

STAGING MEMORY, MAKING THE SACRED: RITUAL, SYMBOL, AND DIGITAL PRACTICE IN RUSSIA'S IMMORTAL REGIMENT

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Russia's Immortal Regiment (IR) has become the largest public ritual of remembrance of the Great Patriotic War in post-Soviet Russia, combining family commemoration with an officially curated performance of unity and loyalty. Drawing on video microanalysis of IR marches, ethnographic observation, and a digital ethnography of approximately 1 million Instagram posts with IR-related hashtags collected in 2020, the article asks how the ritual generates collective emotions that temporarily reconcile contradictory motivations—grief for victims, pride for victors, nostalgia, and alignment with state narratives. It argues that IR's symbolic ambiguity enables broad participation while facilitating state co-optation: The initial victim-centered, “necronominalist” impulse to honor individual lives is increasingly reframed as a canonized patriotic rite in which the fallen are absorbed into a collective national body. Instagram materials show that visible IR content is dominated by institutionally affiliated actors using standardized designs and hashtags in “reporting” and “promoting” modalities, revealing patriotic memory work as a bureaucratic deliverable (*tufta*) more than a vernacular expression. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic intensified this administrative logic through home-based flash mob campaigns, while typo-based hashtag sampling exposed vernacular participation and parasitic exploitation of tags. The Immortal Regiment appears less as a spontaneous mobilization than as a managed technology for staging sacred symbols and projecting mass solidarity under conditions where genuine mass mobilization is politically risky.

Keywords: Immortal Regiment; Public Ritual; Memory of the War; Instagram; Digital Ethnography; Patriotism

The memorialization of the Great Patriotic War¹ has become a central pillar of Russia's contemporary politics of memory. Since the late twentieth century, Russia—like many postmodern societies—has experienced a pronounced “memory boom”: intensified public engagement with the past as a resource for both personal and collective iden-

¹ The Russian term for the Eastern Front of World War II (1941–1945), central to national identity and commemorative practices.

tity. In the Russian context, however, this surge has not produced a single narrative. Instead, groups with differing convictions have linked their identities to competing historical legacies, from Christian Orthodox nostalgia for the imperial past—as articulated by organizations such as the Pamiat’ Society—to civic efforts to uncover and commemorate Stalinist political repressions, most notably associated with the Memorial Society. Against the backdrop of profound wartime losses, the rediscovery of the value of individual life and personal memory has elevated the fallen: Remembrance has become an ethical and civic value more salient for civil society than for the state. At the same time, official ideology under President Vladimir Putin has foregrounded victory in the Great Patriotic War as the cornerstone of national unity, turning Victory Day (May 9) celebrations and military parades into key state rituals affirming Russia’s military might and historical continuity. The dissolution of the Soviet system also spurred a proliferation of memorial initiatives across the country, tied to a growing calendar of commemorative dates—including May 9, October 30 (Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression), and anniversaries of the Siege of Leningrad—shaped through ongoing negotiation between the state and civil society. Against this evolving landscape, the Immortal Regiment (IR) emerged as post-Soviet Russia’s the most massive commemorative ritual: Launched in 2012 by journalists in Tomsk, this grassroots project—marching with portraits of relatives who participated in the war—rapidly gained traction nationwide. Its broad appeal, combining personal and collective remembrance, quickly attracted state interest, leading to the IR’s rapid absorption into official memorial policy.

After a two-year pause without an actual parade, on April 10, 2025, at a press conference, officials and leaders of state-organized NGOs responsible for the Immortal Regiment in its current form announced that in 2025 the march would take place in several formats, including the “Immortal Regiment on the front line,” with ancestors’ portraits placed on military equipment and in dugouts. This illustrates the current stage in the evolution of an initiative that initially had no militaristic connotations. Another recent report describes how schoolchildren in the village of Bol’shoe Pikino, Nizhniy Novgorod Oblast, performed not before a live audience but in front of portraits of Great Patriotic War participants placed on chairs in the school assembly hall.² Do these incidents indicate that new symbols have acquired sacred status in Russia?

This article consists of two parts. The first addresses the phenomenon of mass participation by analyzing the ritual’s structure as a generator of collective emotions. Based on fieldwork and visual analysis of the Immortal Regiment’s marches, it examines the ritual’s symbolic and affective dimensions, aiming to explain the basis of IR’s widespread appeal and the mechanism through which solidarity is temporarily constructed among people with different convictions. The second part shifts focus to the ritual’s articulation in the digital sphere. By analyzing a complete corpus of Instagram publications, I examine the institutional drivers of the event and ask a

² *Ostorozhno novosti*, “V Nizhegorodskoi oblasti shkol’niki vystupili pered portretami uchastnikov VOV. Drugikh zritelei v zale ne bylo,” Telegram, April 17, 2025, https://t.me/ostorozhno_novosti/35714.

central question of digital ethnography: What pragmatic goals are revealed by posting practices and intentions? Taken together, the two parts help clarify what IR means for the Russian state and for those who take part in it—an important issue because it sheds light on the technologies of patriotic mobilization used by the current Russian authorities. Among these technologies, sacralization is especially important: By endowing particular symbols, objects, and commemorative forms with sacred value, the state strengthens emotional attachment and narrows the space for alternative interpretations.

Methodologically, the study adopts a triangulated qualitative approach, integrating three principal sources: (1) video documentation of IR's public rituals (a total of around four hours of my own footage and at least the same amount of footage from social media); (2) visual and textual data from Instagram (a total of 1.085 million posts, 0.74 million of which are tagged with #бессмертныйполк [immortal regiment]; a subset of 2,000 posts was coded in Atlas.ti); and (3) ethnographic observation from 2015–2019 and 2022. The design draws on digital ethnography, qualitative content analysis, and visual ritual studies.

The Instagram corpus comprises approximately 1 million posts, collected between January and June 2020 and identified through IR-related hashtags. These hashtags serve both as a data source and—during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic—as a proxy for ritual participation in digital space. Combining qualitative and quantitative elements, I use mixed (hybrid) methods characteristic of post-API studies of Instagram (San Cornelio 2022; San Cornelio and Roig 2020). A methodological innovation emerged through typo-based hashtag sampling: Targeted searches for common misspellings provided access to less institutionalized, more vernacular content typically displaced by algorithmic and political filtering. The approach is novel in that it juxtaposes ephemeral ritual performances (observed in vivo and recorded on video) with curated digital artifacts (Instagram), thereby revealing tensions between state-orchestrated symbolism and grassroots participation.

To recover embodied, affective dimensions that are often lost in digital traces, I conducted close readings of video recordings of IR marches (that took place in Saint Petersburg, Russia, on May 9 in 2016, 2018, and 2025), focusing on ritual sequencing, soundscape, spatial hierarchy, and emotional contagion. Drawing on interaction ritual theory (see Collins 2004), the analysis shows how collective emotions and symbolic choreographies unfold in physical public space, complementing the predominantly representational logic of Instagram data. Ethnographic observation, including videotaping and fieldnotes, further anchors the analysis in lived practice.

