

The Winding Road to Poklonnaia Hill: the History of Building the Soviet and Russian National World War Two Memorial in Moscow

The realm of the symbolic—public rituals and holidays, anthems and uniforms, monuments and street names—has emerged as one of the most crucial battlegrounds in post-Soviet politics. The toppling of the statue of Felix Dzerzhinskii, the founder of the Soviet secret police, in front of the KGB building in downtown Moscow marked the collapse of the Soviet hard-liners' coup in August of 1991, the failure of which foreshadowed the end of the Soviet Union itself. Attempts to restore Dzerzhinskii's statue to his former place, undertaken in the winter of 2000, was seen by many as one of the most salient and disturbing signs of the current shift in the Russian political balance towards a partial restoration of Soviet political institutions. Battles over the content of Russia's state anthem, flag, and coats of arms; over burying Lenin's corpse and closing down his mausoleum on the Red Square; and over renaming multiple locations still sporting the names of the erstwhile Soviet leaders and heroes have punctuated the whole turbulent decade of post-Soviet Russia's existence, often relegating to the back burner seemingly more pressing economic and political issues.

The special place of importance held by symbolic politics in the post-Soviet Russia is hardly surprising, for it reflects not only the expected vagaries of a new political system in the process of construction, but also much deeper underlying anxieties about the nature of the present Russian state. Questions such as “what is Russia?”, “where is Russia?”, and “who is a Russian?” have become the new Russia's “accursed questions.” Most of Russia's political forces, be they on the “left” or “right”, in the “liberal” or

“patriot” camps, have agreed on little but the fragility of new Russia’s statehood. The ongoing war in Chechnia, numerous challenges of ethnic and regional separatism within the Russian Federation, testy relations with the neighboring Soviet successor states, and real or perceived threats from abroad all compounded to create a deep sense of national insecurity which permeates Russian society today. This atmosphere of national insecurity has naturally called for a country-wide search for the new Russian “state idea”: the “*raison d’être*” for the very existence of the Russian state. The search for the elusive Russian national identity has been carried out in a bewildering variety of public venues, from the pages of high-browed “thick journals” (the hallowed refuge of Russian intellectuals), to the newly minted TV talk shows where sundry eggheads pondering the weighty issues of the meaning of Russia and Russianess have vied successfully for viewers’ attention with soap operas and criminal chronicles. Unable to come up with a formula of the new Russian identity on his own, Boris Yeltsin, post-Soviet Russia’s first president, ordered a team of his political advisors to hatch one. Several years and a host of conferences, debates, and position papers later Yeltsin’s order still stands unfulfilled.

The disquieting lack of national unity in the present has led to an intense re-examination of Russia’s past. Each of the major competing forces on the Russian political arena has offered its own new version of the historical cannon. Yet little solace can be found in Russian history by those who seek a unifying national idea. Twice in the twentieth century, first at the time of the Russian revolution, and then again in the early 1990s, Russia suffered tectonic rifts in its historical consciousness when the new political regimes rising out of the embryonic soup of revolutionary turmoil sought to build their

legitimacy on rejecting, and, indeed, demonizing the heritage of their predecessors *in toto*.

Against this background, the memory of World War Two, much better known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, or simply “The War,” stands as a stark exception—as nearly the only event in modern Russian history which draws a universal reverence. Paradoxically, as the number of Russians who actually fought and lived through the war dwindle precipitously, the war looms larger than ever in the Russian popular consciousness. A number of recent surveys of Russian public opinion has shown that the war is edging out the Russian revolution as the most important event of the 20th century, leaving the dissolution of the Soviet Union far behind in third place. The growing symbolic status of the war is conspicuously reflected in the patterns of celebration of the Victory Day, celebrated in Russia on May 9. During the last decade the Victory Day has become one of the most popular Russian holidays, second to the New Year celebrations only. More importantly, the Victory Day has become the most important Russian “political” holiday. It eclipses both the annual celebration of the Russian revolution (now awkwardly renamed “a national reconciliation day”), and the new putative Russian national holiday, Independence Day (the day of the proclamation of the Russian Federation’s “sovereignty” within the USSR in 1990). Voicing the feelings widely shared in both the Russian political elite and the society at large, Evgenii Primakov, a former prime minister, has recently proclaimed the Victory Day to be Russia’s “true national holiday.”

