About twenty years ago a number of pathbreaking studies, for instance, the works of Anderson, Hobsbaum and Ranger, and Gellner, suggested that nations should be viewed not as «objectively existing» entities which transpire as a result of teleological historical development, but rather as relatively modern historical artifacts which are culturally and politically produced. The constantly expanding number of studies from across the social sciences and humanities has explored various social, political, and cultural mechanisms activated by nation-builders in order to produce a national community. Starting with Anderson, who viewed nations as «imagined communities,» special attention has been paid to the role of cultural strategies of nation-building. Of these strategies, constructing and maintaining national historical memory is one of the most important. In his famous lecture on «what is a nation,» delivered in 1882, Ernst Rennan already postulated that the sense of shared history is a sine qua non of national identity: «Of all common cults that of the ancestors is the most legitimate for the ancestors made us what we are. A heroic past … is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea.»

The construction of national historical narratives is far from limited to the production of historical texts. Of no lesser importance is the production of national rituals, symbols, and memorial places. My research project is devoted to the study of the representation of the Russian and Soviet national identity in the WWII memorials. One can hardly overestimate the role which the memory of the World War
Two, much better known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, or simply «The War» played in shaping the contemporary narrative of Russian history. A number of recent surveys of Russian public opinion has shown that the WWII has edged out the Russian revolution as the most important event of the 20th century in the Russians’ historical memory, leaving the dissolution of the Soviet Union far behind in third place. Paradoxically, as the number of Russians who actually fought and lived through the war dwindles precipitously, the war looms larger than ever in the Russian popular consciousness. The growing symbolic status of WWII is conspicuously reflected in the constant popularity of the Victory Day holiday, which has eclipsed by far the popularity of both the main Soviet holiday, the Bolshevik revolution’s anniversary, as well as that of the new post-Soviet Russia’s «Independence Day.»

The legacy of WWII is also indelibly inscribed into the Russian cultural landscape. Whereas the exact number of the Soviet and Russian war memorial sites is not known, they arguably form the largest single corpus of memorial sites in the world. According to one source, Ukraine alone by the end of the 1970s had over 20,000 extant WWII memorial sites.

Construction of such sites started already before the war’s end, and has never ceased ever since. However, the history of creating this enormous memorial landscape is rife with its own paradoxes. Despite an impressive array of the Soviet wartime projects, almost none of them were ever realized. In fact, it took more than a decade after the war’s end before any large memorials were erected in the major Russian cities, including Moscow and St. Petersburg (Leningrad). The major Soviet national memorial in Moscow was not finished but until fifty years later since the war’s end — and nearly forty years since its construction began. In fact, it was opened already after the Soviet Union had disappeared from the world’s political map. These seeming paradoxes have been explained in the current Russian research literature variously by scarcity of state’s resources, impracticality of many of the memorial projects, or bickering of their authors. All these reasons are un-
doubtedly valid, but hardly sufficient. Paucity of resources, the strain it inflicted upon the population, or conflicting artists’ ambitions never prevented the Soviet leadership from undertaking the projects (no matter how grandiose or lunatic) it actually set its mind to accomplish. I believe that is impossible to explain these omissions without turning to the difficulty of constructing a single official narrative of the war, and the inherent contradictions this process encountered. Precisely the total, all-encompassing character of the «people’s war» posed the hardest dilemmas for the memorials’ creators. Who was to receive the main credit for the ultimate, if bloody, triumph? A new «socialist human being» forged by the trials of the Bolshevik revolution, alongside with a new historic «brotherhood of the Soviet peoples»? Or the unbending strength of the Russian national character, fortified by the ancient hatred of alien invaders? Than where was the place for the omnipotent Party’s «leading and guiding role?» Or the military genius of Comrade Stalin?

As the foci of a nation’s collective memory, the memorial sites are the one of the most important displays of the nation’s images of its own self, and the story of the evolution of the Soviet, and now Russian (as well as Ukrainian, Belarussian, and so on) memorial landscapes are ultimately the stories of evolution of the corresponding historical narratives of nationhood.