TOWARD A RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF IMMORTAL REGIMENT AS A PUBLIC RITUAL

An established avenue of research details the post-Soviet politics of historical memory and the Russian state's instrumentalization of the Great Patriotic War as a "useful past." This scholarship, initiated by seminal works like Nina Tumarkin's *The Living and the Dead* (1994), established how the Soviet victory narrative was deliberately

transformed into a pompous ritual and a foundational state-constructed victory myth. Building upon this foundation, contemporary studies examine how the Great Patriotic War functions as the single most important historical narrative appropriated by the state for political legitimation and patriotic mobilization under Putin. David L. Hoffmann (2022) and Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler (2021) highlight the striking continuities between Soviet and post-Soviet commemorative practices, noting that the memory of the past is framed as a civil religion. Mark Edele (2017) details how the state engages in “history wars” through the codification of WWII history, while Jonathan Brunstedt (2021) contextualizes this official narrative by exploring the enduring ideological tension between the pan-Soviet/internationalist paradigm (supraethnic unity) and the Russocentric paradigm (Russian primacy) within the Soviet myth of victory, a tension that continues to reverberate in the post-Soviet space. Some more specific research provides essential context for interpreting the Immortal Regiment as a newly invented public ritual, focusing on the dynamics of performance, affect, and identity. This body of work, including analysis by Elizabeth A. Wood (2011), examines how Putin utilizes the practice of “performing memory” to personalize the war and attach it to his authority, while Serguei Oushakine (2013) frames the collective suffering of the war as the “only remaining sacral-ity” and a powerful affective device. Furthermore, studies like those by Mischa Gabowitsch (2015) contextualize the IR within the broader ethnography of Victory Day, demonstrating that even seemingly spontaneous bottom-up commemorative efforts are never entirely divorced from the commemorative frameworks either inherited or preformatted by the party-state. This robust scholarship is crucial for understanding the ritual’s dualistic nature and enormous popular appeal, which Ivan Kurilla (2023) further dissects in his comprehensive analysis of the public ritual’s history and its articulation of memory dualism in a social movement.

Any study of the Immortal Regiment must address why this ritual attracted mass participation. Kurilla (2023) offers both a comprehensive review of IR scholarship and a convincing account of the ritual’s history. He shows that this grassroots initiative—later taken over by the state—can be understood as a memory-based social movement whose agenda differed markedly from the war narrative promoted by the Russian state. Kurilla rightly argues that the Tomsk activists’ initial impulse was to resist state appropriation of war memory: Making family stories public was experienced as reclaiming memory from a state that controlled official commemorative rituals. He also notes the IR’s substantial similarity to protest rallies (2023:1273); another revealing comparison that I would like to emphasize is the Soviet May 1 demonstrations. This parallel helps explain mobilization on such a scale, alongside other factors—shared patriotic values promoted by state propaganda or protest against the state’s militarization of war memory. It is as if officials in the Presidential Administration responsible for domestic policy concluded that May Day had become too politicized, potentially useful to the Communist Party, a quasi-oppositional party integrated into the regime’s managed political order, albeit with a carnivalesque tinge, and therefore risky as a venue for uncontrolled political performances. If, instead, people march on Victory Day with portraits and newly sacralized symbols of

unity, this ambiguity becomes an advantage: It makes the event genuinely popular, while allowing meanings to be steered back toward an official narrative that cultivates resentment by combining “we are the true winners” with a sense of victimhood (“they want to steal our victory”).

To situate this research within current understandings of sacrality, I draw upon Lorenzo Zambernardi’s (2022) conceptualization of the process by which soldiers have been transformed from an amorphous collectivity into distinct individuals—especially his analysis of sacrificial death. Zambernardi traces long-term changes in Western attitudes to soldier deaths, showing how rising awareness of the supreme worth of the person reshaped both the social meaning of death and the practices surrounding it: body disposal, rites of grief, and war memory. This framework helps ground discussions of the “cult of the war dead” in the context of the Immortal Regiment as a social and cultural phenomenon.

According to Zambernardi, soldier deaths shifted from being socially meaningless to gaining public importance, prompting monuments and other public forms of recognition. Mass graves were treated as temporary, and inscribing individual names on monuments marked a crucial change: It recognized soldiers as persons with identities. “Sacrificial” death denotes lives imbued with sentimental, political, and religious meaning; burial grounds and memorials were meant to teach the living about fallen heroes, while private loss was interpreted as collective immolation for the common good (Zambernardi 2022:89). States used commemoration to recode mass bodily destruction as regeneration, often blending Christian narratives (Passion and Resurrection) with nationalist ideologies in which religious language sanctified the nation, its land, and its traditions.

The First World War also democratized commemoration, asserting that everyone has the right to a life story and that all fallen soldiers should be treated equally, regardless of rank. The design of the IR ritual follows this trajectory. Another key shift, in the post–Second World War period, moved commemoration from the sacredness of death to the sacredness of life: Soldiers were mourned rather than celebrated, foregrounding the human cost rather than heroic sacrifice (Zambernardi 2022:132–140). In its original conception, IR fitted this trend: The individual—not the cause—had supreme value. Yet the officially promoted meanings of IR continue to treat the fallen as part of a collective national body, preserving an earlier paradigm; the spending of human resources in the Russo-Ukrainian War—contrary to casualty-averse warfare—accords with a narrative of national heroism that legitimizes mass sacrifice. While the Soviet Unknown Soldier could remain anonymous, IR in practice displays a hypernominalist tendency. Its commemorative forms have a religious overtone, as Thomas Laqueur writes: “The age of the necronym is one aspect of the great shift of the dead from a transcendent sphere to an immanent one, from a religion based in a cosmic reality to one grounded in memory” (2015:412).

Laqueur depicts how the names of the dead rose to importance across modern history. He defines necronominalism as the “precise counting and marking of the dead, one by one” and links it to “a conjuncture of the interests of the state, of civil society, and of the individual psyche,” each needing the names of the dead for over-

lapping or conflicting reasons (2015:414, 446). Several IR features resonate with this account. Carrying portraits keeps the deceased powerful in the imagination of the living, allowing them to appear as active presences in this world. Portraits function as tokens of the dead, much as names on monuments evoke fictive presence; in this sense, IR demonstrates the cultural work dead ancestors perform in shaping community and memory.

Contemporary theories of ritual emphasize that rituals are machines for human emotions, vehicles of collective emotional energy that prescribe patterned forms for expressing emotions—and prescribe emotions to be felt (cf. Berthomé and Houseman 2010; Collins 2004; Hobson et al. 2017; von Scheve 2012). This is an important aspect that accompanies the re-creation of group identity and propels solidarities. Among IR participants, we find people of various convictions who nevertheless feel solidarity through their ancestors and through voluntary participation in a massive event that functions as an emotion generator. While video-based microanalysis of participants' moods, expressions, and interactions is beyond this article's scope, videos have the advantage of conveying mood to viewers; an attentive look provides insight even to those with personal experience of walking in the parade.

