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Europe | Putin's parade

What Russia's Victory Day celebrations say about the war in Ukraine

The absences and omissions were the most notable part of the festivities



May 14th 2022

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THE RULE of Vladimir Putin, a former KGB operative turned dictator, rests on lies, violence and militarism. And on May 9th, the day marking the Soviet Union's victory in the second world war, all three of those traits were paraded on Moscow's Red Square. Mr Putin has long hijacked the victory over Nazi Germany and built it into something resembling a religious cult to serve his regime. Now he

is invoking it as he fights his war against Ukraine and anyone inside Russia who stands in his way. As Ben Wallace, the British defence secretary, said in a speech of his own on the same day, Mr Putin and his generals “are now mirroring the fascism and tyranny of 77 years ago...resplendent in their manicured parade uniforms, weighted down by the gold braid and glistening medals.”

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Just as the Nazis justified the invasion of Poland in 1939 and the Soviet Union in 1941 by claiming that they were fighting a defensive war against Ukraine and NATO, Mr Putin claimed in his speech at the parade that the threat to us was steadily being created right on our borders. It was a correct decision.”

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The parade was more notable for its absences and omissions than for its pageantry. The reduced number of troops marching in Red Square showed the lack of spare capacity. The usual airforce flypast was scrapped. Ostensibly that was because of low clouds, but some intelligence sources suggested it was really because of security concerns. A low-flying military plane being shot down by a Stinger missile over Red Square would not have made good publicity for the regime. Such concerns would not be outlandish. A series of mysterious fires and explosions have struck

strategic sites across Russia in recent weeks. The latest occurred on May 1st at a military plant in Perm in the Urals, where propellant for Grad and Smerch missiles is made.

Also missing from the parade was Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff. Russia's top soldier was spotted on May 1st near Izyum, the site of the fiercest fighting in eastern Ukraine, and has not been seen since. Ukrainian intelligence sources believe he was wounded there. But perhaps the most notable absence from the Victory Day parade was the victory itself. After more than two months of fighting even Mariupol, a port city that has been pounded by every conventional weapon imaginable, is not entirely in Russia's hands.

Having lost more men and equipment in two months than the Soviet Union lost in the ten years of its war in Afghanistan, Mr Putin, an ageing dictator, cut a defensive and frustrated figure, as though trying to make excuses for what may well rank as the biggest military blunder in Russia's history. His final "For Russia! For Victory! Hurray!" seemed strangely downbeat.

But this does not mean Mr Putin will be stopping soon. As he laid flowers on a series of war memorials and firework displays lit the skies over Russian cities, the skies over cities across Ukraine were lit up by Russian missiles. Although Russia now controls the majority of the eastern Donbas region, its offensive to take the rest of it is proceeding slowly. A Ukrainian counter-offensive around Kharkiv has almost pushed Russian forces back over the border there, showing that Russia's grip on its newly acquired territory is precarious.



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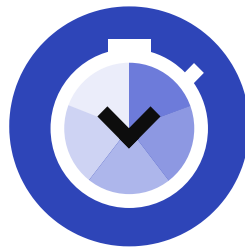
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