and a nearby section of Brooklyn that receives less media attention.

RUSSIANS IN BROOKLYN

Localities

Community district CD 11 including (Bensonhurst) and CD 13 including (Coney Island and Brighton Beach) are the two main areas of Brooklyn I will focus on, since both of these districts have a dense population of older Russians, many of them Jewish. Figure 3 depicts the locations of these two districts in south Brooklyn. In CD 11 and 13 there are many synagogues and Jewish Centers. Community district 11, the NYC Department of the Aging found, is home to more older immigrants than any other district in Brooklyn. The city’s definition of elderly is 60 and older. Bensonhurst also has the largest number of females 60 and over. Community district 11 and 13 of south Brooklyn are typically working class, without the genteel charm of Park Slope, for example, or the youthful appeal of Williamsburg. They are home to many immigrant populations of the past 50 years, including immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Bensonhurst has the highest population of 60+ (40,163) and the highest population of 65+ (29,580) than any other district. In looking at the foreign-born population, according to the Census 2010: Changes in the Elderly Population of New York City 2000 to 2010, Bensonhurst has the highest population than any other district at 23,734; second is CD 13 at 21,807.
In both districts there are many businesses and stores catering to the Russian population with Russian signs and medical polyclinics staffed with Russian-speaking doctors and nurses. Figure 4, in the Appendix, illustrates in English and Russian language the various medical services provided at a clinic in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. These enclaves, although ethnically diverse, provide all the services needed in Russian. Older Russian-speaking Jews in Brooklyn have Russian-speaking home attendants with them on a daily basis. Although the relationships are on a paid professional basis, the caretakers, attendants, and clients often become close. At the banquet there were many home attendants seated with the veterans at the table. These attendants’ appeared to enjoy and participate in the event in a familial manner.

*Immigration Patterns*

The influx of Russian-Jewish immigrants to Brooklyn illustrates the incapacities for many to express their dissent in Russia. The first wave of Russian and also Jewish immigrants into the United States began in 1910, and the numbers of people has continued steadily ever since. The third wave of Russian immigrants occurred between 1945-1955, most of them Jewish refugees. That migration was made possible by *perestroika* and the opening of Soviet borders. Russia experienced deep economic and social crisis, including a resurgence of anti-Semitism. Migration intensified after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Many Russians also went to other destinations like Israel. The state of Israel was established in 1948. The mass migration to other places away from their restrictive “motherland” allowed a more pluralistic perspective on World War II. Migration also provided a space to generate new commemorative narratives that could reach a wider audience. Migrating to Israel was easier than immigrating to America. American Jews were sometimes
skeptical of the mass exodus of Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union to America. Israel for many was the thorough fare before immigrating to America.

Kraly and Miyares (2001) emphasize that between 1975 and 1994 the United States (U.S.) resettled nearly 412,300 refugees from the various states of the former Soviet Union, constituting the third largest refugee group to enter the U.S. since WWII. The waves of immigration from the former Soviet Union speak volumes to the social and political unrest. The contemporary refugee movement that has impacted New York City has been those from the former Soviet Union, also the largest country-of-origin group, surpassing the Vietnamese in numbers of annual entrants (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1994). Russians comprised the largest number of entrants (Miyares 1998b; NYC Dept. of City Planning, 1996).

Orleck (2001) notes that the immigration to New York City peaked in 1995-1996, with over 40,000 immigrants arriving in just two years from the former Soviet Union, 85% of which came with full refugee status. It has already been mentioned that many were granted a unique status upon entering the United States, stemming from their shared historical background of discrimination as well as the contributions they made in World War II. Many immigrants maintain ties with the associations that assisted their arrival to Brooklyn from the former Soviet Union upon. One of several associations founded after WWII to assist with the mass exodus was the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA).

Today, many Americans label the diverse pluralistic population as “Russian”, despite the fact that a substantial part of this population is neither Russian by nationality or citizens of the Russian republic, inasmuch as many immigrants are from Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova,
Uzbekistan, and other former Soviet republics. Some Russian-speaking Jews prefer to identify simply with being “Russian” because “Soviet” currently has a derogatory connotation.

