Identity Loss and Recovery in the Life Stories of Soviet World War II Veterans

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Purpose: We examined the adjustment to societal change following the fall of communism in a group of Soviet war veterans from Russia and the Ukraine. The focus of the study was on the dynamics of identity development, and especially generativity, in a period of intense social upheaval. Design and Methods: We administered measures of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and generativity to 50 World War II veterans from five distinct areas of the former Soviet Union. We also conducted life-history interviews and made a thematic analysis of the transcripts. Results: Despite the loss of the system of government and values that had dominated their lives, most participants demonstrated positive well-being, and especially a high sense of generativity. They described their experience of societal change as having disturbed their past, present, and future sense of self. Most, however, had found ways of reaffirming a generative identity. For some, this meant maintaining a Soviet identity; for others, it meant taking a critical view of the history through which they had lived. The principal sustaining element among the participants as a whole was hope in their own families’ future. Implications: Major societal change of the kind experienced by Soviet war veterans in later life poses a challenge to a continued sense of generativity. These elderly veterans were able to meet this challenge, providing evidence of their resilience and the continuing strength of family bonds in the former Soviet Union at this time of debate about national identity.

Key Words: Generativity, Societal change, Values, Family bonds, Communism, Russia, Ukraine

In this article we focus on older war veterans’ experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union, perhaps the most striking of all late-20th-century societal changes not only in Europe but in the world at large. Soviet World War II veterans are of particular interest because of the enormity of their wartime sacrifice—the latest estimates put Soviet war losses at 28 million—and the character of the recent social upheavals they have experienced. One might expect these veterans to have a particularly strong investment in the continuity of the communist system that had directed the war effort. Moreover, although it was welcomed by the western world, the subsequent development of a capitalistic and market economy has had negative economic and other consequences for many older people within Russia, the Ukraine, and other republics of the former Soviet Union. Not only have they lost financial and social security, but they have also suffered from a loss of national and individual self-esteem.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 following the failed coup against President Gorbachev and the subsequent introduction of free market reforms by President Yeltsin, there was a widespread collapse of public services and income support for older people (Tchernina & Tchernin, 2002). The liberalization of prices led to inflation rates of over 2,500%, both in Russia and the Ukraine. The value of pensions lost pace with inflation, and in many cases they were paid late or not at all. The health care system and social services on which so many older people relied for support also ceased to function reliably or disappeared completely. It is understandable, therefore, that the older generation in particular, because it has suffered most from the political changes,
tends to look back on the communist period as a golden age.

The impact of social change on older people has been recognized belatedly by the Russian government. It has taken steps to improve pensions, but at the same time it has removed a series of subsidies on transport, utilities, and medicine that, it can be argued, benefit older people more than others. Highly relevant to the focus of this article is the fact that the annual May celebrations of victory over Nazi Germany have been reinstated. Veterans had always played an important part in these ceremonies, which confirmed their historic identity as heroes of the Soviet Union. President Putin has even gone so far as to acknowledge openly the trauma the Russian people have suffered, referring to the fall of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century” (“Awkward Russia,” 2005). Soviet war veterans’ experiences of suffering and triumph in World War II as well as of life in the Soviet Union’s postwar years of success and failure give them a significant role in the present debate about future directions for Russia and its neighbors (Billington, 2004).

We are members of a research group that is applying psychological theory to problems of international reconciliation across Europe. Since the late 1990s, this group has met regularly at workshops funded by the Swedish School of Social Sciences in Helsinki and the Leverhulme Trust in London. Our current interests focus on the contribution that retelling war experiences has on productive aging, especially in the area of intergenerational and international relations. As part of this research, we conducted a preliminary study among Soviet war veterans, their children, and grandchildren to investigate the feasibility of intergenerational data collection (Podolskij & Coleman, 2003). Here we report on data collected from the war veterans, focusing in particular on their adjustment to recent societal change within the former Soviet Union. We expected that they would have encountered major difficulties, and we were interested in the means they used to surmount these challenges. In previous work conducted in England on older people’s adjustment to societal change in the 1960s and 1970s, our research group identified a number of distinct responses, ranging from moral siege to disturbed questioning (Coleman & McCulloch, 1990).

