How should we write the history of war memorials?

In a well-known essay on World War I memorials, historian Jay Winter counts among these the British tradition of observing a two-minute silence on November 11th, the social bonds between veterans with disfigured faces, and new communities of people who have lost friends and relatives to war. As Winter reminds us, anything can act as a memorial: a vacant lot, a hospital, a photograph; a political party, a legislative text, a set of everyday practices. Viewed from this angle, a memorial is defined by the author’s intention and its acceptance by an audience, in other words, by the emergence of a commemorative community. A space, an object, a practice become a memorial, a lieu de mémoire, through the intention that inspired it and through the acceptance of that intention by those who pass by the space, use the object, or engage in the practice. No object is a memorial-in-itself; its commemorative quality is always in the eye of the observer. Hence the observer can also deprive a monument of its commemorative function, turn a memorial into a former memorial, or a site of memory from a common place into an empty space—to be salvaged neither by physical size nor by edifying or menacing inscriptions (“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”). In any case, it is very difficult to give a precise definition of what makes a memorial a memorial, and to separate its physical features from its immaterial qualities. The meaning of a memorial is shaped by what happens to it and around it.

Such transformations suggest a novel approach to writing the history of memorials in the narrower and more habitual sense: the structures of stone and bronze—statues, plaques, tombstones, and cenotaphs—that we commonly designate by that term. This approach could be called biographical. Beyond being interested in what a memorial says about past events or about contemporary perspectives on those events, a memorial’s biographer also studies all the twists and turns in that memorial’s life, from creation to decay or retirement and, often enough, to its withering and death. Despite their monumentality and claim to eternity, monuments are most often manifestations of a generational project. This goes all the more for war memorials, often built on the initiative of survivors. With the passing of that generation, with changes in political context, interest in its monumental legacy may be eclipsed or at the very least transformed. The most grandiose monuments, those erected decades after the event they commemorate, tend to fade the fastest. One of the world’s largest war memorials, the Monument to the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig, built for that battle’s 180th-anniversary in 1913, turned into a historical curiosity soon after completion.

Monuments to the Soviet Participants of World War II

Contemplating Soviet war memorials, what outside observers often remark upon first and foremost is a kind of stern Socialist Realist monotony, especially obvious in contrast with the aesthetic diversity that characterizes North American and West European memorial mania (in Erika Doss’s expression, or even with the sculptural production of the 1920s Soviet avant-garde). Many even assume that the Soviet monuments were created according to a single plan issued by Moscow for all the territories that were under its control by the end of the war, and reinstated when the Cold War became an era of a Great Patriotic War started in earnest under Brezhnev in the mid-1960s.

In reality, the apparent monumentality of the bronze and stone soldiers always concealed complex local dynamics, the personal and artistic ambitions of their creators, and a multitude of objectives addressed by the memorials. There was no single post-war monumental propaganda plan, and there is no evidence that the Kremlin directed its construction. The main actors in this process (and the conflicts it sparked) were the military leadership, sculptors, and architects, later joined by the leaders of the satellite states and Soviet republics, local Party officials, and even heads of factories, from large sculpture studios to chemical plants.

memorial, Welz claimed, was the actual model for the Russian memorial and he therefore also thought of himself as the actual creator of the Russian memorial. Mikhail Intizaryan didn’t contribute anything else of significance to Soviet art history. The mere fact that the memorial on Schwarzenbergplatz— as the first Soviet World War II memorial to be built and as one sanctioned by high command—possessed a certain model character for all future memorials of its kind, lent its sculptor himself a degree of respect even in the eyes of the great masters of Socialist Realism, for example Lev Kerbel (who sculpted the Marx monument outside the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and in Chemnitz as well as the last Soviet Lenin statue on October Square in Moscow), or Vladimir Tsogal (who sculpted the monument of Khrushchev, the Soviet General who was murdered at Mauthausen concentration camp).