Along with language differences, cultural differences obfuscate the inter-subjectivity between many natives and older Russian immigrants, hence the tendency toward insular boundaries in many niches of Brooklyn. Migrating at any age can be difficult. For many older immigrants learning new language can seem insurmountable. Miscommunication and cultural differences, depending on the individuals and the given situation, can produce frustration, confusion, and alienation. Thus, it is more likely that older Russian immigrants will socialize with other older Russian immigrants. Assimilation may not really be desirable. Also, there may not be the same flexibility to adapt to new societal cues and customs.

_Social and Cultural Life_

There are numerous senior citizens centers throughout Bensonhurst and Brighton Beach. Local Jewish Centers like Bensonhurst Jewish Center and Shorefront Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. have active senior citizen centers that cater to the physical and social wellbeing of those in the community. Free lunches are offered as well as recreational classes. Social coordinators are available to assist with a wide range of issues, like Social Security Insurance, immigration, and food stamps. Free classes are offered. Jewish centers such as the Shorefront Y and Bensonhurst Jewish Center are pivotal centers for many. Membership in such centers intensifies the social link with other immigrants from the Soviet Union. Although there are other Jewish
centers, which are frequented by this population, I am most familiar with the Shorefront Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. and Bensonhurst Jewish Center.

The Shorefront Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. in Brighton Beach is active in promoting relations amongst veterans and the older Russian-speaking community. Concerts are performed in Russian. Literary guests are invited to read in Russian. The Shorefront Y also holds activities to bridge relationships with non-Russians and the older Russian community. On May 31 (date?) there was a memorial event at The Shorefront Y held for Russian and American veterans of WWII. Social adult day centers catering to the Russian population of Brooklyn also draw many older Russian out of their homes. Vans pick up individuals at their homes and take them to such centers for a long day trip. These day centers are funded through Medicare.

Many older Russians in Brooklyn enjoy the communications from Davidson Radio station (620 am) and several newspapers: Russian Bazaar (since 1996) and Russian Newspaper (1993). On a sunny day older adults sit on the many benches along the boardwalk. Others sit in front of their large buildings listening to such radio stations and reading these papers, often with the accompaniment of a home attendant.

Older immigrants have been often overlooked in scholarly research. In some Russian neighborhoods in Brooklyn, a collective awareness of those who are Russian is a mainstay. The other such places are non-Russian, a reversal of inclusion/exclusion. This group often referred to as на пенсее” (translation: on pension) is underrepresented in sociological studies, as most research focuses on populations with the potential to work.

*Veterans’ Associations*
There are two veterans organizations: The American Association of Invalids and Veterans of World War II from the Former U.S.S.R. founded in 1997 by Leonid Rozenberg and The All American Association of Invalids of World War II was founded later by Semyon Komissar. The first one seems to be more active amongst the population I focus on. Rozenberg’s organization plans many of the Victory Day events with help from various community non-profits. A few of them are the Russian-American Arts Foundation and the American Forum of World Congress of Russian Jewry. Local Russian businesses also sponsor special events like the one I will later describe at the Master’s Theater and at Winter Garden.

The group founded by Rozenberg in 1997 began in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, as an informal organization of 30. As reported by Kelliher (2002) in a New York Times article the association had more than 3,000 members in the New York region, 2,000 of whom live in Brooklyn. In 2002 the association had 500 women. Kelliher notes:

As Jews who shared both the deprivalions of a brutal war against Hitler’s forces and postwar anti-Semitism under Soviet system they had risked their lives to preserve, their allegiance is not to the former Soviet Union, nor to the Red Army, nor even to Mother Russia, but to one another (2002:1).

One of the narrative threads involves “telling and sharing the truth.” Rozenberg shared at the age of 93, “People are not taught about the role of soldiers on the other side of the Eastern Front” (Mueller, 2015:1). Rozenberg continued through a translator to say, “May 9 is a chance to fight back against a tide of forgetfulness, a holy day” for him and the few dozen other veterans who donned old medals for a slow march on the boardwalk in Brighton Beach. “For people to learn, you have to talk about it, the sacrifice that happened in the Soviet Union.”
Shared narratives link the members of this population in south Brooklyn and legitimize those to commemorate with others who are like themselves. One veteran, Iosef Kuglack age 89 (2015:6) shared in *New York Magazine* article, “The most important thing is that we remained to live after the war, that’s the most important thing.” A *New York Times* (Kelliher 2002) article underscores the camaraderie amongst Russian veterans in south Brooklyn.