For the present study, we adopted a theoretical framework, derived originally from the psychosocial life-span theory of Erik Erikson (1963), which proposes the centrality of identity to healthy adult development. Erikson’s theory also gives particular emphasis to the importance of harmonious intergenerational relationships across the life cycle. Although Erikson’s interest was primarily in child and early adult development, he acknowledged the importance of reciprocity between generations at each stage of personal growth. Other theorists who have followed him in this respect, such as Gutmann (1987), have pointed to the advantages of a stable and coherent culture, in which successive cohorts can recognize themselves in each other’s life tasks, for aging well. Unfortunately, in a society with fast-changing cultural practices and norms, older people’s ability to pass on their knowledge and values to the younger generation is limited. The resulting perceived inability to influence younger people affects the individual’s acquisition of a sense of generativity, a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation, which Erikson posited as the principal psychosocial task that is characteristic of middle adulthood and that is necessary for the successful transition to the final stage of integrity.

McAdams (1990), in his substantial reconstruction of Erikson’s theory of life-span development, convincingly argued that generativity is best conceptualized not as a separate task but as a further stage of identity development. To know who one is eventually requires the articulation and justification of the consequences, beyond one’s own life span, of the life choices one has made. McAdams also created an integrative framework to guide research on generativity, and he developed a model that brings order into the ideas and measures that he and others have constructed to study the concept in action (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). His model emphasizes seven features of generativity: cultural demands, inner desire, concern for the next generation, belief in the species, commitment to goals, creative and maintaining action, and narrative expression in the telling of one’s life story. McAdams uses the concept of generativity script to describe the mature adult’s creation of an imagined future within a framework of belief and value that links to key events in the individual’s life. In the communication of this vision, personal identity is both reaffirmed and projected into the future. If, for whatever reasons, the previously imagined future loses credibility, then identity is threatened. The individual must find other ways of coherently linking a different future with past and present.

With this conceptual framework in mind, we examined how Soviet veterans’ sense of continuing identity may have been affected by recent societal change in Russia and the Ukraine. In particular, we sought evidence on the processes by which identity, and in particular a sense of generativity, may have been retained or lost and recovered.

Participants, Data Collection, and Methods of Analysis

We had a total of 50 Soviet war veterans, all of whom had experienced service in combat zones, interviewed over the course of 1.5 years (during the period from 2000 to 2002). Eight war veterans (6 men and 2 women) living in Moscow responded to pilot interviews conducted by psychology students of the
same minor modifications to the interview material, we identified the remaining 42 participants from four other contrasting areas of the former Soviet Union in addition to Moscow. We obtained initial contacts through regional and local World War II veterans’ clubs and societies. We set a target number of 10 participants for each area to allow us to make a comparative qualitative analysis. We had the content of the interview, and its inclusion of sometimes painful and intimate questions, explained to the veterans before we obtained consent from them. Inclusion in the study was also based on the agreement of both a child and grandchild of the veteran to complete a questionnaire on well-being and attitudes toward war. We contacted the veterans first, and relatively few (20%) refused to participate. No families subsequently refused their collaboration.

The eventual numbers of veterans interviewed were 13 in Moscow, 7 in Obninsk in the region of Kaluga, 8 in Cheliabinsk in the Urals, 7 in Petrozavodsk in Russian Karelia, and 15 in Cherkassy in the south of the Ukraine. We selected the five areas to provide a broad and representative spread of the former Soviet Union with varying indicators of economic and personal well-being (Podolskij & Coleman, 2003). Obninsk, 100 km southwest of Moscow, was important in the Soviet period as a center of the defense industry, but it has subsequently declined in status. Cherkassy has always been a rich agricultural area; it was occupied by Nazi forces for the larger part of the war, and it was a favored area to which Soviet veterans were encouraged to migrate at the end of the war. Soviet recruits from Karelia saw some of the first action of World War II in the Winter War of 1939–1940 against neighboring Finland. The Urals provided another point of contrast, distant both from Moscow and the war front.

Trained psychologists conducted the interviews, under ethical procedures approved by the Faculty of Psychology of Moscow State University. We had special attention given to those individuals who showed distress during the interviews (i.e., we drew the attention of family, friends, or social workers and doctors to their problems). In some cases, particularly for those who expressed a need to talk more about their lives, we had regular follow-up visits organized by students from the Faculty of Psychology. Most of the participants regarded their participation in the study as part of their continuing generative contribution to society, and many articulated this point enthusiastically in the course of their interviews. Some, however, responded in more depressed tones, indicating that nobody would be interested in what they said or thought.

