# THE IMAGE OF A HERO IN THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL PERCEPTION OF RUSSIAN YOUTH

**Oleg Gabrielyan**
V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University – Russia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0302-0229
E-mail: gabroleg@mail.ru

**Mikhail Gasparyan**
V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University – Russia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8183-8475
E-mail: mgasp@mail.ru

**Ivan Kravchenko**
V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University – Russia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6661-5698
E-mail: zx3com@gmail.com

**Galina Golovkina**
V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University – Russia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6487-0177
E-mail: galinka4845@mail.ru

## Abstract

**Objective:** In contemporary society, advanced mass media play an important role in broadcasting value systems. One notable manifestation of this axiological dissemination is the construction and portrayal of the hero's image. Within this context, the objective of this study was to conduct a comprehensive study of the conceptualization and perception of the hero's image.

**Methods:** The study utilized focus groups, hierarchical cluster analysis, and frequency content analysis.

**Results:** The research identified two aspects: on the one hand, the "real" image of a hero formed in the perceptions of Russian youth, and on the other, the "ideal" (standard, traditional, aligned with the Russian sociocultural code and defined by the state) image of a hero. To understand the "ideal" model of heroic behavior, documents on the conferral of state hero titles (Heroes of the Great Patriotic War and Heroes of the Special Military Operation) were analyzed. To uncover the fundamental characteristics of the "real" hero in new media, the authors examined 10 leading Telegram channels in the Russian-speaking segment. As a result of comparing the two images, a conceptual cloud was presented, describing the hero's image at the intersection of what is approved by the state and what is propagated in the new media space.

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**Conclusion:** The comparison of the "real" and "ideal" hero images revealed points of intersection between these two sets of representations. For example, self-sacrifice emerged as a characteristic common to both the "real" and the "ideal" hero.

**Keywords:** Hero image; Special Military Operation; Information and communication environment; Socio-humanitarian technologies.

## INTRODUCTION

The word "hero" originates from the Greek hērōs, meaning defender. Literature offers various conceptualizations of the hero, each focusing on different aspects, such as an exceptionally courageous or virtuous individual (Ushakov, 2008); a person who attracts public attention for a significant period (Ushakov, 2008); a brave individual performing a selfless feat (Alabugina, 2015); or a valiant companion, whether in war or peace (Dal, 2009).

Analyzing the content of the concepts "hero" and "heroic" used in the discursive practices of Russian youth is appropriately preceded by an explanation of the communicative determinants that shape the form and means of transmitting these meaning-making categories within the modern cultural system.

In modern times, the concept of a hero is undeniably a media-driven category. A hero serves as a mediator for transmitting ideas and value systems from a generating center to the masses. These centers can include institutional entities (e.g., state authorities) as well as spontaneous, situational social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter or Kyiv's Euromaidan) (Davies, 2022).

The "horizontal world" (Castells, 2000), with its persistent trend toward decentralized, networked communication among users, has led to an exponential growth of user-generated data in the public domain. This has resulted in contemporary culture becoming highly fragmented; the concepts and narratives within its space are predominantly local, situational, unstable, mutable, and subject to numerous transformations and hybridizations. A continuously recombined contingent of memes spreads through an extensive network of user contacts, momentarily dominating large segments of digital platforms during emergencies, unexpected events, or anticipated occurrences (Golubeva & Semilet, 2017; Akhmetshin et al., 2021).

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During such "viral" expansions, messages not only replicate rapidly but also evolve into derivative versions, sometimes diametrically opposed to the original context (e.g., the phenomenon of fake news based on factual events or fun-fiction rooted in postmodernist pastiche practices) (Hairunissa, 2023).

In previous eras, hero creation (heroization) occurred more organically, reflecting the most significant challenges and responses of the time. However, in the information age – and particularly with the advent of interactive forms of mass communication – the ability to construct hero images with specific parameters has significantly expanded (Gozalova & Gazilov, 2021).