Symyon Pundik and Iosef Kruglyak never knew each other on the Eastern Front, the two men from Ukraine, among more than 1,000 World War II veterans of the Red Army now living in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, met only a few years ago. Yet when they talk about one another, they use the word “family. Like many family members, they want to be buried side by side along with hundreds of their comrades (2002:1).

Mr. Kruglyak, who emigrated from Ukraine shares:

We want to be together at one cemetery. Because our family, most of them know each other here now, and when our children and grandchildren come to visit us, they will also see this friend and this friend and that friend, and they will remember our heroism (2002:1).

Moreover, for older Russian immigrants living in Brooklyn, their lives are shared psychological experiences, including lived experiences of World War II, Communism, the dissolution of the USSR and their immigration to Brooklyn. I will demonstrate how self-identity is tied closely with the events of World War II and being Jewish. A sense of self and belonging are inherent in the practice of commemorations. The collective phenomena of older Russians gathering together to express shared attitudes among the members of a community and are jointly expressed by them, constitute the community to which they belong and become the attitudes of the community.
itself. They regard one another as “brothers,” in a real sense their camaraderie is acted upon in key fundamental gestures.

Remembrances of Victory Day

Victory Day, as a “holiday with a tear in one’s eye,” will eventually be remembered with participants, who do not shed any tears, who may not have any accurate understanding of the victory over fascism. It may just be another day off to raise a few toasts to "victory" without giving any thought to the “fidelity of truth.” I think certain songs and traditions will persist, but the sustainability of memory is questionable. Many Russians in Brooklyn celebrate Victory Day amongst family and friends by eating food and drinking and singing patriotic songs. On this more intimate level there is not an audience. Most likely there is not the same expansive broadcast of the celebration as there is of the one in the Red Square. Individuals can sift through the media representation, engaging in certain objective representations to varying degrees. Wherein at home there is an established sense of understanding of what is appropriate discourse or behavior commemorating this important Russian holiday.

“Attempts at creating a global framework for collective memory are visible in the activities of the United Nations that try to arrive at valid interpretations of historical experiences on a global scale” (Halas 2008:). The status quo of denial or “blatant falsification” of history demeans the experiences of many and has a dehumanizing effect that leads to incapacitation. However, in Brooklyn individuals can determine how as a group they want to remember their past. The
common narrative thread of “stolen victory,” has continued since the post-war period. More recently, Shishkin in a *New York Times* article points out:

> Once again, the rulers are rewriting history and leaving in it only military victories and martial glory. They have added a chapter to school textbooks about Crimea’s glorious return…. Once again, the dictatorship is calling on its subjects to defend the homeland, mercilessly exploiting the propaganda of victory in the Great Patriotic War. Russia’s rulers have stolen my people’s oil, stolen their elections, and stolen their country. And stolen their victory (2015:1).

However, as veteran Miron Goldsheyt (2015:3), originally from Odessa, shared in a *New York Magazine* interview: “It was very scary, and those who survived are heroes, they remember this day. No one will be able to steal our victory from us.” Goldsheyt’s comment underscores one of the affective ties and rallying points of the various commemorative events in south Brooklyn.

The focus at the 70th Anniversary of Victory Day Parade (2015) at Brighton Beach was on the veterans, not power and military arsenals. Many veterans are human capital in the sense of their active involvement in a broad community to speak about their past. Their presence in Community District 11 and CD 13 reminds others of the historical significance of WWII; especially during the first week of May when “veterans wear their uniforms and medals. Ethnic attachment and solidarity are visible in the banners and portraits that are carried.

The Russian web (Norris 2011) was utilized in an unprecedented way to capture the many stories of the dying generation. The website pobedetli.ru or (theVictors.com) is dedicated to “the soldiers of the great war.” Founded for the 60th anniversary in 2005, by 2010 the site listed over
1 million veterans living in Russia and abroad. The site’s stated purpose is a “civic initiative among individuals and businesses” which is, therefore, “not a part of an official memorial.” Other sites that focus on veterans originated from a perceived sense of official neglect combined with a fear of forgetting (2011:220). My searches on this website were unsuccessful, I was unfortunately unable to locate the names of veterans from Brooklyn.