IMMORTAL REGIMENT OFFLINE: RITUAL STRUCTURE AND COLLECTIVE EMOTION

My footage from 2016, recorded from a window overlooking Austrian Square in Saint Petersburg, shows a slight but noticeable difference in the crowd's mood at this stage of the parade compared to other footage discussed below.³ The column is led by a military orchestra, followed by military cadets, elderly participants presented as war veterans and seated in old military cars, a priest and an imam, children in military uniforms, and then the main crowd, including many schoolchildren. Participants pay little attention to the portraits they carry; they simply march, enjoying music from the orchestra or from loudspeakers on a propaganda car broadcasting Soviet songs. One likely explanation is that this section of the column is only partly authentic in terms of voluntary participation. Some portrait bearers have come on their own accord, but a significant portion of the crowd resembles extras—state-sector employees (*biudzhetniki*) mobilized by their institutions' leadership and schoolchildren brought by school administrations. Notably, the procession is being filmed: It is followed by a Lenfilm studios bus, and videographers appear periodically along the route. This is the very beginning of the march, before the column proceeds to the city center to merge with others. It is there that one would expect more enthusiastic moods and stronger involvement in collective effervescence (a concept famously introduced by Émile Durkheim [(1912) 1995:217–220]). Rituals create such moments and places—markers of connection to something invisible yet deeply felt and valued in the activity.

³ My 2016 video can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/SDHCKMsGNZc>. Compare footage recorded by a spectator in 2025, <https://youtu.be/KKmsevklqHw?si=z3TLFmEBMpmRXbvl>, and an IR participant in 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhVf3CFEIQc>.

Let us consider the symbolic elements that, as the 2025 video recorded by a spectator shows, have become obligatory for this ritual. A comparison with the IR column in 2016 suggests that the theatricalized part of the procession follows an established canon. It does not involve ordinary citizens carrying portraits of relatives, but rather organized volunteers, servicemen, and military academy students—participants who, by virtue of their status, are assigned roles and march at the head of the column, with ordinary citizens following behind.

The first elements to appear are vintage cars from the Lenrezerv museum collection, carrying reenactors in period uniforms and several elderly people who, because of their age, can only be portraying war veterans. Those who follow are separated from these representatives of an imagined past by a chain of police officers. Foremost among them are young uniformed Immortal Regiment volunteers carrying an enormous banner depicting a wartime flag. The inscription on this banner is illegible from ground level; only a bird's-eye view would reveal it—an indication that the text is not intended for spectators.



Figure 1. Flags at the head of the Immortal regiment procession, Saint Petersburg, May 9, 2025.

Behind the banner come servicemen carrying flags (figure 1): a replica of the Soviet wartime military banner, the Russian tricolor, and the flag of Saint Petersburg. They are followed by military academy cadets in historical uniforms holding military banners, their sabers drawn. Next comes a combined military orchestra in modern parade uniforms, followed by a group of Iunarmiiia (Youth Army) participants in uniform with red berets. Only after these groups does the main column—featuring portraits of ancestors—appear, and it is, for reasons that remain unclear, led by maritime academy cadets. This sequencing materializes a hierarchy through the order of appearance: first, the imagined ancestors (performed by reenactors) and the gigantic flag that signals superhuman powers; then the parade military, functioning as ritual specialists who mediate between worlds; next, VIPs and local leaders (where present); and only then the mass of participants carrying portraits of their ancestors. Cross-generational transmission is staged through the placement of the young—IR volunteers and Iunarmiiia members—who either carry the giant flag themselves or follow immediately behind it, a configuration that emphasizes the flag's monumental scale and its symbolic message beyond the spectators gathered at street level. These

young supporters are visibly uniformed and kept separate from the general crowd, underscoring their distinct, organized role within the ritual.

In the 2025 video, several moments relate to emotions and collective effervescence, most conspicuously in periodic “Hurrah!” outbursts. The soundscape is especially notable for its faithful reproduction of a Soviet May Day demonstration: After the brief appearance of the military orchestra, enthusiasm is amplified by wartime songs from Soviet films broadcast over loudspeakers, which form the sonic backdrop for the entire procession. A performance ostensibly oriented toward communion with fallen ancestors is thus embedded within a reenacted Soviet-style mass celebration—mobilizing nostalgia as an affective resource.

What emerges is a successful hybridization of at least four components that were once largely independent: (1) the Soviet-era May Day demonstration, (2) the military parade, (3) the original Immortal Regiment format of marching with family portraits, and (4) historical reenactment/cosplay. While Soviet May Day columns could include theatrical elements (for example, cars decorated with propaganda images and slogans), these never amounted to anything comparable to the reenactment component now incorporated into the IR canon.

In the late USSR, it would have been unusual to contemplate international worker solidarity at a May Day demonstration, even while carrying a leader’s portrait. Because attendance was effectively “voluntary-compulsory,” participants often treated the event as a spring holiday, engaging in celebration without sustained reflection on the ideologically charged behaviors the ritual prescribed—among other things, the public performance of unity between population and authorities. In this sense, May Day had become a degenerate version of the ritual, even though people still enjoyed shouting “Hurrah!” when passing the tribunes filled with state leaders and honored guests. The IR is not degenerate in the same way: At least its voluntary participants are not merely extras carrying portraits as props, but people who hold their ancestors’ portraits above their heads as a personally meaningful act, even if that significance is not continuously displayed throughout the march.

As Axel Michaels notes, “whether the act of ‘pouring water’ is performed to clean or consecrate a statue is not to be decided solely on the basis of these external, formal criteria, but also depends on ‘internal’ criteria relating to intentions and emotions,” with these internal criteria involving “the awareness that the act in question is done because a transcendental or higher value is attributed to it” (2012:31). In the case of the Immortal Regiment, symbols provide contact with the ritual’s sacred dimension: ancestors’ portraits, replica wartime flags, Saint George ribbons, and elements of military attire. This sacred dimension is not external to practice; it emerges through ritual action and through the attribution of value and meaning to acts and objects. This also helps explain how the same practices can sustain divergent interpretations, allowing different participants to invest identical symbolic forms with different (and sometimes incompatible) meanings.

Independent media coverage of the voluntary-compulsory mobilization of government employees to IR marches has reported practices that would appear sacrilegious to “genuine” participants, such as portraits discarded in trash bins—an act

that seems plausible only where portraits have been distributed as interchangeable props rather than carried as kin-based relics.⁴ A useful discussion of the performative dimensions of Victory Day appears in the work of Alexandra Arkhipova and colleagues (2017), who show how masquerade-like practices coexist with forms of symbolic identification through which IR participants align themselves with their ancestors. An especially incisive analysis of identification and its uses appears in the final chapter of the recent book by Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko (2023), where the authors discuss social media photographs in which IR participants mimic the posture of the ancestor depicted in the portrait they carry—an embodied claim of kinship and resemblance between the living bearer and the represented dead.

Field observation suggests that the prevailing mood in the “center” of the event is often joyful; interpretations of the IR as a death cult (e.g., Arkhipova et al. 2017:101–104) therefore need to account for the fact that its dominant emotional register is not necessarily mournful—or even particularly solemn. Nor is it primarily aggressive: Although some symbols carry aggressive connotations, their use appears marginal in the marches observed. Participants who experience the event as a spring celebration marked by nostalgia for the Soviet past—for instance, through collective singing of Soviet songs—seem to include military cosplayers.