In this paper, however, I will limit the scope of my inquiry to the earliest Soviet memorial projects, which were made during the war itself. Nearly all these projects remained unrealized, yet they formed a large and varied body of works that can yield a number of cultural and political insights into the drastic changes that the Soviet society underwent during the war. Despite an onslaught of military defeats in the first two years of war, the first Soviet projects of memorial sites were produced already in 1941. Many of the first memorial projects were developed in Leningrad (St. Petersburg). Although since September of 1941 the city was completely cut off from the rest of the Soviet territory and besieged by the German troops, the Leningraders were particularly active in the use of monumental propaganda during the wartime years. In December of 1941, when starvation and pesti-
lence claimed thousands of lives of the city’s residents daily, the Leningrad City Soviet’s executive branch, the Ispolkom, took time to adopt a special decision: «On Development of Works on Monumental Propaganda». In the same month the Leningrad branch of the Soviet Union of Architects (SUA) announced the competition of the best projects of «monumental decorations of military propaganda» of the major city’s points. Other competitions of designs of the monuments of the city’s defenders took place in October and December of 1942.

In Moscow, a series of competitions of the monuments’ designs also became the focal point of the efforts to create a monumental portrayal of the Soviet War efforts. The first such competition was organized in March of 1942 by the Moscow SUA’s branch. Twenty-nine union members submitted forty-five projects for this competition. That competition was the first one in a long series of competitions of the monuments’ designs which lasted throughout the war years. In April of 1941 the SUA’s central board recommended to all local SUA’s organizations to organize competitions similar to the one in the Moscow. In June of 1942 the Committee on the Arts of the Soviet of People’s Commissars, the major Soviet state organ in charge of the arts, suggested erecting a monument to Soviet partisans (the resistance fighters). A number of leading Soviet artists were invited to submit their projects. In July of 1942 the Moscow SUA’s organization announced the second round of competition of war monuments. In September of the same year the first all-Union competition of the monuments to the Soviet war heroes was announced. By January of 1943, when all the projects were exhibited for a public discussion, more than 200 projects were submitted. The exhibition lasted until the April, and was actively discussed in both the professional and the popular Soviet press.

The authors of the memorial projects of 1941-early 1943 could hardly hope for an immediate materialization of their designs, given the continuing retreat of the Soviet army. Therefore the projects submitted for these competitions mostly envisioned memorials of a generic variety, such as «To the Heroes of the Patriotic War,» «To the Soviet Partisans,» or «To a Red Army Commander.» The place-
specific projects were devoted almost entirely to the defenses of Moscow and Leningrad. This changed since the summer of 1943, when, after the Soviet victories at Stalingrad and Kursk, the Red Army began to roll steadily the German advances back westwards. First, real, not hypothetical, victories could now be celebrated. Secondly, the memorial theme took a prominent part in the projects of reconstruction of liberated Soviet cities, many of which had been severely damaged or razed entirely by the war. For instance, in 1944 a large artistic and architectural competition was announced for designing a memorial to the defenders of Stalingrad. In fact, according to the plan of Stalingrad’s reconstruction developed in 1944–45, the whole city was supposed to become a huge memorial complex to the imminent Soviet victory. Similar, if more modest, reconstruction plans were made for Kiev, Kharkov, Sebastopol, Voronezh, Kalinin (Tver’), and other locales.

Finally, since the Soviet troops now would usually retain control over the battlefields, a question of proper burial of the Soviet war dead became more acute. That caused a great demand for developing standard designs for aesthetically appropriate and ideologically «correct» tombstones, communal grave markers, monuments to fallen generals and so on. The work on these smaller memorial forms resulted in several collections of model designs which were submitted to the Soviet army command and various governmental institutions.

The discussions over various proposals of war memorials showed a high level of political and cultural reflection over both the form and content of memorials’ designs. One of the leading Soviet art critics, D. E. Arkin, implored to pay special attention to the form and content of the memorials, since they would not only immortalize specific war events but would also let posterity judge «how these events and heroes were reflected in their contemporaries’ consciousness.» He also called for the creation of memorials which would reflect specifically the Soviet experience, rejecting those which «would fit any heroical event of the past, or any historical situation.» Another eminent critic, I. L. Matsa, called for a limited use of traditional elements in memorials’ designs, advising instead the authors to use
«folkloric forms» invented by «the people itself».