On a local level, a woman, who lives near the Shorefront Y, diligently compiles photographs of veterans in the community. She wants photographs from anyone who has ties to the ending of WWII. She knows many Russian-speaking Jews and Holocaust survivors in Brighton Beach. She is active in performing at retirement centers, such as at the banquet on May 9th, along with other artists. At the events she sets up the display of collected photographs and memorabilia. She has essentially developed a repository of archival information of veterans and survivors of WWII. She has transposed Russian songs to English and vice versa. This is one attempt to integrate their symbols into the context of south Brooklyn.

When immigrants come to a new place, they naturally bring with themselves symbols, motifs. Symbols refer back to golden moments that have intensely affected their sense of individual and collective identity. Figure 5 in the Appendix shows the opening banner at the parade in 2015, it depicts the Soviet military emblem in the left-hand corner. This emblem signifies civic and military duty was frequently displayed during the musical concerts dedicated to the veterans.
Victory Day Parade 2015 in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn

The opening banner, at the 70th anniversary parade in Brighton Beach reads “Happy Victory Day, Dear Veterans.” Victory Day continues to involve a sense of empowerment and belonging, as well as a sense of deep mourning. Last year, May 9, 2015, on a cloudy overcast day, a group of World War II veterans, and their family, friends, and press met around 11 a.m. in front of the Shorefront Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. on Coney Island Avenue to commemorate the 70th anniversary. The parade drew several hundred people, was led by veterans, with concentration camp survivors and other supporters. Leonid Rozenberg, founder of the All American Veterans of World War II Association of Invalids and Veterans of World War II From the Former Soviet Union shared:

Dear friends: we were dealt a very difficult life, and the move to America inspired us in many different ways.” He told veterans who gathered at a celebratory luncheon “we won the war together, and we will never forget the aid the American people gave us during the war” (Zavadski and Sergyev 2015:3).

As stated earlier, the majorities of immigrants are of Jewish descent and can be regarded as “twice-minority groups.” Figure 6, shows the banner with the Star of David; remnants of Soviet symbolism are omitted. Laitin (2006:6) notes, “to have influence in American and/or New York politics, a Russian identity is of little value. However, conjoined with other American Jews, Russian-speaking Jews can capture a part of a powerful minority voice in both arenas”. Not all of the banners and symbols I observed displayed affiliations with Israel.

The veterans and other participants walked slowly from the Shorefront Y to Tatiana’s Restaurant, perhaps several hundred yards. With the enormous population of Russians in the direct vicinity, in reflection, I question why there was such a small crowd. At Brighton Beach
the ceremonial parade affords an opportunity to learn and talk with veterans. It is a time to personally thank veterans and to offer them a red carnation. The parade is a scheduled and highly anticipated event for this community. No one can testify to the first parade, during the mid-1990s, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, organized Victory Day parades gained traction in Brighton Beach.

While they are living amongst us, they remain a marginalized group in conflict with the dominant group that holds power in Russia. Older immigrants in adjusting to a host country will often refer to their past lives. In converging at the Shorefront Y and walking together, there is a performative aspect: veterans are presenting themselves as living spirits who by their physical presence are claiming their historical roles, their lived experiences.

The parade in Brighton Beach provides an opportunity for others to share about the individual sacrifices. Collective solidarity resounds in the purposeful ritualistic activity. Participants bring symbols with them—portraits, banners, and medals. Figure 7 in the Appendix illustrates the display of medals worn by veterans. Several veterans pinned their medals on pillows, placed on their walkers, as the weight of all the medals was too heavy to carry on their chest.

I argue that the act of creating and carrying pictures of family members who have served in WWII be considered as a form of protest: an assertion not to forget that diverts attention from any singular leader and overarching narrative discussed in the first section of my thesis. Participants retell their stories, with portraits in hand, to younger generations. They may retell the stories of those who have died. The interface between generations reflects the
older generations’ desire to be remembered and their desire for a different future for their children and grandchildren.

In Brooklyn, New York, Victory Day celebrations are intimate; the theme of patriotism toward the motherland is diminished. There isn’t the military bravado, which is displayed in Moscow. For one, the celebration is held in a different territory. Immigrants have left the “motherland;” they hold a different perspective. “At the time of the war,” Mr. Rozenberg shared, “we didn’t know anything, we just gave our lives for victory. Only after Stalin’s death did we understand that he wanted to get rid of the Jews. Of course, we felt less patriotic after that” (Kelliher, 2002:3).