Though the rest of Intizaryan’s career as a sculptor, which mainly focused on the Russian-Armenian friendship, was unremarkable, the inscription he added in the 1970s was, for the history and interpretation of the memorial at Schwarzenbergplatz, all the more enlightening. It stands directly in front of the monument and offers a translation of the memorial’s main inscription, which is written in Cyrillic and thus normally incomprehensible to Austrian viewers: “Eternal glory to the soldiers of the Soviet Army who fell in the battle against the German fascist occupiers for the freedom and independence of the people of Europe.” The tilted cube that in a manner of speaking strives for “modernism” fundamentally transforms the memorial with its new and less menacing tone: “Memorial to honor the Soldiers of the Soviet Army who gave their lives to liberate Austria from fascism.” The memorial is historicized to some extent and becomes an object of contemporary history in an outdoor museum in urban space. But, as the sculptor’s widow Mina Intizaryan says, her husband had not only been warned before he left for Vienna, but even while working at the construction site he was accompanied by embassy employees who pointed out the “perils” of his task: In Austria there were still plenty of fascists who might at any moment launch an attack on the Liberation Memorial, a warning that Mina Intizaryan assures us her husband never took as a serious one: he considered it just an excuse to keep an eye on his every move. But at least Intizaryan spent a few nice days in Vienna before his much too early death, she adds. Burgstaller stole the original plans for the statue in Vienna and the small sculptures he completed later, which had been kept for years in his dacha on the outskirts of Moscow, the original bread models for the Liberation Memorial in Vienna were eaten by the birds.


Mischa Gabowitsch

CASE No5 MONUMENTS COMING TO LIFE. PUSHKIN’S THE BRONZE HORSEMAN

Pushkin wrote The Bronze Horseman in 1833. It is one of his deepest, bravest, and best works. With unbelievable strength and courage, the author demonstrates the contradictions of public life laid bare, without attempting to artificially reconcile them in places where they are irreconcilable in reality. In The Bronze Horseman, the opposing forces are generalized with the images of Peter the Great (who is then represented as the monument of The Bronze Horseman come to life), who stands for the government, against the everyman with his personal, private interests and troubles, who dies, crushed by state power.

CASE No6 A STYLIITE

A stylite (from Greek στυλίτης, stylitēs, «pillar dweller»), Simeon Stylites the elder who climbed on a pillar in salvation of their souls. The first stylite was probably preaching, fasting and praying. Stylites believed that his personal, private interests and troubles, who dies, his deepest, bravest, and best works. With unbelievable

(Translation: Kimi Lum)
Soviet war memorials and cemeteries became perhaps the only ones in the world that not only served commemorative and legitimizing functions, but also geopolitical ones. Unlike, for instance, the monuments that were erected outside of the USSR, in the central squares of German towns from Königsberg to Berlin, in Vienna, and in a number of Polish cities.

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During that first stage of monument construction, their creators, too, were a very diverse group. While the larger and more symbolically charged memorials were by and large designed by young sculptors and architects from the Russian-speaking parts of the USSR, who were lavishly provided materials and manpower by the military leadership, many other monuments were commissioned by the Soviet authorities (later increasingly supplanted by local communist parties) but built by local sculptors or architects. Examples of this include the monument erected in the Bush district of Berlin, designed by Johann Tenny, and the Liberation Monument in Budapest, both built in 1947.

Regional variations aside, the immediate post-war years did see the emergence of rather narrow aesthetic standards for Soviet war memorials. There were several reasons for this. First of all, even on the periphery of the USSR, there were often sculptors and architects who had been trained and had developed their preferences at the big Stalinist sites of the 1930s, such as the Palace of the Soviets. Secondly, by this time, the production of monuments had evolved from an artisanal task into a large industry. In the USSR, it was increasingly common for monuments to be assembled from readymade parts, planned and manufactured by a relatively small handful of organizations. These included foundries, stone works, and, most importantly, the Grekov Studio of Military Artists, founded in 1934.

In the mid-1960s, as war memorials became ubiquitous across Russia, the geopolitical function of the first wave of monuments was no longer evident to ordinary Soviet citizens, although its effects were never lost on Estonians, Hungarians, Austrians, Germans, Czechs, and Poles. After the Soviet forces had suppressed the uprisings in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, and the Prague Spring of 1968, and after martial law was introduced in Poland in 1981, the tanks and bronze soldiers reminded the majority of locals not of the liberation of their countries by Soviet troops, but of the ever-present threat that these troops posed to them. After 1989, there were many initiatives to take down, relocate, or re-dedicate Soviet monuments. Conversely, some of them became gathering sites for the supporters of the old regimes, but also for those who sincerely feared the rise of revanchism and neo-Nazism. Thus, in January 1989, hundreds of thousands of anti-fascist demonstrators gathered in Treptower Park in response to the appearance of anti-Soviet graffiti at the site.