The analysis of iconography of the Soviet wartime memorials reveals the existence of two broad trends in the memorials’ design. The first trend was based on the use of universal symbolic language rooted in the cultural heritage of the Greek and Roman civilizations (From now on I will refer to this type of memorial as «classicist»). Classic obelisks and stelae, triumphal arches and columns were the primary symbolic elements featured in numerous Soviet projects. Some projects directly alluded to the classical prototypes. For instance, the project of a colossal memorial lighthouse in Leningrad by I. A. Golosov was clearly inspired by the famous Hellenic lighthouse of Pharos. Trojan’s Arch served as a model for numerous triumphal arches. A couple of proposed memorials bore an uncanny resemblance to Rome’s Coliseum. Perhaps the most prominent manifestation of the classicist trend was the idea of building of a Soviet Pantheon for interring the bodies of the war heroes. The theme of a pantheon as a Soviet war memorial was already suggested as one of the themes for the Moscow architectural competition of 1942. The concept of a Soviet Pantheon appeared to acquire a great appeal, and culminated in the early 1950s with the officially approved project of building a gigantic pantheon of «The Great Heroes of the Soviet Land». Naturally, most of the proposed Soviet pantheons were variations of the Roman original, albeit enlarged by a double-digit factor.

All the classicist memorials’ designs projected an image of timelessness, and emphasized the universal character of the Soviet people’s struggle with Nazism. They also symbolically supported the Soviet Union’s claim to be the rightful heir to «all the best achievements of the world’s culture.» On the other hand, these projects sought inspiration in and built a sense of historical continuity with not only the classic civilizations of antiquity, but the Russian Imperial tradition as well, as the latter used the same symbolic language. Significantly, the classicist memorials were largely prevalent in the projects originating in Leningrad (St. Petersburg)—the old Russian imperial capital.

If classical motives were never entirely absent from the Soviet symbolic
language, even in the first years after the Bolshevik revolution, the second type of memorials—which I term the Russian traditionalist type—owed its re-emergence on the Soviet cultural scene to the onset of the WWII. Having faced tremendous military defeats of the first months of the war, and struggling for the very survival of their regime, the Soviet political leadership, and Stalin personally, decided to appeal to the sense of Russian ethnic patriotism. The struggle against Hitler’s armies was from now on coached not in the habitual terms of Marxist rhetoric, as a struggle of the first socialist state against world imperialism, but rather as a continuation of the centuries-old struggle of the Russian people against foreign invaders. In August of 1941 Stalin referred, for the first time, to the war with the Nazi Germany and its allies as a «Patriotic» one, making an obvious reference to Russia’s first «Patriotic war» against Napoleon’s invasion in 1812. Three months later, in a landmark speech on the Red Square, Stalin named the great princes of ancient Rus’ (and Russian Orthodox saints), Alexander Nevskii and Dimitrii Donskoi, and celebrated generals of Imperial Russia, Suvorov and Kutuzov, as sources of inspiration for the Soviet troops departing for the defense of Moscow. This ideological turnaround of the Soviet leadership was met with a genuine groundswell of Russian patriotism, as the German armies marched deeper and deeper into Russia’s historical heartland.

The rehabilitation of the Russian historical tradition was immediately reflected in memorial design. A number of projects dated 1941-42 already used vivid evocations of Russia’s pre-Bolshevik past. For instance, the centerpiece of the monument to the defenders of Moscow, drafted by I. A. Golosov, was made up by a sculptural group of a knight slaying a dragon—in fact, the very image of St. George, the patron saint of Moscow. The use of such an image could hardly even be contemplated in the Soviet Union prior to 1941. The figure of this «Soviet St. George» (with a five-pointed star at the handle of the sword as its only visible Soviet mark) was placed against a copy of Kremlin’s red brick wall, thereby increasing the similarity of the whole composition to the pre-revolutionary Moscow’s coat of arms, which depicted St. George on a red background. The
central part of the monument was flanked by a replica of another venerated relic of the Muscovite past, the so-called Tsar Cannon. Another project of the memorial to the defenders of Moscow envisioned not a piece of Kremlin’s wall, but a whole medieval Russian wooden castle built on the top of a huge artificial mound. This fairytale castle was to be crowned by a central structure closely resembling the famous Moscow’s Ascension church in Kolomenskoie, of Ivan the Terrible’s fame. This project’s only visible Soviet symbols were red stars again, perched atop the castle’s towers (instead of Orthodox crosses or double-headed eagles). Dozens of other proposed memorials, big and small, also featured a traditional Slavic burial mound.