In her analysis of the Immortal Regiment and its meanings in Russian society, Julie Fedor (2017) shows how different actors advance competing readings of the ritual and its symbolism. The IR framework makes it possible to publicly express not only feelings shaped by state-sponsored memory projects such as Russia—My History, a multimedia museum-exhibition network that presents a strongly patriotic version of the Russian past, but also attitudes closer to the “never again” position than to the militant slogan “we can repeat.” This is why the IR should be contextualized not only through the *poiskoviki* (search volunteers who recover and identify the remains of Soviet war dead) but also through more recent civil rituals such as Last Address, a project that installs memorial plaques for victims of Soviet repression at their last chosen homes, and Reading of the Names, a public ceremony in which the names of victims of state terror are read aloud. Unlike these more niche and overtly oppositional initiatives, often frowned upon by the authorities, the IR achieved broader traction because it first appeared politically unaligned and later, with state backing, provided a commemorative frame for the depoliticized, quasi-carnavalesque May Day atmosphere colored by post-Soviet nostalgia.

At the same time, the state seeks to co-opt ritual design and mnemonic “devices,” including the visual grammar through which collectives are imagined. Sarkisova and Shevchenko (2023) offer an insightful discussion of composite images assembled from multiple portraits, noting that the 2008 Name of Russia voting project, a state-backed television and internet campaign in which audiences selected emblematic figures from Russian history, represented the national past through an assembled image on its website, and that Russia—My History exhibitions deploy a similar

⁴ In the documentary film *Jours de fêtes (Holidays; 2022)* by Antoine Cattin we see how migrant workers discard the portraits (01:03:20) just leaving them on the ground by a wall.

trope in which unity is visualized through arrays of thumbnail portraits of rulers, military heroes, saints, and other canonized figures from the national historical pantheon. They argue that IR reproduces this same matrix logic: “The aerial shots of these marches rely on the same matrix logic uniting multiple miniature portraits into a grand composite ‘visual database,’ turning individual portraits into building bricks in the enormous edifice of Russian statehood” (Sarkisova and Shevchenko 2023:12).⁵

The trope of a mosaic portrait that makes it easy to connect the individual and the collective emerged to serve the memory of victims whose names need to be restored, resonating with the fact that those who died in the war—like victims of Soviet repressions—were often buried anonymously in mass graves. Yet even though the ritual’s outward form is linked to remembering victims rather than victors, Russian state propaganda adopted it as acceptable, shifting the semantic accent from the victimhood of the remembered to the “patriotic” unity of the ritual’s participants.

The war cult promoted by Russian authorities has features of both a substitute for a national idea and a quasi-religious phenomenon: Engaging with dead ancestors, their heroic deeds, and associated symbols brings participants into contact with a sacred realm. Such items—ancestors’ portraits, in particular—occupy privileged places in ritual practice, and the domain they reference (the memory of the Great Patriotic War) is treated as so sensitive that the state takes special measures to protect it. Laws and enforcement practices imposing exaggerated punishment for “discrediting” the Russian army are one expression of this symbolic policy; the same applies to laws targeting historical “falsification” and the “rehabilitation of Nazism” (see, e.g., Edele 2017). As has been noted, the sacralization of victory over Germany also combats historical dissent, since “the victory is being used to whitewash not only Stalin but also the entire Soviet repressive regime” (Petrov 2021:82). The Victory has thus become a new founding myth for the Russian state, replacing the October Revolution’s role for the USSR, and today’s Russians are positioned as the heirs of the Victory.

The idea of directly connecting the victory over Nazi Germany with the ongoing war in Ukraine makes it possible to cast a sacred light on the Russian army’s actions and to place new heroes alongside those from the Great Patriotic War. However, since February 2022 has considerably changed the context for memory performances, some who supported and participated in IR before 2022 no longer join the parade, so as not to be seen as supporters of state propaganda. They maintain their own connection with their ancestors and are unwilling to surrender it for use by a state that is using the sacred as a foundation for its power.

Since, in a world of ubiquitous online social networks, practically every significant event has a digital media reflection, and since social media have become a prominent arena for mnemonic practices—with platform-specific affordances that enable new mnemonic practices (Ben-David et al. 2024; Wang and Hoskins 2025)—I will turn to Instagram materials on the Immortal Regiment to see to what extent, and in what forms, state appropriation of this ritual is represented in publications.

⁵ For a broader discussion of the narratives promoted in Russia—My History exhibitions, see Karen Petrone (2022), who also notes that a large photograph of Putin participating in the 2015 IR parade is included in the exhibition.

INSTAGRAM POSTS: PERSONAL OR INSTITUTIONAL?

The first insight about this material emerged during the pilot exploration of Instagram search results that, at the time (in 2020), were much richer than what Instagram has provided to its users more recently. A search for #бессмертныйполк returned an infinitely long sheet of posts—around 740,000 at that moment—with screens resembling what is shown in figure 2.

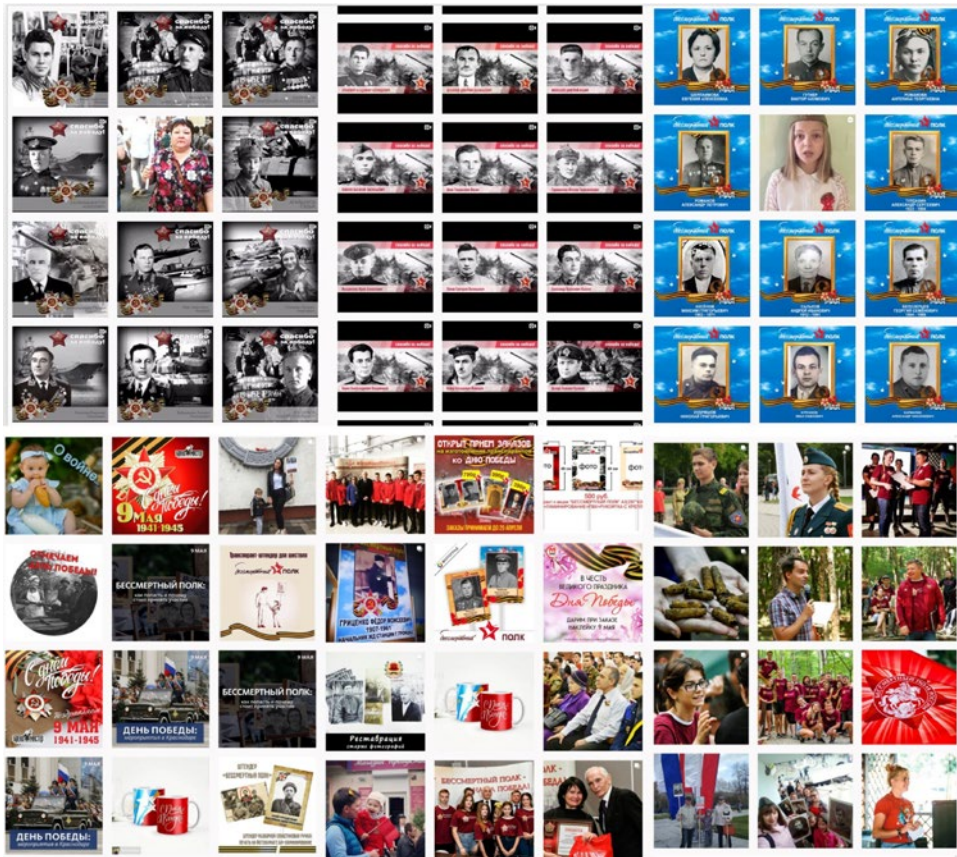


Figure 2. Six screenshots of search results for #бессмертныйполк on Instagram (2020). Each screenshot contains 4 x 3 thumbnail images.