The final sample of 50 war veterans was composed of 11 women and 39 men; the mean age was 79.7 years (age range = 73–91 years). The greater part of our sample, 45 respondents (90%), were young adults (18–24 years) when called into service. An examination of their war histories demonstrated that they had had more experience of the war’s later rather than earlier stages. The majority of the veterans, 30 of them (60%), had taken part in the recovery of occupied areas within the Soviet Union, 26 (52%) participated in the liberation of other Eastern European countries. Nevertheless, some had also experienced the earlier stages of the conflict: 13 (26%) were part of the 1939–1940 Winter War with Finland and the continuation war on the northwest front; 9 (18%) experienced the German invasion of the Ukraine and Belorussia; another 9 (18%) participated in the defense of Moscow; 8 (16%) took part in the siege of Leningrad, and another 8 (16%) participated in the turning point in the conflict, the battle of Stalingrad. Six (12%) also had experienced the final stages of the war with Japan in the Far East. Others had continued in service after the war. One had been a naval commander at the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Of service categories, 38% of the veterans had been members of the artillery, whereas 23% were in the infantry; 9 veterans (18%) had served in the medical divisions, 5 (10%) in signals, and 3 (6%) in intelligence. Three (6%) had served in air, 2 (4%) in naval, and one (2%) in tank forces.

We had the interviews with the veterans conducted in two parts. In the first part, after the veterans provided brief details on their health and living circumstances, the interviewers invited them to talk about their lives as a whole, the connections between past and present, significant formative experiences, and major themes and values. We translated the interview schedule from one designed to investigate older people’s experience of continuity in sources of identity, in particular the relatedness of their recent life experiences, to their whole life course (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 1998). The schedule is based on McAdams’ (1993) model of identity as life story. Thus participants were encouraged to explain sources of both continuity and discontinuity in their lives and to describe their own reactions to the important events they had witnessed. However, leading questions, such as those relating to the collapse of the Soviet Union, were avoided.

In the second part of the interview, the interviewers asked the participants to complete various questionnaires on well-being and adjustment. These included a measure of self-esteem (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 1993) and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). In addition, we used the Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993) to assess Erikson’s developmental concept. We also used a measure of wartime experience (Hunt & Robbins, 2001). We derived this measure in part from a measure used by the U.S. military during the first Gulf War, with items added to allow for the different experiences of World War II, and validated on British veterans. It covers experiences of air, sea,
and land forces. We used the Impact of Events Scale (Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979), which has been translated into several languages, to assess the continuing experience of trauma. All of the remaining U.S.–UK questionnaires were translated into Russian and backtranslated by colleagues in Russia. Lastly, we developed a Russian questionnaire to assess knowledge about World War II and attitudes toward it as well as toward war in general (Podolskii & Coleman, 2003). We had this questionnaire, together with those on life satisfaction and generativity, administered to all three generations. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours and were recorded and transcribed by the interviewers.

During our qualitative analysis, we carefully analyzed the transcripts to identify material on values, societal change, and impact on personal identity and generativity. We grouped cognitive, affective, and practical coping responses to the changed social situation together, and we extracted a list of major and minor themes under each heading. We also examined connections between themes. Each of us checked the validity and value of this categorization with one another in repeated meetings and presentations of the data over the course of 2002–2003. Both of us reread the material to ensure that no important themes were neglected. In abbreviating the results of the analysis for this article, we have made an attempt to provide representative quotations for each of the themes identified from participants in the five geographical areas.

**Results**

**Indicators of Health and Well-Being**

Almost one half of the participants in the sample (46%) rated their health as poor, the same number as fair, and only 8% as good. Visual problems were present in half of the participants, and a similar number of participants used hearing aids. Virtually all veterans indicated some problems with chronic disease, most commonly cardiovascular disease. One fifth of the individuals were registered as war invalids.

On the Impact of Events Scale, 12 respondents (24%) scored at or above the criterion marker of 30 for signs of significant distress (particularly intrusive symptoms), warranting clinical examination. This figure corresponds well with data collected on older World War II veterans elsewhere (Hunt & Robbins, 2001). More than two thirds of the sample, 36 (72%), referred to reminiscing often or everyday or increasingly. War experiences dominated their reminiscing, and many veterans told detailed stories about their experiences. Only 7 members (14%) of the sample said that they did not like to reminisce. The reasons were mainly related to the war, especially the painful losses of family members.