The "horizontal world" (Castells, 2000) facilitates exponential user-generated content growth, making contemporary culture highly fragmented. The resulting concepts and narratives are local, situational, unstable, and subject to constant transformation and hybridization (Aidomojie et al., 2022). The recombination of memes spreads rapidly through user networks (Deus et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023), momentarily dominating major digital platforms during crises or significant events (Golubeva & Semilet, 2017).

In this process, viral messages not only replicate but also develop derivative versions (Jung, 2024), sometimes entirely opposed to their original context. Examples include fake news based on factual events and fun-fiction, which traces its roots to postmodern pastiche practices.

This trend has led to the creation of standardized mass culture products capable of influencing national identity. The objective of such shifts is to develop programs that gradually transform the meaning structures and value systems of broad audiences (Smagorinsky, 2022). This creates a foundation for actions aimed at undermining traditional values by replacing them with destructive simulacra through social engineering technologies (Gabidullina & Satturova, 2015; Novrianti et al., 2023). Among these shifts is the erosion of the traditional hero image, replaced by simulacra promoted by mass media, exploiting unconscious psychophysical structures tied to human drives and instincts (Glebova et al., 2024; Stahl & Literat, 2022).

The image of a hero remains a fundamental issue, as it is crucial for the self-definition of any society, particularly one as complex as Russia. The perception of the hero among youth is of special interest (Rappa, 2023).

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

The construction of the hero's image is primarily carried out through entertainment (loosely "playful") forms, which have been the subject of separate monographs (Sakhalieva-Talal, 2019). These constructs are mainly targeted at children and youth, who are in the process of forming their worldviews (Aguilera & Saa, 2022), as noted by Chernobrovkina: "After reaching maturity, the image of a hero loses its relevance" (Chernobrovkina, 2013). Based on her empirical research, she concluded that the hero image of modern Russian teenagers is formed exclusively within the screen-based realm of interaction with the world and has a distinctly gendered character. Another significant finding of this research is that "a retreat into the mystical realm generates mythological consciousness and an inability – or often unwillingness – to cope with real-life challenges" (Chernobrovkina, 2013).

For our work, the results of a study conducted by Ulyanovsky (2020) are particularly relevant. In this study, several hundred of the most current characters were statistically analyzed. The goal was to identify changes or shifts in youth perceptions of the world and to determine their connection to changes in the system of images populating the Russian media space over the past 6–12 years. The study recorded an almost complete "reset" of the imagery system among young people. A shared international youth value agenda appears to have emerged. Additionally, the research showed that fictional characters coexist with real media personalities and objects from the surrounding socio-cultural reality. A notable aspect of this relationship is the blurring of boundaries between fictional entities and reality.

The issues of social myths in general and the construction of the hero's image in particular open up a broad field for cross-cultural research. These include comparative studies of heroes and superheroes in the perceptions of Russian and Israeli audiences (Kyshtymova, 2022), Russian and Macedonian audiences (Angelovska, 2018), the depiction of heroes in Russian and foreign social advertising (Zhukova, 2019), the superhero image in 20th- and 21st-century American culture (Borshch, 2014), modern American comic book films (Kovaleva, 2018), and heroic images of antiquity compared to contemporary Russia (Alekseyev, 2012).

In addition to studies analyzing the general processes of hero image construction and their reflection in mass consciousness, academic discourse includes works that focus on

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specific media projects. In this context, cultural products (such as blockbusters and TV series) are seen as encoded media texts that concentrate a wealth of messages, laying the foundations of cultural and political discourse for a certain period. Special attention is given to the main characters as media heroes, whose foundations are rooted in mythological archetypes. These archetypes serve not only positive or destructive functions but also play a cultural-creative role.
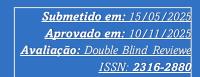
Such research includes Tsukanov's work (2018), which examines the phenomenon of the folk hero through the example of the film *Brother* by director A. Balabanov; Pozharov's study (2020) of new methods for modeling alternate history, using the series *Chernobyl* as an example; and 0 Chelysheva's analysis of audiovisual media characters, exemplified by the film *12* by director N. Mikhalkov, among others.