While scrolling through search results, one could see posts in which veterans' or heroes' photographs were given professional design provided by institutional actors coordinating the memorial event (*aktsiia*); the standard design of post series comprised identical decorative elements and slogans (e.g., "Thank you for the Victory!"). Ordinary people who had posted their pictures on their own initiative rarely appeared among these numerous well-framed, similar-looking postings.

However, when I inadvertently made a typo searching for #бессметрныйполк, I encountered very different types of posts (like those shown in figure 3). Here, authors were mostly those "ordinary people" who sometimes misspell words while typ-

ing, unlike the authors of more carefully edited postings from IR-related institutions with official accounts. In these posts, people shared content typical of their regular Instagram representation: images of themselves taken by others, selfies, group selfies, children, friend groups, visited places, events they attended, and emotions they experienced, mostly in domestic mode (as opposed to competitive mode; see Tifentale and Manovich 2018). There was no professional design or media-grade picture quality—everything was captured with phones. Fortunately for researchers, these users decided to include the hashtag, otherwise these posts would have been impossible to find unless you “follow” the authors on Instagram.

It should be noted that most images from Immortal Regiment events published by “ordinary” Instagram users belong to this unsearchable category and hence cannot be collected as data—and even their number is difficult to estimate. Tentative exploration of several dozen profiles of noninstitutionally related users who published relevantly hashtagged posts shows that many have also posted numerous IR-related photos without hashtags or with tags referencing something else, such as #окнапобеды (windows of victory) or #фонарикипобеды (lights of victory), referring to Victory Day flash mobs promoted during the COVID-19 lockdown.

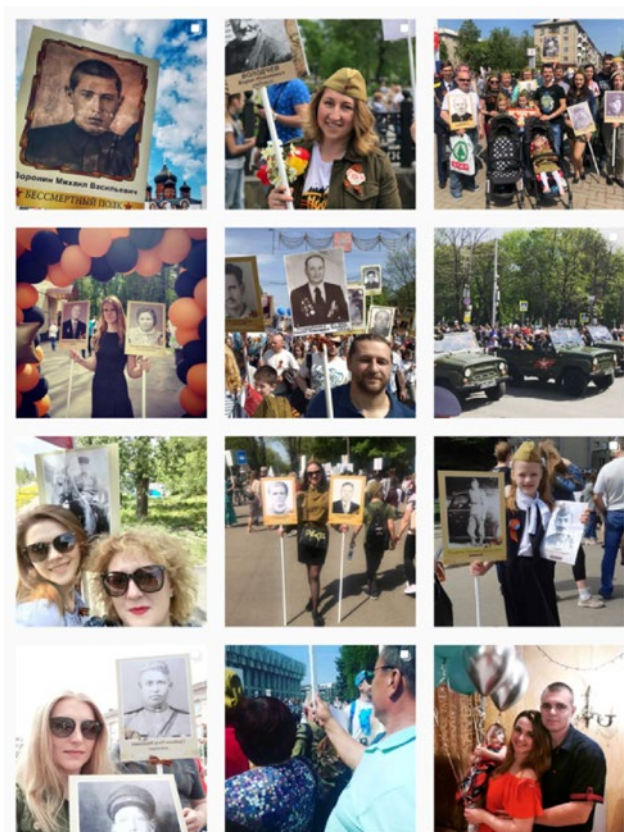


Figure 3. Search results page for #бессмертныйполк (with a typo) on Instagram (2020).

The contrast was so telling that I immediately recognized this difference between private and institutional postings as one of the main axes for analysis, even though there was much more to explore regarding genres, iconography, and the pragmatic dimension of the posts. However, the typo-prompting method led to yet another discovery, shown in figure 4, where I tried another version of the misspelling, #бесмертныйполк.

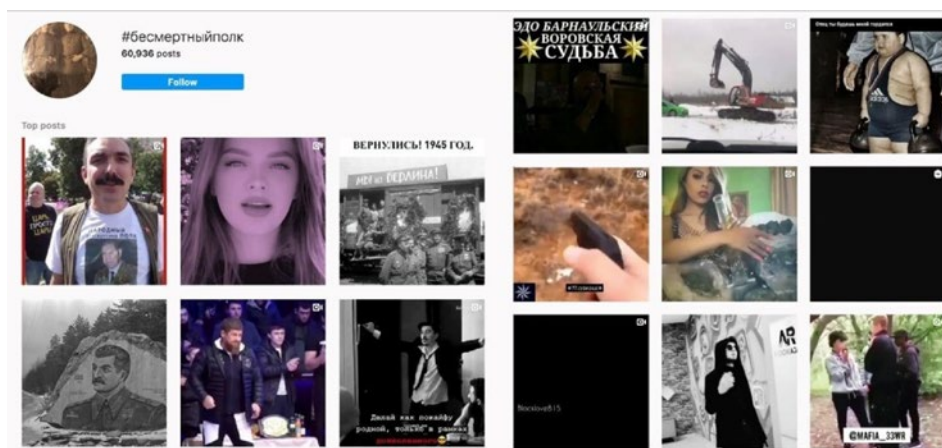


Figure 4. Search results for #бесмертныйполк on Instagram (2020).

As you can see, most search results returned for this query relate to the criminal subculture known as AUE, often glossed as *arestantskii uklad edin* (the convicts' code is one and the same), and associated with the spread of prison norms beyond penal institutions. The explanation is that this typo is not random but strongly associated with low literacy levels; people who wrote "бессметрный," as in figure 2, would immediately recognize the error had they paid more attention, whereas those who wrote #бесмертный either didn't know the correct spelling or conspicuously used the "il-literate" spelling as a subcultural identity marker.

This illustrates a simple way to exploit algorithms for promotional purposes: To increase post visibility, authors need only add trending hashtags to their publications, regardless of the actual content. Since #бессметрныйполк was a popular hashtag with substantial organized promotional effort surrounding it, it became possible to parasitically attach to it to gain a larger audience. Not only the AUE subculture but also bloggers and small entrepreneurs used IR-related content or simply added IR-hashtags to take advantage of IR's popularity on Instagram. This resonates with earlier research (Makhortykh 2021; Utekhin 2021), which showed that social media platforms possess specific affordances that, among other things, enable the commercialization of nostalgia as a mode of engaging historical memory and community. This commercial aspect is made possible by—and is indicative of—the waves of societal interest to nostalgic topics. Digital memory activism (see, e.g., Davidjants and Tiidenberg 2021) might look to some extent similar as it shares with digital entrepreneurship systematic topical posting and same basic struggle for audience attention.

IMMORTAL REGIMENTS AND THEIR HASHTAGS

Collecting the corpus required exploring the full landscape of hashtags used to mark IR-related publications. By 2020 hashtags seemed a somewhat obsolete practice: Russian influencers and ordinary Instagram users were not actively using them (see Erz et al. 2018; La Rocca and Artieri 2022; Omena et al. 2020). Introduced to make posts searchable and thus enhance visibility, hashtags soon evolved into tools of self-expression and automated promotion, especially when dozens were added via specialized tagging apps.

