



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 10, 2010

U.S./NATO Troops Celebrate Victory Day in Red Square

Anti-communists at the height of the Cold War may have dreamed of the day when NATO troops would march triumphantly through Red Square. But they probably never imagined it would be under a Soviet flag, with the hammer and sickle flying overhead.

But the symbols of the old Soviet Union were unfurled once again, when troops from the United States, Great Britain, France, and other NATO allies marched together with their counterparts from Russia and the former Soviet-bloc nations for the first time in Moscow's annual celebration of Victory Day, commemorating the anniversary of the surrender of Nazi Germany to the Soviet army in Berlin 65 years ago, on May 9, 1945.



"In 1945, not only a military but also a great moral victory was achieved," Russian President Dmitri Medvedev said at the historic square where the body of Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin was entombed. "It was a common victory," he said. "All peoples of the former U.S.S.R. struggled for it. Our allies advanced it. And today, soldiers of Russia, the former Soviet countries and the anti-Hitler coalition states march together triumphantly. A single rank is evidence of our common readiness to defend peace."

NATO units accompanied Russian infantrymen, sailors, and airmen, along with a familiar display of military might, a Soviet tradition revived two years ago by Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Planes soared overhead, tanks rolled by and missiles were towed in the parade. The S-400 air Defense system, which Russian officials say is capable of shooting down up to six missiles or aircraft simultaneously at a distance of up to 250 miles, was part of the arsenal on display. Apparently, Moscow has no shortage of prospective customers for the system, as China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates are said to be interested in buying it. President Hu Jintao of China was among the foreign leaders attending the Victory Day celebration. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany also attended.

Relations between Russia and the West have frequently been contentious in recent years, as NATO has expanded to include former Soviet bloc nations, moving closer to the Russian border. Moscow's sale of weapons to Iran have also been an issue, as were U.S. plans, since abandoned, to install anti-ballistics missiles in Poland. But relations have reportedly improved since the signing of a U.S.-Russian treaty to reduce the number of nuclear weapons, and a recent Russian agreement to help supply NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Despite the show of solidarity with their Cold War enemies, some Russians voiced their opposition to the precedent-shattering invitation to the NATO nations to join in the celebration. Communists and nationalists held protests and called the presence of the foreign troops an insult.

"Foreign troops have never appeared on Red Square. It's a violation of tradition," said Sergei Obukhov,



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a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, still the largest opposition party in Russia. "The presence of foreign troops with weapons in their hands," Obukhov told Reuters News Service, is "an unnecessary reminder that we lost the Cold War."

But public opinion polling is one of the tools of modern democratic nations that has penetrated the defenses of the Communist stalwarts and, Reuters reported, most Russians were in agreement with their government's decision to open up the Victory Day event to other nations. A Levada Center poll last month showed 55 percent in favor of having the NATO troops at the parade and 28 percent opposing it.

World War II was a desperate fight for survival in Russia once the German army invaded and fought its way to Stalingrad. Roughly 25 million people in the former Soviet Union died in a war that remains vivid in the collective memory of the Russian people. "Russians believe that they sacrificed immensely to save the world from Nazism," *The New York Times* noted.

Residents of Poland, a NATO addition of the post-Cold War era, might have a different recollection of Russia's relationship with Nazi Germany. Moscow was allied with Berlin at the start of World War II, storming into Poland from the East, while Hitler's forces invaded from the West. When Hitler turned on his erstwhile allies in 1941, the Russians fought valiantly to save themselves and their own nation, not the world, from Nazi aggression.

Still, Poland troops were among those marching in the Victory Day parade, though Poland's liberation would not come for another 45 years after the German surrender to the Red Army.

"This parade unites all those who participated in the war," said Iosif Efron, 85, who was part of a Soviet division that met American forces in Germany at the end of the war. "The invitation was absolutely proper. We fought together, and they helped us.... Of course, without Russia, no one would have defeated Germany," he told the *Times*.

It might be added that without the military and economic aid from the United States—often at the expense of our own troops in the Pacific—Russia might not have survived the German onslaught. Today, the victorious nations are preoccupied with economic rather than military threats. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, missed the Victory Day celebration, citing the crisis surrounding the euro currency. A scheduling conflict prevented President Obama from attending, the White House said, but the U.S. President issued a statement praising his Russian counterpart.

"President Medvedev has shown remarkable leadership in honoring the sacrifices of those who came before us, and in speaking so candidly about the Soviet Union's suppression of elementary rights and freedoms," Obama said.

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