The emerging type of the Russian traditionalist memorial could not avoid using cultural references to the Russian Orthodoxy. Sometimes such references were veiled, sometimes quite obvious. Some of the most interesting examples of the incorporation of Orthodox motifs by the wartime Soviet culture are the projects of soldiers’ tombstones and grave markers created by M. F. Olenev, I. A. Golosov, N. I. Gaigarov, and M. M. Dzis’ko. The prototypes of memorial signs in these projects were, in fact, traditional wooden tombstones from Russian peasant cemeteries—with a Soviet star literally replacing an Orthodox cross. Interestingly, the red star was the only specifically Soviet symbol that was still used widely in the Soviet wartime memorials. Other common Soviet symbols, such as a hammer and sickle, or the Soviet coat of arms, were used much less frequently since the war’s beginning. This holds true even for the holiest of the holy images of the Soviet ideological hierarchy—that of Vladimir Lenin, not to mention Karl Marx, whose bushy visage disappeared entirely from the Soviet wartime iconography.

Perhaps the most interesting evidence of the degree which the amalgamation of Soviet patriotism with the Russian traditionalism and Orthodox revival reached by the end of the war years comes from a proposal submitted by the head of the main directorate of educational buildings of the State Committee on Architecture, architect A. K. Chaldymov, to the top Soviet leadership, and personally to Stalin, in 1943. The centerpiece of Chaldymov’s proposal was the establishment of no less
than an official Soviet «Cult of the Sacred Motherland». The specifics of his proposal are indeed so striking that its major points are worth citing at length:

1. For the sake of the purposeful upbringing of a new [type of] human being, it is necessary to work out and formulate the already established basic principles of behavior (laws like the commandments) of Soviet citizens in personal and social life…

2. To establish a new, both in form and content, CULT OF SACRED MOTHERLAND [KUL'T SVIASCHCHENNOI RODINY, the capitalization is Chaldymov’s] (there could be a different name) with its own rituals for the conduct of popular holidays, the revolution’s anniversaries, other events in the citizens’ personal and social life.

3. To establish, as a public building for people’s spiritual life, a TEMPLE OF SACRED MOTHERLAND [KHRAM SVIASCHCHENNOI RODINY], where in a solemn atmosphere the services will be held to celebrate various public and personal events.

A temple is not a theatre, cinema, or a conference hall, but a new type of building of special significance for the state. Its solemn and monumental architecture with paintings and sculptures will reflect the great traditions of the people, and, in particular, the heroic deeds of the Patriotic war.

The temple with its services must be QUALITATIVELY different from all public events which have taken place so far. A special atmosphere of dignity, concentration, [spiritual] depth should be created in the temple …

It is hard to think of a stronger and better historically justified expressive medium than the bells’ peal. The bells’ peal should become a mean of the expression of the cult of SACRED MOTHERLAND.

In essence, Chaldymov suggested to the Soviet leaders to perform a fundamental ideological coup d’état: to dispense de-facto with «Marxism-Leninism» as the ideological basis of the Soviet Union’s existence, and to officially substitute it
with the cult of Soviet nationalism, with undisguised attributes of religious service. Repeated mentions of «people’s historical traditions», and such telling details as a special roles reserved for church bells and chorus, leave little room for doubt that Chaldymov sought to emulate not a generic, but a very specific type of church service—the Russian Orthodox one.

It is already significant that Chaldymov even dared to submit such a proposal. To put this in a proper historical perspective, one should not forget that the year of 1944 marked the tenth anniversary of the beginning of the Great Terror. Millions have had already disappeared in the Gulag’s entrails for a mere suspicion of «smearing» or «undermining» the ideological foundation of the Soviet state. But the archival materials have revealed no evidence that Chaldymov suffered any punishment, much less a term in prison camps, for his seemingly iconoclastic proposition. Most interestingly, in the letter to Stalin’s personal secretary Poskrebyshev, written in October of 1944, Chaldymov claimed that powerful Politburo stalwarts Kaganovich and Malenkov, as well as a number of lesser Soviet and party officials and cultural figures, had actually read his proposal, and were interested in pursuing it further. That makes Chaldymov’s proposed «Cult of Sacred Motherland» a particularly telling evidence of the Soviet cultural and political Weltanschauung of the late war years.