Adding a hashtag is not automatic—unlike location marks in Instagram before 2015—so it reflects a conscious effort. As I noted when comparing posts with only a geotag to those using a hashtag naming the place (Utekhin 2017), geotagged posts without hashtags tend to operate in a domestic mode, revealing aspects of life addressed to one's circle, whereas place hashtags aim to communicate something about the location itself. Consequently, they feature fewer people and more objects, landscapes, and artistic elements, and more often appear in a competitive mode oriented toward likes.

The visible portion of IR-related content is visible because of hashtags, and it is far more heavily tagged than typical Instagram feed content. In my corpus, posts with multiple tags are common—a telling sign of either deliberate work behind posting and tagging or the use of tagging apps. Hashtag co-occurrence analysis is promising because it can help identify groups who share values and attitudes—mnemonic communities, in the language of memory studies (Adriaansen 2024).

At the first stage of my exploration, I initiated the search using starter hashtags that directly refer to IR. A search for `#бессмертныйполк` returned posts where this tag appeared alongside other versions referencing the event, such as `#бессмертный_полк`, `#бессмертныйполк2016`, and `#bessmertniypolk`. An extended list of these direct references that systematically co-occur with the starter tags can be called main hashtags—for example, `#бессмертныйполк05`, `#моypolk_05_ru`, `#бесмертныйполкбишкек` (immortal regiment Bishkek), `#immortalregiment`, and `#immortal_regiment`. As these examples suggest, main hashtags often encode location: 05 is the vehicle registration code for Dagestan, though not all Russian regions are represented in this way.

For analysis, the most valuable step is extracting concomitant (co-occurring) hashtags. These do not name IR but express identity and emotion—functioning as slogans—and often co-occur with primary and main tags: `#япомнюгоржусь` (I remember, I am proud), `#спасибовам` (thank you), `#спасибодедузапобеду` (thanks to grandfather for the Victory), `#гордостьроссии` (the pride of Russia), and `#помнимлюбимскорбим` (we remember, we love, we mourn). Predictably, as a result of parasitic exploitation, AUE-related tags also appear among the co-occurring ones. In my database, around 740,000 posts are tagged with `#бессмертныйполк` and 443,000 with `#спасибодедузапобеду`; while the overlap is substantial, expressions of gratitude to one's grandfather can also circulate independently of IR. The co-occurrence of these hashtags is partly produced by orchestrated promotion campaigns, which can be traced efficiently through the chronological distribution of co-occur-

ring tags.⁶ This approach allows to show that the geographic expansion of IR propaganda to ex-USSR countries began in 2016 and that “No to War” was prominent in 2017, while no oppositional messages appeared among top hashtags after that—except for criminal subcultural intrusion in 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic is noteworthy because although there were no street marches in 2020, the *aktsiia* Windows of Victory brought IR not only to people’s apartments and their windows, but first and foremost to social media, with multiple reels of schoolkids reciting poems or standing with their ancestors’ portraits at home. This is an IR entirely directed by the state-affiliated agencies and NGOs, with top concomitant hashtags promoting not only the memory of the victory and feeling of unity but also the lockdown: #мойполкдома (my regiment at home), #сидимдома (we are staying home), #мывместе (we are together), #мывсе равно скажем спасибо (we will say thank you anyway), #знатьчтобыпомнить (to know in order to remember), #окнапобеды (windows of victory), #лицапобеды (faces of victory), #лучшедома (better at home), #оставайтесьдома (stay at home).



Figure 5. Co-occurring hashtags in a publication from Podvig Naroda, the Ministry of Defense archival database. Below the hashtags is the description of the heroic actions of the WWII veteran in the photo.

⁶ See tables with hashtags from our data: main hashtags (asterisk is added to those which give ambiguous results): https://f005.backblazeb2.com/file/ImmortalRegiment/Main_hashtags_morethan10posts.xlsx; concomitant hashtags that were used in more than 50 posts: <https://f005.backblazeb2.com/file/ImmortalRegiment/concomitantTags50%2B.xlsx>; top 200 concomitant tags for each year from 2014 to 2020: https://f005.backblazeb2.com/file/ImmortalRegiment/top200tags_byYear.xlsx; and concomitant tags listed by first appearance year: https://f005.backblazeb2.com/file/ImmortalRegiment/new_tags_by_year.xlsx. It is worth mentioning that the data do not include posts after May 2020.

Both for main and concomitant tags, it is fruitful to examine chronological and geographic patterns, some of which prompt questions about why certain regions are represented through hashtags in this way while others are not. Why are Dagestan, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Adygeya, Kalmykia, and Krasnodar Krai so prominent in representing their IR on Instagram—was there, in each case, a campaign organized there that year, or does the represented reality differ? And why are there so many IR-tagged posts from Florida? Social media materials alone cannot answer these questions: One needs to understand Russian-speaking communities from the former USSR in Miami and Orlando—and likely the activities of Russian soft power promoters—to explain this pattern.

Concomitant tags are especially interesting because they point to actual slogans, *aktsiia*, or simply the names that promoting entities chose for the object of promotion. Only a portion of posts using these hashtags are about IR: Tags like #спасибодедузапобеду, #парадпобеды (victory parade), and #парадпобедителей (parade of victors) often co-occur with main IR tags, but they are also widely used without mentioning IR, because they may refer to a different event or *aktsiia*, or operate at a different scale.

I did not collect a wider circle of posts bearing tags that tend to co-occur with IR, as this would be a different—and more demanding—task, requiring decisions about relevance thresholds—for instance, whether the overlap with main tags is significant enough, as with #ветераны (veterans), or not, as with #наследникипобеды (heirs of victory) or #юнармия (youth army).⁷ The problem is compounded by hashtag ambiguity: #бессмертный often points to IR (especially given the widespread form #бессмертный#полк), but it can also refer to fandom culture and anime. Similarly, #полк (regiment) and #шествие (procession) are ambiguous as well.

I began to define the range of necessary tags by trying out word combinations, including those with the adjective “immortal.” In the process, I discovered phenomena that are related to the Immortal Regiment in content but are not part of the Russian IR campaign. For example, the hashtag #БессмертныеПисьма (immortal letters) refers to a Kyrgyz campaign in which schoolchildren read letters from participants in the Great Patriotic War on video. However, to differentiate themselves from the Immortal Regiment and from Russian patriotic propaganda, the Kyrgyz education workers who published these posts—apparently following instructions from educational authorities—supplied them with only two hashtags: #БессмертныеПисьма and #ЕвразийскийВыбор (Eurasian choice). This case suggests that studying IR’s repercussions outside Russia could yield interesting results and that such a study might benefit from incorporating Instagram materials.

A plausible conclusion from the hashtag analysis is that, in the pandemic year, Immortal Regiment propaganda fused with lockdown propaganda. This is visible in the prominence of hashtags such as #лучшедома, #оставайтесьдома, #мойполкдома, #сидимдома, and #мывместе, which frame participation less in terms of mourning or

⁷ Young Army movement is not a random example here, because the profile that is currently @bessmertny_pol_kprigorod used to be @unarmia_prigordni_rayon (Ossetia); about the Youth Army see Finch (2019).

sacral encounter than in terms of obedience, managed togetherness, and civic compliance. In this respect, the online Immortal Regiment intensified one of the ritual's existing functions: the public display of unity under administratively prescribed conditions (compare "Narod i partiia ediny!" [The people and the party are united] as one of the central slogans of Soviet May Day demonstrations). At the same time, this material allows us to conclude less about transformations of ritual structure than about the reformatting of participation through the logic of the *aktsiia* and the affordances of social media. On the basis of hashtagged publications and hashtag co-occurrences alone, one cannot make strong claims about sacrality or about the ritual experience of participants. The next section will show that a large share of such posts belongs to what I call "reporting mode," in which portraits and related materials are treated less as sacred objects than as bureaucratically managed units required for demonstrating participation and successful patriotic work.