The top-heavy periodization in my thesis juxtaposes the civic culture and the local praxis of Victory Day commemoration in south Brooklyn. Immediately after the war, they were not granted the liminal space and freedom to remember and grieve. The political restraints of the authoritarian regime emphasized a stilted version of victory; a version that set off a trajectory of misattribution, suggestibility, and bias. Shishkin writes:

My father fought the evil of fascism, but he was taken advantage of by another evil. He and millions of Soviet soldiers, sailors and airmen, virtual slave, brought the world not liberation but another slavery. The people sacrificed everything for victory, but the fruits of this victory were less freedom and more poverty (2015:1).

Russians celebrate Victory Day at home with their families and friends in a private setting and many celebrate in public gatherings. Many veterans live at home and do not attend public events. I will now focus on two recent events (2016): On May 5th at Master’s Theater in
Brighton Beach a musical concert with Boris Tenin and his friends and the banquet dinner at Winter Garden on the evening of May 9th. My non-participant accounts illustrate the communal ties of those in the community.

The concert on May 5th 2016 was both entertaining and reflective of the shared history of the veterans. The Master’s Theater is a 1326-seat venue ideally located in the heart of Brighton Beach near the subway and the boardwalk. For Russians in the tri-state area it is their theater and used to be called the Millennium Theater. It is well known in the Russian community as a place where many Russians could in earlier years bring their passports to vote. NET COST, a chain of Russian grocery stores, sponsored the concert. An usher in her seventies held my hand when I asked in Russian where my seat was located. Bouncy Russian pop music played during the seating. I was surprised to find the theater almost full to capacity. The average age of the audience might have been in the seventies. I tripped on a step and landed on an older gentleman who was seated. He did not seem bothered in the least. I felt clumsy. Throughout the performance people older than I cautiously navigated in the dark. There were so many steps.

Michael Jackson’s Thriller played loudly while safety announcements were made in English. Strobe lights swirled around the stage and out into the audience. Throughout the performance, images of Soviet military marching and large Soviet military emblems were projected on the back screen. I did not observe politics related to United Russia or to the Soviet Union. Instead there was an overarching theme of military duty, shared allegiance to one another and genuine gratitude for those who served in WWII.

In attendance was Mark Treyger, Council Member of District 47; he talked emphatically about the importance of the holiday for his family as the end of fascism. “From his heart,” he
expressed his gratitude for his family of seven. He spoke in English and broken Russian. He is the first in his Ukrainian family to be born in the United States. Mark Treyger also attended the banquet ceremony.

In Brooklyn, Victory Day celebrations are not driven by government involvement. Therefore one major difference between festivities in Russia and in Brooklyn involves the pluralistic narratives in Brooklyn. Three main narrative threads at the concert and the banquet include: acknowledgement of the multilateral involvement of other countries in ending the war. In south Brooklyn the participants recognized that victory is a Russian and American holiday. The overarching perspective is that the burden of the war and the duty to fight was on Russian shoulders.

Prior to the end of World War II Jewish population did not have their own territory. Participants expressed a wider interpretation of Israel as a direct outcome of Victory Day. Lastly, many key speakers at the banquet and musical concert spoke with gratitude for the role of Israel in accepting them as immigrants. Pointing out that Israel was the pathway to America. The recognition of Allied countries—especially the United Kingdom, Soviet Union, and the United States—differs from the perspective promoted during the Soviet Union that the burden of the war and the duty to fight was on Russian shoulders.

One of the traditions on Victory Day as I mentioned earlier is to give veterans a red flower. At the concert, a beautiful young woman on stage asked for all the veterans to stand. She gave them each a long-stemmed red carnation. I counted about 25. However many remained seated while she continued to give about 25 more carnations to those veterans who preferred to stay seated. A military anthem was sung while most of the audience stood and sang. On the large screen, images of the Red Army marching were displayed. Various Russian artists
performed.

Mother’s Day was also mentioned; the MC made a special acknowledgement to women in the war and those in attendance. Afterwards two young women sang and danced, while daisy and Ukrainian embroidery images were displayed on the large screen. There were solemn moments, intermixed with sheer entertainment and glamour.