The Post-Soviet Era

The post-Soviet fate of Red Army monuments in Eastern Europe was not always determined by confrontations between pro- and anti-Soviet forces. Decisions to demolish, relocate, or preserve monuments were often made on the local level and based on practical considerations: insufficient funds for moving monuments (or re-burying remains) or for replacing the old monuments with new ones, the significance of monuments as city landmarks or tourist attractions, and so on. Many monuments were moved to open air museums, such as Budapest’s Memento Park or the Gutas Park sculpture garden in Lithuania, or to cemeteries, especially if they had stood over the remains of Soviet soldiers. Monuments weren’t always relocated in their entirety: in Budapest, the removal of a bronze soldier and a red star transformed the Monument to Liberation into the Liberty Statue. Often, the initiative to refurbish a monument aims to draw a distinction between fallen Soviet soldiers and communist ideology. Thus, in 2007, Rene Pelan, deputy mayor of the Czech city of Brno, took it upon himself to remove a Red Army hammer and sickle from a monument to the soldiers who died during the liberation of the city, arguing that this was a symbol of communism and not of the army, to whom the city remains grateful.

Yet it would be inaccurate to say that the post-Soviet period has seen an all-round “retread” of memorials to Red Army soldiers. On the contrary, in a number of countries, there has been a wave of construction of new monuments and memorial cemeteries (or reconstruction of old ones), especially since the 2000s. At the same time, many of the monuments that remain from Soviet times have become focal points for new rituals and political and artistic practices which endow them with entirely new meanings.

In Russia, the reasons for the construction of new monuments are reminiscent of the Brezhnev-era. The cult of The Great Patriotic War has become the foundation of the sole widely accepted ideology. People’s attitudes toward the symbols and rituals of that cult follow the standard pattern in such situations, ranging from enthusiasm to the ironic over-identification known as stoib, and often enough including both. In any case, there has been much demand for new monuments. Many of these could be qualified as corporatist, dedicated as they are to fallen soldiers who were representatives of a specific profession, workers from a specific factory, graduates of a particular school, and so on. The construction of these monuments is increasingly sponsored by businessmen. Building monuments in time for important historical anniversaries has become a profitable business for manufacturers and patrons alike. The new title of City of Military Glory, introduced in 2006, has had an impact on the memorial construction industry comparable to the Hero-City designation from the 1960s.

Yet new memorials and practices are appearing outside of Russia as well. This is primarily due to the fall of the USSR, which led to mass emigration and the transformation of Russian communities in destination countries and former Soviet republics into ethnic and cultural minorities. War monuments and the concomitant Victory Day rituals have increasingly come to be seen as symbols of Soviet identity and nostalgia as well as markers of Russianness, which can mean very different things and is rarely limited to a narrow ethnic interpretation. This totemic relationship to war monuments is characteristic of a significant portion of the Russian-speaking population in former Soviet republics. Thus, while May 9th celebrations around Soviet monuments are often central emotional events in the lives of Russian-
CASE No.1 A GRAMSCI MONUMENT
BY THOMAS HIRSCHHORN
Gramsci Monument is the fourth and last in Hirschhorn's series of "monuments" dedicated to major writers and thinkers, which he initiated in 1999 with Spinoza Monument (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), followed by Deleuze Monument (Avignon, France, 2000) and Bataille Monument (Kassel, Germany, 2002). This fourth monument pays tribute to the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), famous for his volume of Prison Notebooks (1926–1937). Gramsci Monument is based on Hirschhorn's will "to establish a definition of monument, to provoke encounters, to create an event, and to think Gramsci today."

Conceived by residents of Forest Houses, the artwork takes the form of an outdoor structure comprised of numerous pavilions. The pavilions include an exhibition space with historical photographs from the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci in Rome, personal objects that belonged to the philosopher from Casa the Fondazione istituto Gramsci in rome, personal takes the form of an outdoor structure comprised. Constructed by residents of Forest Houses, the artwork monument is based on Hirschhorn's will "to establish a definition of monument, to provoke encounters, to create an event, and to think Gramsci today."