AKTSIIA AND REPORTING MODE

I analyzed posts by assigning codes until no new categories emerged, which suggests the existing categories would cover most of the corpus. While the diversity of publications is vast, fewer than 120 primary categories encompass the variability of the materials.⁸ Below I will present some observations relevant for my argument.

In the corpus, alongside posts representing a ritual event or performance, we also find posts documenting the past (archival photographs—many from family archives—screenshots from films, artwork, documents) and posts representing interaction with the past performed by the author or their relatives. Connections to the past are conveyed through popular iconographic types: "me and my ancestor," "child and ancestor," a living veteran in a recent photo, or a child with a drawing (or a poem performed on video or another contribution in the format of an *aktsiia*), as well as cosplay or historical reenactment. I leave the Russian term *aktsiia* untranslated. Crucial for understanding IR, it has undergone a curious semantic evolution and now encompasses organized events (*meropriiatiie*), especially promotional marketing events, as well as provocative public actions or performances that critique social norms or political power. Drawing on both marketing vocabulary and political activism, state-sponsored NGOs organize patriotic activities as *aktsiia* designed to go viral and mobilize maximum participation, much like flash mobs.

A significant number of posts include emblems and other design elements of an *aktsiia*—as announcements, reports, or participant contributions—whether people photograph themselves with ancestors, decorate windows for Victory Day (#окнапобеды), or organize special dictation events in schools (#диктантпобеды). Authors also sometimes present themselves—or those in their photos—as bearers of a definite identity and group membership through explicit markers: an Armenian flag, Cossack outfits, student uniforms, or school teachers' trips to Moscow with students

⁸ You can find illustrative examples of the posts coded with some of the categories mentioned in the file that contains much more information than would fit in a research paper format: [https://f005.backblazeb2.com/file/ImmortalRegiment/Immortal_regiment+_examples_categories+\(1\).pdf](https://f005.backblazeb2.com/file/ImmortalRegiment/Immortal_regiment+_examples_categories+(1).pdf).

for historical essay competitions (with participation certificates). The fact that Saint Petersburg marches involved organized diaspora groups from ex-USSR Central Asian countries makes ethnic identity salient in the IR context, and it invites questions about why particular identities become relevant in some places but not others—for instance, when a folk ensemble representing a local ethnic minority participates in an IR-related activity or when town elders lead the march. In such cases, one can observe which groups have paid respects to newly declared shrines and symbols, as if signing a visitors' book—ensuring the gesture will be noticed by authorities.

Design quality and professional photography characterize posts from institutional authors, which can be grouped as follows: First are IR-related NGOs and organizations linked to state organs, such as Podvig Naroda (affiliated with the Ministry of Defense), some commanding huge audiences; alongside them are federal-level NGOs involved in patriotic activities without being directly related to IR (e.g., the All-Russian Student Rescue Corps). Second are local branches of these NGOs, ONF (United Popular Front; #молодежкаонф), and institutions responsible for promoting IR in their city, republic, or province—local authorities, United Russia party branches, and media outlets, as well as local branches of organizations contributing to “patriotic work,” such as the Youth Army. Third are corporate actors supporting IR and mobilizing their employees to participate in IR or in an *aktsiia*. Fourth are educational organizations—daycare institutions, schools, universities—which not only involve students but also showcase the patriotic activity of their employees; libraries and museums share this characteristic, participating in existing *aktsiia* and organizing their own, including events such as Defense and Patriotic Awareness Month.

All institutional actors—NGOs, schools, corporations—draw on materials from the private family albums of *aktsiia* participants, employees, students, and so on, displaying portraits of ancestors. Part of their work is publishing Instagram posts that demonstrate the popularity of memorial initiatives and active participation: The more schoolchildren read poems or display portraits while expressing pride, the better the school's patriotic education program appears. These posts serve reporting purposes, as do posts containing images and videos from events organized by the reporting institution, while announcements of events and actions—along with Victory Day congratulations—are also highly visible among institutional publications.

The nature of patriotic work conducted by institutions tasked with promoting patriotism becomes clear when examining their profiles, and profiles of education departments are particularly illustrative. Most publications function as reports to higher organizations, with patriotic education occupying a significant place: Local education departments report on the implementation of Defender of the Fatherland Day, Unknown Soldier Day, the Blockade Bread campaign, online tests on Great Patriotic War history, the Candle of Memory, Victory Windows, Victory Lanterns, the all-Russian flash mob Drawing an Eternal Flame with Children, and, of course, the Immortal Regiment. Education departments also repost content forwarded from higher authorities, as well as campaign-related posts published by kindergartens and schools under their jurisdiction; selecting IR-related posts tagged with #repost makes it possible to trace the actors involved in report-oriented reposting chains.

To demonstrate patriotic and IR-related activity, schools and libraries also publish posts in the genre of representing the past, apparently aimed at historical education. Since stories about heroic feats and Nazi atrocities are emotionally charged and function as clickbait, both institutional authors—seeking views and likes for reporting purposes—and private bloggers engage in “educating” their audiences with such narratives.

Following the common pattern of highly skewed frequency distributions on digital platforms, we would expect a relatively small number of very active authors to account for a large share of IR-tagged posts in our corpus. This is certainly true: The most prolific authors are profiles of social activists and local institutions, along with some federal-level institutions such as @proektnaroda, @podvig_naroda, and @polk.rf.⁹ Among the activists are people working in educational institutions, self-promoting bloggers, and municipal deputies.

Beyond bloggers, activists, deputies, or educators, who are the “ordinary people”—those not involved in reporting? We only know some of them through typographical errors, and it would be an oversimplification to assume that those who made them have no institutional connections: Many institutionally affiliated authors were simply careless and included typo-hashtags alongside correctly spelled tags in multitag posts. It should be noted that Instagram in Russia is popular among people with above-average incomes who live in large cities and travel abroad. This is why noninstitutionally affiliated authors of IR-tagged posts with typos tend to fall into this demographic. Among them are lifestyle bloggers, photographers, and people showcasing their enjoyment of life—now using VPN to access the platform, after it was blocked by Russian government in March 2022.

This material, basically, tells a story of how personal memory—whether an initially grassroots impulse to reclaim the past from the state or a response to a call for participation in IR-related activities—is systematically collected, abstracted, framed, and presented through official promotion to serve a highly visible, standardized demonstration of unity and collective allegiance. By tracing institutions, locations, and profiles, we can see how networks of patriotic propaganda operate in the case of IR, with the main workload assigned to government-created youth NGOs, schools, libraries, and museums.