A handsome and suave young man sang “Dark Nights” and “Cranes”. Images from memorial sites in Russia with monumental cranes were displayed on the large screen while this song was sung. Several Jewish songs were sung and several people danced near the front of the stage. MC and composer Boris Tenin introduced a new song he composed entitled, “My New York.” While the song was sung, images of New York City were colorfully displayed in fast motion. The possessive reference to New York indicates a tribute to his host city. During the concert, songs about Moscow or other cities were not referenced. There are many popular Soviet songs on that subject, however they were not sung. Perhaps this indicates an acceptance of New York as a new homeland. Actually, participants were frequently verbally demonstrative, expressing their gratitude toward American and New York.

After several hours in the theater, I left before the end of the show. Upon leaving the theater and walking along the streets at Brighton Beach I realized I had felt safe and warmed by the concert. There was a genuine sense of kindness in the way the woman next to me spoke and how we laughed during the performance. The atmosphere was convivial and upbeat. I did not notice any affective display of tears. The honorary function was meant to be an enjoyable time with one another in a large theatrical setting. An evening of similar musical entertainment was held at a smaller venue on a different evening.
The banquet at the Winter Garden restaurant in Brighton Beach hosted many veterans and their family. The main sponsor was Susan Levit; she and her husband were both active in the Israeli army. Mr. Levit emphasized the recent anniversary of the state of Israel. Making a direct link between Victory Day and Israel, stating that if there had not been Victory Day, there would not have been an independent state of Israel.

Doctor Susan Levit founded Levit Medical Center in Midwood, a large polyclinic it consists of Russian doctors and treats thousands of older Russian patients. My primary care physician works at Levit Medical Center, I can attest to the almost factory style of healthcare treatment suited for that particular area and population. In attendance were other business leaders, local politicians, and Eric Adams, the borough president of Brooklyn, two directors of local funeral homes, journalists, doctors, and a representative from the Russian consulate. People danced while meal announcements were made. Mark Treyger, Council Member District 47 and Chair of the Committee on Recovery and Resiliency, was present and went around twice to each table to shake hands with individuals and personally thank everyone. He shook my hand twice.

Instrumentalism and primordialism overlap. When the Brooklyn borough president Eric Adams said in English, “I will protect you. I did so when I was in the police force I will continue to do so,” this signifies the efficacy of instrumentalism. When a leader pledges his support and guardianship, he is acknowledging the longstanding residency of Russian-speaking Jews in his borough and garnering their support. Adams is simultaneously tapping into the long-standing need and desire of his continuant’s for safety. I view this as primordial. Aside from his speech and Mark Trygers’, the others spoke predominately in Russian. Both Mark Tryger and Eric Adams serve their constituents, the participants at these events. Mark Tryger has primordial ties
with this population and frequently expressed his familial ties and gratitude at the musical concert and the banquet.

Networking takes place at these special commemorative events. There were two funeral directors at the banquet, who were also sponsors of the event. A check was handed to Leonid Rozenburg from one of the two directors of the funeral home, who said in Russian, may your days be warm and sunny and, to help, here is a check. The group is acutely aware of their imminent death; they voice their desires relating to burial sites. A member’s death is another occasion for their friends to meet. Along with the Victory Day events many of those present at the banquet maintain close ties outside of these commemorations. To parse between instrumentalism or primordialism is a challenge since these businesses are Russian with a long history of servicing the community, but they are also amongst the community.

The woman, whom I wrote about earlier, was one of the MCs, and she sang many Russian and Jewish songs. She also played the violin. She went to each table to acknowledge the veterans while she performed. Veterans who were unable to attend were noted. The oldest veterans, who are 105, were in nursing homes. They would receive the gifts from a member of the association.

Russian food was served continuously. On each table there were bottles of vodka and white and red wine. I did not witness the 100-gram toast that was a common tradition in Russia. This tradition dates back to Stalin, who granted 100 grams of vodka to each soldier before a military advance. Occasionally a toast was raised to individual veterans amongst the group sitting at the table. Long-stemmed roses were given to each of the veterans. One of the veterans at my table gave the flower to me. He danced with his home attendant briefly on the dance floor.
It was apparent that many veterans had mobility issues. Home attendants accompanied many of the veterans attending the banquet ceremony with fewer veterans joined by their families. The Rozenberg family stood out amongst the participants.