CASE No.8 PEOPLE'S MONUMENTS.
EUROMAIDAN, 2014

The national temporary monument, «Glory to the Heros of Maidan,» which was erected in the location where protesters fought and were killed by government forces.

This significance of the monuments was most obviously illustrated in the conflict around the relocation of the Bronze Soldier from downtown Tallinn to a military cemetery. Interestingly, initially, both the Bronze Soldier monument and the one blown up on Mikhail Saakashvili's orders, had been the work of local sculptors, yet during both of these conflicts, both supporters of demolition or relocation and Russian officials made it clear that they perceive them as Russian.

Monuments to fallen Soviet soldiers have started to play a similar role in places with large émigré communities from the former USSR, most notably in Germany, where there are many such migrants as well as a large number of Soviet memorials. Moreover, immigration has led to the erection of new monuments in places where there had not been any before. For example, in 2005, a small monument to the Soviet soldiers of World War II was unveiled in West Hollywood, which, after New York City, has the largest concentration of Russian-speaking immigrants in the US. In June 2012, a National Monument Commemorating the Victory of the Red Army over Nazi Germany was dedicated in Netanyahu, Israel. The monument had been built on the initiative of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but it was in large part sponsored by Russian businessmen. Vladimir Putin presided over the dedication ceremony alongside Netanyahu. In both West Hollywood and Netanyahu, a central element in the composition is the motif of flying cranes, characteristic of Soviet memorial sculpture in the late 1970s and early 80s.

For residents of Germany, the US, and Israel, the Soviet Union or in Soviet families, old and new monuments alike are material manifestations of the value of a Soviet and Russian heroic and quasi-religious discourse about the war. This can be especially comforting in settings when that discourse is never used and indeed unfamiliar and incomprehensible to most other residents. While in the Israeli case the "Soviet" style of the new monument was a result of Russian participation, in East Germany most war monuments and inscriptions were simply never changed. Contrary to West German custom, even Stalin quotes are not usually qualified by explanatory signs, as, in accordance with the Two Plus Four Agreement on the reunification of Germany, all burial sites of Soviet soldiers are protected by the federal government.

Both old and new monuments are becoming objects of discursive and symbolic wars. In May 2011, several days before Victory in Europe Day (May 8th), the memorial inscription on the monument in West Hollywood was altered by an anonymous hand: the dedication, which had read "to the Soviet veterans of the Second World War," was boarded over with a plaque that read, in Russian and ungrammatical English, "Eternal memory and glory to those who defeated the Nazism in the World War II."

Events like those in Brno and West Hollywood prompt an important question: what is the best way to honor the memory of the fallen and surviving Red Army soldiers? Does respect for the dead necessarily entail respect for the style in which they were later commemorated? The Russian authorities tend to react very touchy to any discussion or alteration of existing monuments. This position has the effect of preserving the late Stalinist poetics of memory, considered by many to be an anachronism.

Like all monuments, those dedicated to Soviet soldiers say much more about those who built them than about the historical era they refer to. In the early 1970s in France, the government undertook a project to honor the memory of the fallen who died in the liberation of France. The former USSR inescapably became a manifestation of a generational commemorative project. Reexamination of such projects always leads to rancor. Monuments such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin were built with the objective of emphasizing the 1960s West German generation's vision of how to "overcome the Nazi past" after modern Germany, it seemed, identified themselves in power following German reunification. In Germany, any critique of this discourse—for instance, for reproducing categories of victims created by the Nazis—is met with anxiety. Similarly, in Russia, attitudes to war memorials are articulated in quasi-religious terms: the monument is sacred and its Boulevard is holy ground, and criticizing them is blasphemy. It's not surprising that religious (principally Russian Orthodox) symbolism has more or less openly influenced recent memorial sculpture and architecture. As if to underline the continuity of the post-war generational commemorative project, conservative sculptors dismiss stylistic innovations as inconsistent with veterans' aesthetic preferences. While that argument may be accurate, it begs the question of what should be done once the generation of veterans has passed, and, in the long term, after the demise of the generation that came of age during Brezhnev's cult of the Great Patriotic War.