DISCUSSION

The ritualized environment of IR helps create an affective field in which personal emotion is fused with a symbolic order conveyed through prescribed practices. Yet, although IR creates an imaginary community of the dead, this act of consecration is probably less important to the state than the visible demonstration of loyalty it en-

⁹ Here is data on the most prolific authors—those who published more than 50 posts with IR-related hashtags: https://f005.backblazeb2.com/file/ImmortalRegiment/profiles_morethan50posts.xlsx. Some of them removed their profiles when Instagram was banned in Russia or just stopped their activity on Instagram, having invited their audiences to other social media platforms, such as Telegram or VKontakte.

ables. In fact, the “sacred” dimension can, for the moment, be bracketed out: The Instagram corpus shows that IR-related activity largely follows orders handed down from above. Even a preliminary qualitative analysis reveals networks tasked with executing the patriotic agenda: youth engagement systems and educational institutions, as well as their management hierarchies. IR is therefore not only about its content but also about the mechanisms through which the state orchestrates and displays collective loyalty.

The crucial analytical asymmetry is that participants enter IR with one intention—to publicly carry family portraits as signs of kinship with the dead—while the state reads the same act through a different semantic regime: as endorsement of state policy. What citizens offer as a private sacred connection is recoded as public sacrifice: The dead “once gave their lives to the state,” and the living are invited to “return” them through portraits, slogans, and disciplined procession. This recoding helps explain why official meanings treat the fallen as a collective national body and maintain a heroic narrative that legitimizes mass sacrifice, even when participants’ affect is closer to spring festivity, grief, or nostalgia than militant readiness.

Authoritarian governance relies on emotionally saturated ceremonies to display mass support; among its techniques, co-optation is central (Gerschewski 2013). It incorporates potentially independent civic initiatives, activists, and symbols into managed institutional orbits, funding streams, and reporting hierarchies, neutralizing alternative meanings. IR exemplifies this trajectory: A format compatible with a victim-centered, necronominalist ethics could have anchored solidarity against the expendability of human life, yet in its state-run canon it increasingly resembles organized civic duty and—in the post-pandemic, wartime context—a carefully controlled parade with preinscribed meanings. Instagram makes this co-optation visible less as persuasion than as administration: Institutional posting often functions as reporting, presenting participation and unity as bureaucratic deliverables rather than emergent sentiment. When veneration of new sacred symbols appears within an *aktsiia*, it often becomes *tufta* in the classic sense: a system of creative reporting up the chain of command. The key point is methodological: If we treat social media publications purely as mnemonic practices, we risk overinterpreting what is, to a significant extent, bureaucratic reporting.

By analyzing genres, iconography, and content, we can infer what authors consider relevant to IR and worth displaying. The main distinction is between institutional and private authors, yet many “private” accounts are activists, some institutionally affiliated. For users, posting is a performative act: “I participate in IR,” or “I share these values.” Still, display does not straightforwardly equal ideological allegiance—just as a family photograph with a Lenin monument in the background does not necessarily testify to devotion.

A first criterion of sacrality is the authorities’ sensitivity to violations: Prosecutions for “fakes,” new repressive laws, and symbolic punishments for “desecration” of the memory of Great Patriotic War aim to protect “historical truth” and expel alternatives from public space. A second criterion is ritual centrality: Ancestors’ photos from home archives and other relics acquire symbolic value not primarily from state ideol-

ogy but from family history as an emerging value. In the weeks around Victory Day, Saint George ribbons and veterans' portraits spread through public space like seasonal decorations, becoming ubiquitous elements of visual propaganda that sometimes recall Soviet honor boards: The heroes are "with us," watching from the most honorable places, and may even become an audience for performances by the living.

After the Soviet collapse, the trope of "eternal life" receded; it returns not as Vladimir Lenin's singular preserved body (Yurchak 2017) but as distributed bodies and images: portraits that assemble an imaginary community of the dead and visualize a collective body. A portrait march, in principle, could refocus memory toward victimhood and even grief and repentance. But IR's current hybrid form—fusing parade and reenactment—largely forecloses nonprescribed meanings. At the same time, meanings consonant with propaganda are readily inscribed, and ritual elements can be redeployed with striking creativity. What appears in the news about the most recent Immortal Regiment celebrations confirms that separate elements of the ritual have become part of a ritual language open to reinterpretation. On May 9, 2026, in Chita, a column of wives, widows, and mothers of participants killed or fighting in the war against Ukraine marched in the city's Victory Day ceremony, with some women carrying portraits of fallen servicemen at the end of the procession (*Moscow Times* 2026). The event is noteworthy because it shows how the commemorative repertoire of Victory Day—and the broader Immortal Regiment logic of family-based memorial display—is being extended beyond World War II ancestors to encompass relatives of soldiers from the current war.

Slips of the tongue that are unintentional can sometimes unexpectedly reveal meanings that propaganda would prefer to keep less pronounced. In May 2026 a video fragment from a broadcast of the Immortal Regiment on the Kuzbass Pervyi TV channel circulated on social media. In it, a reporter is speaking with a woman holding two portraits: One placard shows a relative who fought in the Great Patriotic War; the other bears a contemporary portrait of a man. "My son was killed in the SMO," she says referring to the term "special military operation" that is used by the Russian government for Russia's war against Ukraine. Apparently failing either to hear or to grasp her words, the reporter, in the generally upbeat tone of the broadcast, replies: "So that means you have a double celebration. Congratulations!"

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ИНСЦЕНИРОВКА ПАМЯТИ, СОЗДАНИЕ САКРАЛЬНОГО: РИТУАЛ, СИМВОЛ И ЦИФРОВЫЕ ПРАКТИКИ «БЕССМЕРТНОГО ПОЛКА»

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«Бессмертный полк» стал самым массовым публичным ритуалом памяти о Великой Отечественной войне в постсоветской России, объединяющим семейное поминовение с официально курируемым перформансом единства и лояльности. Опираясь на микроанализ видеозаписей шествий «Бессмертного полка», этнографические наблюдения и цифровую этнографию примерно одного миллиона постов в Instagram, собранных по связанным с акцией хештегам в 2020 году, статья стремится ответить на вопрос о том, как ритуал порождает коллективные эмоции, временно примиряющие противоречивые мотивации – скорбь по жертвам, гордость за победителей, ностальгию и выражение солидарности с государственными нарративами. Автор утверждает, что символическая неопределенность «Бессмертного полка» одновременно позволяет обеспечить широкий охват участников и облегчает его кооптацию государством: исходный, ориентированный на жертв, некроминалистский импульс почтить индивидуальные жизни все в большей степени переоформляется в канонизированный патриотический обряд, в котором павшие поглощаются коллективным национальным телом. Материалы Instagram показывают, что видимый контент «Бессмертного полка» доминируется институционально аффилированными акторами, использующими стандартизированный дизайн и хештеги в режимах репортажности и продвижения, в результате чего патриотическая работа памяти предстает скорее как бюрократическая «туфта», нежели как вернакулярное выражение. Пандемия 2020 года усилила эту административную логику через домашние флешмоб-кампании, в то время как выборка хештегов по опечаткам выявила более вернакулярное участие и паразитическое использование тегов. «Бессмертный полк» предстает не столько как спонтанная мобилизация, сколько как управляемая технология инсценировки сакральных символов и проекции массовой солидарности в условиях, когда подлинная массовая мобилизация политически рискованна.

Ключевые слова: «Бессмертный полк»; публичный ритуал; память о войне; Instagram; цифровая этнография; патриотизм