The majority of the participants indicated high levels of well-being. Even those with the most troubling memories expressed pride in having contributed to winning the war. Self-esteem scores were high in the sample, with 94% of participants displaying moderate to high self-esteem compared with 79% in an English sample of similar age range (Coleman et al., 1993). Although scoring below U.S. norms, the veterans expressed higher life satisfaction than their children. Generativity scores were especially high, significantly higher than both their children’s and grandchildren’s (Podolskii & Coleman, 2003). This pattern is dissimilar to that observed in the United States, where the middle generation scored highest (McAdams et al., 1993), and it is also significantly higher than U.S. and UK sample norms.

The high generativity of the grandparents was reflected in the interview material, for example in descriptions of invited talks to schools and colleges, although some individuals indicated that there had been a lowering of interest in war veterans’ contributions since the collapse of the Soviet Union. One veteran from the Ukraine noted the following:

I try to give my experience to the youth. That is why I visit schools and technical colleges where I talk to students and teach them how to build a good society... I would like to write memoirs for the next generation, but nobody wants them in our country now. (male, Cherkassy)

**The Impact of the Collapse of the Soviet Union on Society and the Self**

The vast majority of the participants viewed the changes in Russian and Ukrainian society since the breakup of the Soviet Union extremely negatively. In fact, only those who had experienced Soviet repression directly or within their own families appeared to see the need for change. There were three clear examples in our sample: (a) one man was sent as a boy to Siberia with his mother after his father was denounced and executed; (b) another was dismissed from military academy because his father-in-law had been repressed; and (c) a Bulgarian by birth who served in the Finnish war and the defense of Leningrad was exiled to the east after Bulgaria allied with Nazi Germany and only regained liberty of movement after Stalin’s death.

Most veterans, however, expressed a clear preference for the Soviet way of life. Even those who had positive comments to make about the benefits of the changes they had witnessed tended to qualify them by an overall negative verdict, as in the following statement by a male Moscow veteran:

I didn’t like the fact that in those days nobody could say what he thought openly. Also individual human life wasn’t valued by our government. But there were less gangsters and thieves... I am not pleased
that the USSR doesn’t exist anymore. There was more solidarity then.

Loss of social cohesion was the most commonly stressed consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union. When questioned about valued features of their lives, the veterans placed much emphasis on civic moral virtues (duty, honesty, justice) and social harmony (good relationships, kindness, friendship). Nearly all participants considered these to have declined since the fall of the Soviet Union. Most had taken considerable pride in their work and achievements during and after the war, and a connection was drawn between the sacrifices made in the war and the work of building the country afterward, as both had required mutual support between comrades. Such positive features were perceived to have disappeared from current Russian and Ukrainian society, as illustrated in the following quotes from veterans from Obninsk and from the Ukraine. A female veteran from Obninsk noted that “there was no worry that somebody would hurt you. . . . Now many people set metallic doors and steel grating on their windows.” A male veteran from Cherkassy stated that “what we had before and what we have nowadays couldn’t be seen even in a nightmare. There is anarchy in the state. . . . Thieves rule.”

The majority of the veterans in the sample had experienced the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an acute personal as well as social crisis. It had affected them not only materially and socially but also in their understanding of their lives. They wanted to leave their listeners in no doubt about the ways in which the expectations and ambitions for society that had underpinned their previous lives had been dashed. Such attitudes were particularly strongly expressed by the veterans interviewed in the Ukraine, which had lost its close connection with Russia as a result of the changes. As one male veteran from Cherkassy said, “I hardly survived the breaking of the USSR. I can’t forget the behavior of our party leaders. It’s impossible for me to feel the present is equal to the past. Only our spirits and beliefs are the same.” Another male veteran from Cherkassy stated that “those events we were dreaming about didn’t happen. The state betrayed us. . . . Our vital moral values have been smashed.”

Similar attitudes were expressed in the four areas of Russia as well. The following quotation is from a 91-year-old male from Moscow, the oldest veteran in the sample:

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union the self-perception of each citizen has been changed. Beforehand everyone was convinced that we were the citizens of a great state. . . . The reforms were carried out awfully. They destroyed everything we had built up and it’s very hard to accept this.