The confluence of the notions of «Soviet» and «Russian» became particularly symptomatic in the design of the stations of the Moscow subway (the «Metro») of the 3rd and the 4th series, designed mostly during the war, and completed between 1943 and 1954. Ironically at the first sight, the Moscow subway emerged as the first major Soviet war monument. However, the Metro always occupied a very special position in the Soviet symbolic landscape. Hardly ever was it regarded simply as a mean of public transportation. The entrances to the subway stations were marked by massive temple-like entrance pavilions; the underground halls and passages were weighted down by marble and granite, bronze and gold, sculpture and mosaics. Form the opening of its first stations in 1935, the Moscow Metro emerged as one of the paramount Soviet cultural and political icons, the hallmark
of the Soviet modernity, the showcase of seemingly unlimited possibilities of the Soviet regime. Opening of any new station was staged as a popular holiday; the stations themselves were viewed as the major cultural and political landmarks.

Strikingly, the construction of the subway never ceased during the war’s years. Although the Soviet Union’s resources were stretched by the war effort nearly to the breaking point, the Soviet government stubbornly pressed forward with the subway construction plans. Not only the construction proceeded in the accordance to the pre-war plans, the subway stations built during the war and the immediate post-war period exhibited an extravagant opulence, eclipsing the stations built either before or after this period.

One of the most praised stations of the war series was «Kurskaia-Kol’tsevaia» («Kurskaia-Circle Line»). Its facade is similar to other stations of the 3rd and the 4th series, featuring a classic triumphal arch. The interior of the hall, one of the most elaborate of all the Moscow metro stations, was devoted to the celebration of victory in the Great Patriotic War. In the center of the hall the visitors have to pass through a «Victory Portal», formed by a circle of column supporting a large marble architrave. The columns carried golden swords sheathed in laurel leaves. Each sword bore the images of the medals instituted in honor of the city-heroes—Moscow, Leningrad, Sevastopol, Odessa, as well as of the medal for the defense of the Caucasus. The horizontal architrave stretching above the columns bears the words of the new Soviet anthem, which replaced the revolutionary «International» in 1944:

The sun of freedom shined through the storms,
And great Lenin illuminated our path.
Stalin brought us in devotion to the people,
and inspired us for labor and heroic deeds.

Above the anthem’s words, sixteen golden stars signifying sixteen Soviet union republics, and the Order of Victory in the center. On the architrave, and in the niches alongside the walls, stood the sculptures symbolizing the Soviet industry,
agriculture, and science, and arts. The focal point of the Hall of Glory is, however, the figure of Stalin himself, located in a large niche beyond the portal, on the Hall’s central axis. The figure was so positioned that Stalin’s head was seen from the entrance right under the Order of Victory on the portal’s center. In order to proceed to the trains, a visitor had to pass under the portal, and by the feet of Stalin’s figure, towering above the staircase. The message was clear enough: the victory in the war was credited to the unity of the Soviet people under Stalin’s personal guidance. In fact, the Soviet people itself is personified by Stalin. According to a contemporary Soviet source, «the whole [station’s] ensemble is devoted to the apotheosis of the victorious Soviet people, and is completed with the figure of Stalin, whose image reflects the best strivings of all the Soviet people» (p 117).

Two of the stations which were built in the war year actually bore the name of Stalin: Stalinskaia (Stalin station, now Semenovskaia), and Avtozavod Imeni Stalina (Stalin Auto Works, now Avtozavodskaia). The entrance to the Stalinskaia station was, as with its sister stations, marked by a pavilion with a triumphal arch entrance, decorated with the bas-relief of the arms. Having passed the entrance, the passengers would descend to the platform hall. On the platform hall, two rows of tall lamps faced with semi-precious green malachite stone, lead to the station’s end wall. The center of the end wall is occupied by a large sculptural rendition of the Soviet Victory Order. Shaped as a five-pointed star, and, unlike the early Soviet decorations, studded with diamonds and rubies, the Victory Order was instituted by Stalin specifically to celebrate the Soviet victory in the war. Nor more than a dozen of the Victory Orders were ever awarded, one to Stalin himself. Above the Order of Victory, the image of Stalin himself crowns the composition. The side wall of the platforms were decorated with sculptures depicting various Soviet arms of the service: machine-guns, cannons, tanks, and planes.

The ideological centerpiece of the station Zavod Imeni Stalina (the Stalin Auto Works) is the triumphal hall, located between two sets of escalators which the passengers have to descend in order to pass to the actual station’s platform. There is a round hall. The triumphal hall was built as a square, circled by a set of
low red marble columns. The hall’s high ceiling was crowned with a mosaic with banners of different Soviet arms of the service. In the ceiling’s center there is a red Soviet banner with the portrait of Stalin on it. The image of Stalin occupies the precisely central position on the hall’s vault, a position which is referred in the Russian orthodox churches as a «God’s Eye», for it is customarily reserved for the Savior’s likeliness.