At the same time, the construction of the hero's image occurs not only in entertainment media but also within news agendas. For example, the heroization of medical workers during the pandemic has been noted (Taskaeva, 2021). Similar processes and the implementation of heroization strategies have been studied in German media, particularly in the context of COVID-19 (Poluykina, 2020). Using content analysis of the magazine *Russian Reporter*, researchers have examined the profile of media heroes, identifying their psychological types and personality traits (Zelenina, 2014).

Significant attention is also given to the construction of heroes from celebrities, a topic extensively explored in the book by French researcher Lilti (2018) and in its reviews and critiques.

In their works, some researchers define heroes as individuals who: persevere in the face of failure (Ko, 2007); take risks and make sacrifices for others (Becker & Eagly, 2004); resist external pressure (Zimbardo, 2007); protect and promote the well-being of future generations (McAdams, 2008); and demonstrate the willingness and ability to do the right thing in specific situations (Schwartz, 2010). Several studies reveal implicit understandings of the traits and functions of heroes, particularly among residents of Europe and the USA (Franco, Blau & Zimbardo, 2011; Allison & Goethals, 2011; Allison & Goethals, 2013; Kinsella et al., 2017). Empirical research has shown that heroes are perceived as social categories distinct from role models and opinion leaders (Kinsella et al., 2015a; Kinsella et al., 2015b). Furthermore, heroes are noted to perform various positive psychological and social functions (Kinsella et al., 2017).

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The roles heroes play in adolescents' lives are of particular interest, as this developmental stage is characterized by numerous challenges and increasing openness to external influences beyond the family (White & O'Brien, 1999; Elaine L. Kinsella, 2020; Gash & Bajd, 2005; Gash & Dominguez, 2009).

The aim of this study is to define the image of a hero (heroism), its components, and its characteristics in the perceptions of youth. To achieve this goal, the following tasks are addressed:

1. Clarify the concepts of "hero" and "heroism" as understood by Russian youth.

2. Assess the representation and perception of heroic content in the media space.

3. Identify relevant channels and formats for the dissemination of heroic content.

4. Construct a generalized image of a hero that reflects youth perceptions.

5. Identify the basic characteristics of the Hero of the Soviet Union and the Hero of Russia through an analysis of award documents.

6. Determine the fundamental traits of the hero of the Special Military Operation (SMO) through an analysis of content from 10 leading Russian-language Telegram channels.

7. Conduct a comparative analysis of keyword datasets characterizing the Hero of the Soviet Union, the Hero of Russia, and the hero of the SMO.

**METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS**

The study employs both qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (frequency content analysis) sociological research methods. Hierarchical cluster analysis is used to analyze the generated textual data sets.

The first method involved forming three focus groups by the research team. The participants included first- and second-year undergraduate students (aged 18–20, belonging to the same age cohort) as well as first-year doctoral students (more diverse in age, including both recent master's graduates aged 22–24 and current university staff aged 30–34). One focus group was composed of students, while the other two included doctoral students.

The discussion questions were structured around the study's key objectives:

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1. To identify the lexical material forming the basis for constructing the definitions of the categories "hero" and "heroism" in the discursive practices of students.

2. To determine the extent to which heroic images are represented in the media space and how differentiated they are in the media consumption practices of young people.

3. To analyze the primary sources of media data accessed by each group, with a focus on mentions of heroic events, actions, personalities, and related themes.

Based on the collected responses, the goal was to construct a synthetic image of a hero that closely aligns with the perceptions of the focus group participants. A hypothesis was proposed that within the youth community, perceptions of the hero's image and the characteristics of "heroism" would vary depending on differences in the choice of informational environment, highlighting an implicit polarization of cultural attitudes. Specifically, younger students were expected to exhibit less focus on current events and real-life heroes, while older students were anticipated to show greater interest in contemporary news and reference both historical and modern heroes. All focus groups followed a standard procedure, with responses recorded on a voice recorder and subsequently transcribed into text, resulting in three textual data sources.