The Association is a unifying factor. In a *New York Times* article (2002:3) veteran Boris Feldman, who emigrated in 1995 and works at the association in Brighton Beach reports: “Here, I met people like me who went through the difficulties of war and anti-Semitism and immigration. Here I have met such people that I want to be with during this life—whatever is left—and the next life, too.” Could this population be seen as a single-affective community? Bonds of kinship extend beyond the immediate family. One exemplar of the legacy one veteran will pass on to his biological family is apparent with Leonid Rozenberg.

The intergenerational ties between Leonid Rozenberg (founder of the association) and his family are impressive. Rozenberg’s great grandson was shooting air hoops during the banquet. Naturally he does not identify with the events of WWII as does his great-grandfather. Nevertheless, his presence marks the three generations since the end of WWII. Birthdays were announced, the 70th wedding anniversary of Leonid Rozenberg and his wife was celebrated. Leonid’s son was in charge of a TV camera; three generations of his family were present at the event.

Numerous instrumental and primordial aspects are tied to the association. Each Victory Day celebration, in essence, reminds older Russians of their initial impetus to immigrate from the Soviet Union, the role of Israel, as well as the transition to American society. Gratitude is expressed at each event for the social services granted to them from New York, at large, and at various Jewish centers. These social events can be viewed as public relation events. The
representative from the Russian consulate did not mention Israel for obvious reasons, but almost all of the other speakers did.

Several instrumentalist ties include Rozenberg’s determination to found an association that maintains ties with politicians and the wider Russian. The repetition of yearly commemoration and performances are cultural acts that reinforce the unique cultural presence of the Russian community. He is also present at other community events, thus demonstrating his unique human capital, a social hierarchy as a leader amongst the larger group.

Another instrumentalist factor is the establishment of the Babi Yar triangle park constructed by New York City Parks in 1988. Located at Brighton 14th St, it represents active engagement in reconstructing history, showing that ordinary people are in fact “driven to invest in monuments and permanent sites of remembrance.” This memorial for the dead is a vibrant space for the living. Even though there is not the same severity of ethnic discrimination toward Jews as in United Russia, some express a heighten concern when anti-Semitism occurs in Brooklyn, including Rozenberg who occasionally voices his concern in public along with community leaders.

Primordial ties are accentuated. At the banquet there was a sense of solidarity and allegiance to one another. In some ways it was like a large family gathering: anniversaries and birthdays were celebrated. Both of the songs I have analyzed express the virtue of loyalty and fidelity. Those in attendance were predominantly of Jewish descent, immigrants from the Soviet era and their families. The broader older and younger ethnic Russian immigrant populations were not in attendance. Does this safety net afford a unique comfort due to their choice of emigrating from their motherland? I contend that immigration to Brooklyn provides this older
population the space and freedom to determine how they commemorate shared life experiences and historical events to express their ethnicity and collective agency. They expressed their ethnicity as simultaneously being Jewish and from the Soviet era.

Presumably not all veterans have the same legacy as Leonid Rozenberg. I observed several veterans who were escorted by their home attendants. Once the older generation passes will ethnic attachment for Victory Day continue amongst the Russian-Jewish population in Brooklyn? I presume the impact of “victory” during Victory Day, May 9th will indeed lessen. The gap between the motherland is also psychologically thinning, too. These implications are curious. Perhaps ethnic hybridization, Russian-American will become obsolete. Most of the younger generations of Russians are familiar with the songs analyzed in my thesis, although they may not know all of the lyrics. But for now when these songs are sung in the presence of veterans and survivors, I would argue that their memories are in real time, making the songs potent reminders of their remarkable survival and their “host-country orientation.” For now, the cultural differences are alive and visible.

Their distance from ceremonial procession of Victory Day in Moscow permits this population the agency to celebrate on their own terms. The narratives afforded broad interpretations of “Victory.” In a more intimate and homogenous setting in Brooklyn their narratives can overlap with Jewish sentiments and culture. As mentioned at both events Jewish songs were sung, although the majority were Russian songs. The concurrences of themes, unique to the cultural differences of the veterans and the families in attendance are distinctive of their ethnicity. The key patterns of behavior that emerged throughout my observations highlight the
camaraderie amongst the participants. Their motives for meeting together and affinity they share were evident in their acknowledgement of one another and their remembrances of the past.