Social change not only threatened the future. It also affected the veterans’ continuing appreciation of their past achievements. Many veterans had been members of the Comsomol, the communist youth movement, and as adults had joined the Communist Party. A male veteran from Cheliabinsk in the Urals expressed his dismay at the comments he heard being made:

I see more and more often that young people forget about the value of our victory in the Great Patriotic War. I am worried, frightened, and discontented with the increasing number of neo-fascists. I hear more and more often that it would be better if Hitler had conquered us, that then we would have lived as now Germans do. It hurts me greatly.

Some individuals felt particularly ashamed about the condition that older veterans had been left in, as illustrated by this comment from a Ukrainian male veteran from Cherkassy: “It hurts to look at the old men who gave all their strengths to the state and now drag out a miserable existence. . . . We the veterans are betrayed. We have been deprived of our past.”

Some individuals were as much concerned about the situation of younger people, who received less support from the state than in the past. The continuity of life between generations was broken, and the old were left to worry about what would become of their children and grandchildren. This applied across the different areas. A male Karelian veteran from Petrozavodsk contrasted his own education with that of contemporary young people: “I passed through all the stages of ‘communist youth’ etc., and there was a succession between generations. . . . There isn’t anything like that today. There is no system.” The lack of formation for young people also worried the oldest veteran in the sample: “Our youth doesn’t have an easy life. I become agitated when I think about the future development of the country.”

Recovery of the Self: Reaffirming, Questioning, and Drawing Lessons

Despite their condemnation of the societal change they had experienced and the personal psychological disturbance it had led to, most of the veterans had adjusted to the new situation. This adjustment had been achieved in a variety of ways. Many individuals had successfully maintained or recovered their Soviet identity, and, like British older interviewees of the 1970s–1980s, presented as in a state of moral siege (Coleman & McCulloch, 1990). A male Ukrainian veteran from Cherkassy reaffirmed his own previous political identity: “My life has two parts, before and after the breaking of the USSR. The only connection is that I am still a member of the communist party. My ideas didn’t change.”

Some veterans were even looking forward to the recovery of communism, in their own lifetimes or
beyond them, such as this female veteran from Osninsk: “The most important thing for me is the re-establishment of our clear social system, to see once again the happy society we had been building since 1917. I look forward with hope.” A male Ukrainian veteran from Cherkassy also expressed hope for the reversal of the changes: “I am for the Soviet authority to come back… Nowadays is the time of deceivers, swindlers, and thieves, but they will also come to an end.”

Others, however, seemed to be involved in a continuing dialectic process, doubting the new direction that society had taken but at the same time questioning the assumptions that had guided their past lives. There was no one single thought pattern among those who expressed these attitudes. Some veterans were still questioning the meaning of their lives, some had recovered a fresh perspective on the past and the future, and still others had learned that making comparisons was not easy. A male Ukrainian veteran from Cherkassy articulated the internal dialogue he had experienced:

I was a communist and I still remain one. It would be time to write a book but who needs it?… I’m now waiting for the end and I’ve come to the conclusion life passed by beyond my will. For 90% I was the slave of circumstances.… What meaning does my life have? That I remained faithful to my communist ideas.

In the process of his life review, a veteran from Moscow returned to the importance of the war, but also of his family and the danger of comparisons:

I did a lot both for my family and for our society. The war was an important part of my life. I defended our Motherland. I gave a good education to our sons. I was needed by society.… Now my social status is changed. But there are also a lot of good things, my grandchildren for example. I don’t want to make comparisons. I mustn’t do it.

A few persons were able to draw lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union, as illustrated by this male Ukrainian veteran from Cherkassy:

What is happening to our society is the result of our political passivity and indifference of each man to his fate. The state thought instead of us earlier and they do so now. They behaved disgracefully before and they so the same nowadays. We followed the way of the Party and those in power. Nobody consulted with us, our task was to vote unanimously and approve everything.

Others, including a male Karelian veteran from Petrozavodsk, saw instead the continuity of Russia’s struggle with itself: “We have overcome hard times; it’s also difficult for young people nowadays, but they should endure, [as] it will never be easy to live in our country.” Still others, including another male Ukrainian veteran from Cherkassy, were simply fatalistic: “We are part of Cherkassy, were simply fatalistic: “We are part of the wheel of history. We built Communism and Socialism and now we build Capitalism.”