Using content analysis, documents granting the title of state hero were examined to understand the ideal model of heroic behavior. The "ideal hero image" is most fully expressed during periods of existential threat to the state. Throughout its centuries-long history, the Russian state has faced numerous serious threats to its existence. For this study, we focused on a comparison of the heroes of the Great Patriotic War (WWII) and the Special Military Operation (SMO). This choice was driven by the availability of electronic datasets, which facilitated data collection and organization. Comparing these two historical periods allows us to evaluate the shared characteristics of the heroes of the Great Patriotic War (Hero of the USSR) and the heroes of the Special Military Operation (Hero of Russia).

Two preliminary datasets were compiled for analysis. The first included a sample of 100 randomly selected award citations for the title of Hero of the USSR (from the WWII period). The second dataset consisted of 100 award citations for the title of Hero of Russia (from the SMO period up to the end of 2023). These datasets were subsequently analyzed using the hierarchical cluster analysis method.

**RESULTS**

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The first part of our hypothesis was partially confirmed: all three groups, in their descriptions of "hero" and "heroism", mostly relied on examples drawn from real life. However, a notable difference emerged in the intensified idealization of qualities in real, non-fictional heroes by doctoral students, whereas undergraduate students highlighted the influence of mass-culture heroes and transferred those qualities onto historical figures or contemporaries.

Doctoral students described a hero as a bearer of qualities such as strength, honor, justice, courage, patriotism, intelligence, bravery, honesty, self-sacrifice, fearlessness, and valor. In contrast, the undergraduate focus group emphasized the manifestation of heroism in everyday life: *"A hero is someone who can help others even in everyday, routine situations. Simply helping someone in need is heroic".* One of the most significant qualities defining "heroism" was empathy – the ability to place oneself in another's position. The main point expressed by students was that *"there is room for heroes in everyday life".* A hero in ordinary circumstances is *"a person who tries to cause the least harm to society, thinks a lot and carefully considers every action to avoid harming others. They not only perform constant feats but also live with honor, compassion, conscience, and a kind heart".* Such a hero takes responsibility for their actions and is guided by rational foresight.

In the doctoral focus groups, the emphasis shifted to extraordinary and critical life situations, referencing historical examples, primarily heroes of the Great Patriotic War, as well as participants in modern combat zones. This type of hero is not only empathetic but also highly altruistic, ready to sacrifice themselves for another person, and guided by idealistic principles. Such heroes also have the ability to inspire others to perform heroic deeds.

The second part of the hypothesis was also partially confirmed. Participants in all three focus groups agreed that in modern media:

a. The heroic aspect of life is underrepresented and often portrayed one-dimensionally.

b. There is a clear shift toward the heroization of military figures (due to current geopolitical circumstances), accompanied by attempts to revive forgotten historical figures related to Russia's military history.

c. Heroes focused on peaceful, constructive work, who support everyday order (builders, firefighters, scientists, farmers, police officers, parents of large families), are undeservedly forgotten and should be prioritized in creating artistic representations for broader audiences.
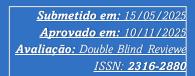
However, doctoral students were more confident and frequent in citing examples of contemporary heroes, primarily connected to the current political situation, indicating higher levels of awareness. They also referred to a broader range of historical examples. In contrast, undergraduate students showed limited awareness of or completely ignored recent events and their context.

A shared conclusion was that the state bears responsibility for the informational asymmetry (more military heroes and fewer non-military ones) as it defines the central media's agenda and the country's cultural policy. Grassroots activity in discussing past and present heroes remains localized within small online communities. Despite potentially high membership numbers, these communities rarely succeed in transferring discussions of heroism to national media platforms.