Contemporary Russia's official policy on war memorials is clearly illustrated by the recently completed Federal Military Memorial Cemetery in the village of Sgonniki, near the Moscow suburb of Mytishchi. Several army generals proposed to establish such a cemetery in the early years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency; at the end of the 1990s, its creation was decided and a location chosen. The cemetery was conceived as the Russian equivalent of Arlington National Cemetery, i.e. as a burial ground for veterans of all military conflicts as well as government officials up to and including the president. For Russia, where there is still a strict hierarchy in the commemoration of wars, with the Great Patriotic War at its pinnacle, the idea itself was novel. However, the reality is sobering. The state-owned Moscow architectural firm Mosproekt-4 had won the official competition, but in the event the design was determined by glass painter Sergey Goryaev (1958-2013), who joined the team later thanks to this connections at the Ministry of Defense. As a result, the cemetery was built in the neo-classical style. The entrance is framed by steles representing the different arms of the service. The central avenue is lined with 24 statues of warriors symbolizing various eras of military history, from Slav knights to contemporary special forces. The cemetery features massive concrete blocks, granite, an eternal flame, the sculpture of a mother with her dead son, and so forth. Yet those buried in the cemetery have by and large been participants of the Great Patriotic War: an unidentified soldier whose remains were discovered in the Smolensk Oblast, small arms designer Mikhail Kalashnikov, and Marshal Vasily Petrov, one of the initiators of the cemetery project. Unlike not only Arlington but also almost every other military cemetery in the world, Sgonniki is a secure site controlled by the Ministry of Defense, and only close relatives of those buried there and tour groups are allowed admittance.

In Sgonniki, the Russian authorities in fact voluntarily did that for which they so often criticize the governments of former socialist republics: they created something like a reservation for the memory of veterans and fallen soldiers that is cut off from society by a tall fence and a strict security regime.

The diametric opposite of this approach is found in the work of a number of contemporary artists. This seems to have been pioneered in 1991 by Prague artist David Černý, who painted a monument to Soviet tank crews in Prague (the monument was itself a tank toy and drove around with a raised middle finger on its action). Černý’s actions provoked the Ministry of Defense. As a result, the monument was built in the neo-classical style. The entrance is framed by steles representing the different arms of the service. The central avenue is lined with 24 statues of warriors symbolizing various eras of military history, from Slav knights to contemporary special forces. The cemetery features massive concrete blocks, granite, an eternal flame, the sculpture of a mother with her dead son, and so forth. Yet those buried in the cemetery have by and large been participants of the Great Patriotic War: an unidentified soldier whose remains were discovered in the Smolensk Oblast, small arms designer Mikhail Kalashnikov, and Marshal Vasily Petrov, one of the initiators of the cemetery project. Unlike not only Arlington but also almost every other military cemetery in the world, Sgonniki is a secure site controlled by the Ministry of Defense, and only close relatives of those buried there and tour groups are allowed admittance.

The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia has arguably had the most agitated post-retirement life of all. Opened in 1954 in the center of town, it had fallen into disrepair in the post-communist era. Yet events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, or, more precisely, the high relief decoration, it depicting nine advancing soldiers in various poses—became a constantly changing canvas for political statements by anonymous artists. In 2011, the soldiers were transformed into American superheroes (in protest against communist system), later, they were adorned with Guy Fawkes masks (in protest against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement), then Paris Riot baloons. It has been painted pink (in parody for Bulgaria's participation in Prague Spring) and in the colors of the Ukrainian flag.

Similiar actions as well as other unorthodox behavior around war memorials have provoked the Russian authorities to issue rote accusations of blasphemy and hooliganism. However, none of these actions are intended to desecrate the memories of fallen soldiers. They may instead be seen as a way to recontextualize traces of a long-gone era into a contemporary context when, if not for such artistic interventions, these traces may otherwise be deemed irrelevant, dismissed, or exploited. Ultimately, the memorialized site of war memorials, the conscious departure from the intentions of their creators, opens the door to a more appropriate, self-aware, living memory, a memory that is relevant to contemporary debates rather than shut off from them by walls and prohibitions, deadened by an excess of bronze, concrete, and monumentality.

Translated by Bela Shayevich

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