Some of the participants were able to achieve a balanced view, recognizing good in both societies. A male veteran from Moscow was able to articulate present-day advantages, without denying the benefits of living in Soviet society:

Knowledge about the world has changed. Now we have more information which we can trust. Earlier there were no alternatives. Today I can compare many points of view on any problem and can develop my own opinion contrary to the commonly held one.… Experience is whole and one cannot select from memories. But what I can say is this. Life was interesting in the USSR. Young people think our Soviet living was dull and grey. It’s not true. Our life was bright, full of interest, and maybe even better than today. We had faith in the future, creating human happiness, we had the enthusiasm to assist our country.… Now I’ve become an old man. No, I can’t say that the present day is worse. It is different.

The Continuing Importance of Family Life

The most prevalent sustaining elements in these veterans’ lives were their families. All participants, without exception, mentioned their families at some point in the interviews, usually to indicate the significance of family for their past, present, and future perspectives on life, but sometimes to lament the death of a spouse or children. Spousal bereavement was clearly a major contributory factor to lowered well-being in some of the participants, but it could be compensated by close relationships with children. Grandchildren especially provided a sense of hope and purpose. This was true across the sample of participants, and it is well expressed in the following quotations from veterans in the Ukraine and the Urals. One male veteran from Cherkassy said this:

I do worry about our children and grandchildren, about their life. But we should fight, we should hope for the best. We are experienced in this. My spirit is still strong and ready to struggle, nothing can break me morally. We just celebrated the birth of a great-grandchild. I took part in the march of peace. My aim is to live for my family. I’m confident in the future; I hope everything will be good.

A male veteran from Cheliabinsk made this statement:

What has changed is that I have lived under Soviet power, and now it is democracy, a change for the
worse. What has not changed is my attitude to my family. I love them as before and take care of them.

In contrast, those who remained demoralized were, without exception, those who had suffered bereavement and other family change. The situation of those who lived unhappily alone was painfully expressed by another male veteran from Cheliabinsk in the Urals:

The basic condition of my life is loneliness... My children call on me often, but they have their life. I have lived at their house, but I couldn’t help and have come back here... Life has passed quickly as if I haven’t lived at all.

Even when adverse comments were made about social change, it was the loss of family life that was most painful. A female Ukrainian veteran from Cherkassy had worked as a school teacher after the war, but she now lacked family support and had to resort to selling on the streets:

It used to be a real life. I helped children. Now I visit the bazaar and sell flowers. My son has died. Is this real life? I have little hope. Capitalism is not the future for me.

Discussion

The participants in this study were survivors of one of the greatest conflicts in human history, and their sense of being part of that history had been reinforced by decades of commemorative events. Their generativity had been consciously called on in their efforts to build up Soviet society after the war. In retirement from paid employment, many had continued to play generative roles not only in their families but also in voluntary work within schools, colleges, and veterans’ associations. The latter, to which most of the participants belonged, had played a particularly important role in maintaining morale during the transitions that occurred with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is therefore not surprising that their generativity scores appeared so high, despite the material and social losses they had incurred in recent years.

The vast majority of the participants had integrated their war experiences into their life stories. The sense of being part of history was of great importance to them and it compensated to a large degree for the continuing distress of mind, interruptions to normal life, and lost opportunities (e.g., to pursue higher education). The restoration of the ceremonies for commemoration of the veterans in the annual victory celebrations had done much to recover some of the pride that had been wounded by the veterans’ diminished status and pensions. As our research with Finnish war veterans also suggests (Hautamaki & Coleman, 2001), commemorations as well as provision of tangible benefits are very important to the mental health and well-being of veterans.

Nevertheless, the veterans’ capacity to psychologically survive such massive societal change should not be downplayed. Many participants continued to draw on the language of struggle and recovery that had marked the period of war and postwar reconstruction. One of our male Karelian participants from Petrozavodsk even converted his feelings into verse form:

I believe that we will clean the country out of the dirt of reforms; happiness and gladness will enter our home; we shall live in peace and friendship again.

The future hope of these veterans was focused less on their own lives and more on that of their children and grandchildren. Expressions of despair predominated only in the few situations in which family difficulties had become oppressive or in which family relationships were a disappointment. There appeared to be no significant gender differences in this regard. Women veterans expressed family difficulties perhaps more acutely, but they also displayed high levels of resilience and pride in past achievements.