The third research task fully confirmed the hypothesis: students and doctoral candidates identified themselves as existing in weakly overlapping informational layers, demonstrating individually developed tactics for selecting information channels based on personal preferences. Doctoral candidates from both age groups more frequently mentioned online resources affiliated with or loyal to the state, whereas students gravitated toward personal blogs and aggregators positioning themselves as independent. Students also admitted prioritizing entertainment content over news, educational, and scientific material in their media consumption practices, while doctoral candidates expressed a preference for a balanced mix of content, with professional sources dominating over entertainment.

Based on the data obtained, the hero can be synthetically defined as follows: *A hero is a person possessing a combination of qualities that enable them to take initiative in both everyday life and extraordinary situations to help others (in the extreme case, by sacrificing themselves). One of the most critical qualities that constitute heroism is the ability to empathize, to foresee the consequences of their actions (in ordinary situations), and to be ready to take extreme measures to save others (in emergencies). A hero is not perfect, but they can and should be idealized so that their achievements, character, and personal qualities are passed on to future generations, fostering continuity.*

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As noted, the hero is a mediator in transmitting specific value systems. The key question is who determines the dimensions of these values. A strong, sovereign state consistently seeks to retain the prerogative to define and, consequently, to heroize individuals.

In moving from the "real" to the "ideal" hero, we turn to vital narratives embedded in award citations, presidential decrees, or published articles on extraordinary feats.

- **Hero of the Soviet Union**: This honorary title was the highest distinction in the USSR for state services associated with performing heroic deeds. Established by a resolution of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the USSR on April 16, 1934, it was conferred by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (from March 1990, by the President of the USSR). A total of 11,739 individuals received this title. To further distinguish the recipients, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR instituted the Gold Star medal on August 1, 1939, a pentagram-shaped medal with the inscription "Hero of the USSR" on the reverse. The medal was awarded alongside the Order of Lenin (*On the 80th Anniversary of the Hero of the Soviet Union Title: Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation*).

- **Hero of the Russian Federation**: This title is awarded for state and public services associated with heroic deeds and is conferred by the President of the Russian Federation. Recipients are given a special distinction medal, the "Gold Star", along with a certificate of the title. As of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine, 272 Russian servicemen have been awarded this title (*Highest Titles of the Russian Federation; Heroes Z*).

Using cluster analysis, the structure of the analyzed text datasets revealed the following clusters:

1. **Location Cluster**: References to the place of events.

2. **Action Cluster**: Indications of specific sets of actions characterized as heroic, represented in various forms of concretization.

3. **Normative Cluster**: Assessment of the alignment of actions with the directives of a governing center.

4. **Hero Cluster**: Descriptions of the subject's personal qualities.

5. **Formalization Cluster**: Indications of compliance with the criteria for receiving the title of Hero.

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Tables 1 and 2 present the names and descriptions of the clusters reflecting the described structure of the text datasets.

**Table 1.** Cluster Analysis Results for Hero of the USSR Award Citations

| Cluster Name | Description |
|---|---|
| Cluster – Location | Contains terms describing the locations of events. |
| Cluster – Hero | Contains terms reflecting a specific set of traits. |
| Cluster – Normative | Contains definitions evaluating the fulfillment of command assignments. |
| Cluster – Actions 1 | Contains terms describing specific actions (e.g., successful combat sorties). |
| Cluster – Actions 2 | Contains terms describing specific actions (e.g., destroyed equipment and enemy personnel). |
| Cluster – Actions 3 | Contains terms reflecting phenomena and objects accompanying heroic deeds. |
| Cluster – Formalization | Contains terms describing compliance with the criteria for receiving the Hero of the USSR title. |