In the last twenty years, a great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the production of cultural artifacts which has accompanied the rise of nation and nationalism

as historically modern phenomena. National monuments occupy a place of special significance in these artifacts' ranks. The construction of national monuments and the ceremonies centered around them play a fundamental role in creating the cult of nation as a "civic religion." Monuments have also served as crucial symbolic markers spatially and temporarily framing the mythical narrative of nationhood. Giving this dual role, and their visibility as national icons, national monuments everywhere have been subject to political and cultural disputes, symbolic contestation, and, often, focal points of civil strife. The attention paid to the history and politics of national monuments elsewhere, has, however, so far largely evaded Russia and the Soviet Union.

My research project is designed to partially compensate for this deficiency. The subject of my research is the history of Soviet attempts to create **the** Soviet national memorial to the Great Patriotic War in Moscow. The earliest attempts to conceive such a memorial which would commemorate the ultimate victory of the Soviet Union were made in 1942-43, when the war's battles were still raging not far from the walls of Moscow and Leningrad, and the banks of Volga. Twice during the war years the future memorial was the subject of official design competitions. Despite a great deal of discussion, none of these designs were realized. The second major effort to conceive such a memorial was undertaken in the 1950s, when another round of competitions took place. A stone was placed with great ceremony on Moscow's historic Poklonnaia Hill to mark the place where the future memorial would be built. That stone was to mark an empty ground for the next thirty years. It was not until the end of the 1970s that the decision to build the main Soviet memorial on the Poklonnaia Hill was made again. However the concept and design of this memorial appeared to be so controversial that its

construction was stopped, one of the first victims of the nascent democratization of the Soviet society under Gorbachev. The same fate awaited the attempt to restart the construction according to a new project in 1990. Only in 1993, when Yuri Luzhkov, the ambitious new mayor of Moscow, made the Poklonnaia Hill complex his personal priority, did the memorial, with its form and content drastically changed again, begin to near its completion. In a twist of bitter historical irony, the Poklonnaia Hill complex, the projected main war memorial of the Soviet Union, was officially unveiled in 1995, when the Soviet Union was no more. Instead, it was appropriated by the new post-Soviet Russia as one of its major symbols. The memorial's complex design—it includes the Russian National Museum of the Great Patriotic War, the main Victory monument, a memorial Russian Orthodox church, synagogue, and mosque, and a number of other monuments and installations spread over more than 300 acres of parkland—struggled to catch the complexity of the new post-Soviet Russian identity and new interpretation of the Soviet past. Nonetheless, the cultural and political battles surrounding Poklonnaia Hill go on.

The Poklonnaia Hill complex is more than just one of the most fascinating palimpsests of the Soviet past and post-Soviet Russian present. By examining the succession of the memorial projects (which spanned more than a half a century), I seek to examine the evolution of the visions of the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian national identities. I maintain that precisely the difficulty of envisioning a single unifying Soviet national icon, particularly the tensions between the communist “internationalist” and Russian ethnic strands in the concept of a Soviet identity, was one of the major causes which doomed various projects of the memorial to failure. The current controversies

over the extant Poklonnaia Hill complex place into the spotlight the uneasy dilemmas of the Russian post-Soviet identities.

Finally, the study of Poklonnaia Hill complex allows me to gain an insight not only into the official, but also into the popular understanding of meaning of a “national icon”. Conceived as an elite political project, Poklonnaia Hill quickly became in the 1990s an important part of Moscow’s vernacular landscape, a place where the groups of veterans have to vie with the skateboarders for the everyday control of the place. The juxtaposition of the official reading of the memorial complex with the vernacular will add an additional depth to our understanding of complexities of the identity politics and practices in the post-Soviet symbolic space.