As the data were collected as part of a study on family relationships, in which representatives from three generations of the same family were required to participate, an emphasis on family values was to be expected. However, the continuing importance of family bonds in Russia and the Ukraine for the material and psychological well-being of older people is also evident from other studies (Round, 2006; Tchernina & Tchernin, 2002). Many of the practical coping strategies used by Russian and Ukrainian older people involve interaction with the family, especially through an exchange of services and money. This makes it important for older adults to live near their families. Our data also indicated that the family provided the main bulwark for coping with present economic difficulties and in sustaining hopes of a better future.

Some comparisons can be drawn with a sample of British older people studied by means of a similar interview schedule (Coleman et al., 1998). The health and well-being of the participants’ families were the most prominent values in both groups. However, the Russian and Ukrainian war veterans placed considerably more stress on civic values. In doing so, they drew attention to what had been lost in the transition from communism to capitalism. An analysis of attitudes to social change also reflected the categories previously suggested in British studies (Coleman & McCulloch, 1990). Considerable resilience was displayed in the face of massive social change. For some participants, this meant adopting a stance of moral
sive current economic difficulties. As befitting a heroic the horrors the participants had experienced and their testimonies to a belief in mankind’s goodness, despite the horrors the participants had experienced and their current economic difficulties. As befitting a heroic generation, many of the veterans articulated expansive generativity scripts.

The sample of participants included remarkable examples of war veterans who combined the ability to survive great trauma, pride in achievements, a strong commitment to their families, and an ultimate belief in their future despite the current difficulties. For example, the only tank officer in the sample, a Ukrainian from Cherkassy, who experienced the entire war from the initial retreat through relinquished Soviet territory to the triumphant advance to Berlin followed by a long journey to the final stages of action in China, still suffered symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from an occasion when his tank caught fire. Although he could not accept the recent societal changes, and was for the return of Soviet power, his religious faith helped him see the purpose of life on a higher plain as “saving human dignity.” His main practical concern was that his children and grandchildren would be able to live well. His hope remained undiminished by the current social upheavals within the Ukraine.

In their deliberations, these older war veterans reflected the turmoil in the wider society about the future directions of their nation. The fall of the Soviet Union has not resolved issues about the sociopolitical future of Russia and its neighbors. Indeed, the economic difficulties of the 1990s have served to reawaken Russian debate about the rightness of following western models rather than pursuing an independent Russian path, such as whether to give priority to developing democratic institutions or to reassert traditional autocratic forms of government. In the past 15 years, Russians have produced what Billington (2004), an American expert on Russian history and culture, has described as “one of the most wide-ranging discussions of a nation’s identity in modern history” (p. 48). The fear of continuing loss of central authority has made the search for a unifying identity more urgent.

Many ideas have been put forward. These have included the continued belief in the distinctive Russian idea, a vision of the future of people that is rooted more generally in Eastern Orthodox tradition but is also seen as a mission particularly entrusted to Russia. Some ideas have also included a more radical turning away from Eurocentric and even Christian perspectives to an emphasis on the Eurasian character of Russia, a country to be conceptualized not as on the fringe of the western world but straddling both West and East, and benefiting from the latter’s greater sense of communal familiality. Parallel debates about postcommunist identity have also occurred in the Ukraine, albeit with a stronger westernizing component. However, in neither country is there yet a consensus on the precise shape of either an authoritarian or liberal future.

The past few years have seen a change in sociopolitical direction, of which presumably most of the Russian veterans we interviewed will have approved. Under President Putin, Russia has become more governed, self-interested, and independent in its political dealings, especially with the United States. Even the Ukraine, which only a short while ago in the throes of its Orange Revolution seemed to be drawing closer to the west, has begun to reaffirm traditional links with Russia. The poor socioeconomic conditions under which the majority of citizens and especially older citizens live have begun to get more attention. Large-scale corruption has at least been the focus of some notable government interventions. Above all there has been the broadening of the debate about Russia’s future.

Particularly striking is how this debate draws in people from so many varied backgrounds. This is partly the result of the greater openness and freedom of speech since the fall of the Soviet Union, but it also draws on the Soviet achievement of creating near-universal basic education to a notably high level. People want to influence the eventual outcome, and none less so than the veterans themselves. Younger people may be less involved in these debates, and more preoccupied with making their uncharted way in a new form of society, but continuing close family ties mean that they listen closely to their parents and grandparents before making up their own minds.

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