**Table 2.** Cluster Analysis Results for Hero of Russia Award Citations

| Cluster Name | Description |
|---|---|
| Cluster – Location | Contains terms describing the locations of events. |
| Cluster – Hero | Contains terms reflecting a specific set of traits. |
| Cluster – Normative | Contains definitions evaluating the fulfillment of command assignments. |
| Cluster – Actions 1 | Contains terms describing behaviors defining a heroic deed. |
| Cluster – Actions 2 | Contains terms describing specific actions (e.g., destroyed equipment and enemy personnel). |
| Cluster – Actions 3 | Contains terms describing self-sacrificial actions. |
| Cluster – Formalization | Contains terms describing compliance with the criteria for receiving the Hero of Russia title. |

As shown in the tables, the clustering structures of the analyzed datasets are similar, which is both expected and logical. At a substantive level, the clusters represent the characteristics of the historical period in the state's development. The content of the "Hero"

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cluster remains unchanged. Heroes of the USSR and Heroes of Russia share many common traits, such as courage, heroism, bravery, fearlessness, selflessness, boldness, decisiveness, and a sense of military duty. However, it is worth noting that the content of the USSR dataset's "Hero" cluster includes references to the adversaries against whom these qualities were demonstrated – specifically, German invaders.

Additionally, one of the action clusters ("Actions 3" in Table 2) is unique in its content. It introduces the element of self-sacrifice into the context of state-approved heroic behavior, with phrases like "Saved at the cost of their own life" or "Preserved the lives of many soldiers".

Thus, we can conclude that the formation of the state-approved image of a hero retains qualitative characteristics consistent with the traditional model of representation. However, a key factor is the alignment of the hero's actions with the interests of the state.

To identify the core characteristics of the Special Military Operation (SMO) hero in modern media, we analyzed ten leading Russian-language Telegram channels based on TGStat data, including "Mir segodnya s "Yura Podolyaka", "Kadyrov_95", "Operatsya Z: Voenkory Russkoy Vesny", "Dmitry Medvedev", "Solovyev", "Rybar", "Margarita Simonyan", "Dmitry Konanykhin", "Starshe Eddy", and "Colonelcassad". For each channel, messages from January 2023 to May 2024 were searched using keywords such as "hero", "heroism", "heroic", "to be heroic", and "perform a feat". Both original posts and reposts from channels not included in the initial selection were processed, expanding the primary source base.

The collected messages were consolidated into a single hypertext. This text dataset was also analyzed using hierarchical cluster analysis. Table 3 presents the set of clusters and their descriptions.

**Table 3.** Description of Clusters Characterizing Heroes of the Special Military Operation (SMO)

| Cluster Name | Description |
|---|---|
| Cluster 1 | Engaging in battle |
| Cluster 2 | Helping fellow soldiers |
| Cluster 3 | Fulfilling high duty with honor and dignity |
| Cluster 4 | Defending the interests of the homeland and its people |
| Cluster 5 | Courage, bravery, heroism, faith, standing by comrades |
| Cluster 6 | Defender of the fatherland |
| Cluster 7 | Eternal memory and glory to Russian heroes |

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After conducting a comparative analysis of the word datasets characterizing the Hero of the USSR, the Hero of Russia, and the SMO hero, we identified words that were common across all three datasets. The next step was to select words whose frequency within their respective dataset was at least equal to the average value. The total number of selected words was 28, forming a conceptual cloud (Figure 1) that describes the hero's image at the intersection of what is state-approved and what is retransmitted in the realm of new media.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Cloud Characterizing the Hero's Image

**CONCLUSIONS**

The completion of the outlined tasks allowed us, on one hand, to evaluate the "real" image of a hero as reflected in the perceptions of youth and, on the other hand, to describe the "ideal" (exemplary, traditional, aligned with the sociocultural code of Russian civilization – defined by the state) image of a hero.

By comparing the results, we can identify the intersections between the "real" and the "ideal" hero. A hero is a bearer of specific personal qualities that remain unaffected by temporal or socio-political transformations. Self-sacrifice emerges as a dominant behavioral strategy, extending beyond the resolution of existential challenges. Heroes weave the social

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fabric of society, acting as connecting links between generations and ensuring their continuity.

## Acknowledgments

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