From an instrumentalist, standpoint, at the banquet most of the Russian-speaking participants acknowledged the direct link between the establishment of the state of Israel with Victory Day. The only native Russian speaker who did not mention this was the woman from the Russian consulate. Also, there are Holocaust survivors that live in south Brooklyn who celebrate Victory Day. As long as there are those who are living who can share their experiences in real time, listeners will gain a deeper understanding and knowledge base, more so than reading historical renditions from a textbook. For example, when I listen to a survivor and glance at their number tattooed on their wrist their presence is etched in my memory more so than reading about past events. The past is current; there is an existential phenomena, which is instrumental, pragmatic and potentially emotive simultaneously. I would argue that such encounters politicize and instrumentalize history in concrete human ways.

CONCLUSION

Elderly Russian-speaking Jews actively assert their ethnicity and identity during Victory Day commemorations, wherein Soviet symbols are displayed, as well as new symbols that reflect their lived experiences in America. But their use of Soviet symbols during the commemorative festivities does not necessarily imply an alliance with Soviet ideology. Their loyalties are with their families, those who died during the war and after, and with the survivors who live in south Brooklyn.
The emotional disposition at all the social events is stoic, with an aura of sacredness. Despite the contentious element of Victory Day celebrations, I witnessed social actions that symbolized a deep sense of self-respect and respect for one another. Annual gatherings, such as the ones I attended, demonstrate resilience, integrity, and fidelity to their shared past. The sustainability of ethnicity in Brooklyn is not for instrumental reasons such as national power or to garner public support, but for reasons associated with primordial ties to one another and to their shared memories. To return to the comparison of popular memory and elite memory, the activities in Brooklyn highlight the role of popular memory, illustrating how narratives can shift away from elite memory.

Victory Day celebrations in Brooklyn are not driven by the government unlike celebrations in Russia. Therefore, one major difference between festivities in Russia and in Brooklyn involves the pluralistic narratives in Brooklyn. The singular rendition of “victory” in Russia from the initial Victory Day celebration narrowly highlights the Russian involvement in World War II. Two critical narrative threads in south Brooklyn that differ from those in Russia include: first, an acknowledgement of the multilateral involvement of other countries in ending the war. The recognition of Allied countries—especially the United Kingdom, Soviet Union, and the United States—differs from the perspective promoted during the Soviet Union that the burden of the war and the duty to fight was on Russian shoulders. Hence, victory is attributed solely to the Russian involvement in World War II.

Secondly, prior to the end of World War II the Jewish population did not have their own territory. This wider interpretation of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 was a direct outcome of Victory Day. Many key speakers at the banquet and musical concert spoke
with gratitude for the role of Israel in accepting them as immigrants first, in the pathway to immigration to American society.

The immigration of Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union has added to the pluralism of south Brooklyn, where “My New York” could be deemed as the new homeland for this unique urban population. Their expressions of symbolic ethnicity and collective memory are especially demonstrated in the practice of publicly commemorating the end of World War II with Victory Day celebrations. In reaching my conclusions, I relied on secondary data analysis, textual analysis, and non-participant observation. I drew upon four Victory Day events I attended as a non-participant observer to explore how the emphasis on Victory has shifted in the local parades and social events in south Brooklyn, where those who celebrate it publicly express an ethnicity and identity that is distinctive to their shared past as Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union.

Remembrances for elderly Russians Jews are culturally dissimilar to broader Memorial Day celebrations and to Jewish Days of remembering. Although participants may acknowledge those days too, for many elderly Russian-speaking Jews Victory Day remains an important celebration: aptly known as “the holiday with a tear in one’s eye.”
Figure 2. Viktor Koretskii and Vera Gitsevich, “Liubite rodinu!” (Love the Motherland!), 1949.
Figure 3. New York Government, Department of City Planning, Community Portal. (http://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/community/community-portal.page)
Figure 4. Medical clinic in Bensonhurst. 2014, Photo by Author.
Figure 5. Victory Day Parade Banner Held at Brighton Beach 2015. “Happy Victory Day, Dear Veterans.” The Soviet military emblem and the St. George ribbon are displayed in the left hand corner of the banner. Photo by Author.
Figure 6. Star of David Banner held at Victory Day parade at Brighton Beach 2015. Photo by Author.
Figure 7. Display of Medals at Victory Day Parade 2015 at Brighton Beach. Photo by Author.
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