The triumphal hall’s wall lying on the axis of the station's platform hall and facing the main escalator was decorated by a large mosaic. In the foreground the mosaic depicts Soviet soldiers riding on tanks towards victory; and in the background, a towering figure of a medieval Russian knight, rising against a silhouette of Moscow’s Kremlin, outlined in red marble. In the words of a contemporary Soviet critic, the mosaic is «easy to understand, and informs a spectator with a sense of vivacity, joy, and strength. Its idea is patriotic because it inspires the belief in invincibility of our beautiful Motherland, and its bright future» (p70). Importantly, the station’s images followed one after another in clear ideological succession. As the passengers were slowly raised by the escalator from the deep recess of the subway’s platform, they faced first by the images of the tanks and the Soviet soldiers, then by the figure of a Russian knight and the Kremlin, and, having achieved the escalator’s top, they would pass under the red Soviet banners flying in the blue sky, and, finally, Stalin’s watchful gaze from the hall’s cupola. «Zavod Imeni Stalina» received an immediate recognition as one of the most successful renditions of the Soviet wartime ideology. The station was praised as an example of «how through clear and simple means one can reflect the Soviet reality… in a full and truthful image of a Soviet Metro station».

Three themes, intertwined in the decor of the Zavod imeni Stalina station: the celebration of the victory in the war (which was still putative at the station construction’s time), the Russian military traditions, and the god-like presence of Stalin, were even more pronounced in the design of «Novokuznetskaia» station. Sculptural compositions celebrating the first Soviet «city-heroes» — Leningrad, Stalingrad, Sevastopol, and Odessa were located on the station’s major under-
ground hall’ walls. The walls facing the platforms bore the portraits of historic Russian military leaders. Selection of these historical figures was drawn from Stalin’s famous speech on the Red Square on November 7, 1941, when Stalin exhorted the troops with «images of our great forebears — Aleksandr Nevskii, Dmitrii Donskoi, Kuz’ma Minin, Dmitrii Pozharskii, Aleksandr Suvorov, Mikhail Kutuzov». Finally, the whole station’s ensemble was dominated by a large sculptural composition on the station’s end wall, depicting «heroic deeds of the Soviet people on the front-line, and on the home front.» On this bas-relief, the throngs of the Soviet people gathered around the image of Stalin at its center. A number of other stations bore the image of Stalin either at the center of the station’s end hall (Electrozavodskaya), or at the center of the entrance hall (Paveletskaya).

The theme of the continuity of the Russian military tradition was further developed in the station Komsomol’skaia-Kol’tsevaia. Komsomol’skaia-Kol’tsevaia occupies a special place in the Moscow subway. It is one, if not the most, busiest stations, serving as a conduit for three nearby railroad remninal (Leningradskii, Kazanskii, and Riazanskii). In order to accommodate the flow of passengers, it was also built with a much grander underground hall than other stations. The special place of Komsomoskaia-Kol’tsevaia station was underscored by the fact that it was commissioned not to a team of relatively young architects and artists, by to the dean of the Soviet architecture, Alexei Shchusev. Shchusev had started his long and eventful career well before the Bolshevik revolution, having achieved an early prominence as a church architect. When the Bolshevik revolution drove his old customers into extinction, Shchusev offered his services to the new regime, and designed a number of modernist office buildings in the 1920s and early 30s. His biggest coup came, however, in 1924, when he was commissioned to build a temporary mausoleum for Vladimir Lenin’s body. Later on, in 1934, Shchusev built a new permanent mausoleum, which instantly became the most pre-eminent of the Soviet sacral buildings. Aside from his undisputed talent and professional abilities, Shchusev managed to survive largely unscathed through the years of purges and terror because of his uncanny ability to accommodate, and, indeed, anticipate, the
major shifts in the aesthetic and political predilections of the Soviet powers-to-be. That makes his design of the Komsolmosl’kaia-Kol’tsevaia especially salient.

The major theme of Shchusev’s station is the celebration of the Russian military tradition. The station’s entrance is crowned with a cupola and a spire, bearing a resemblance to a huge shlem, a Russian knight’s helmet. The station’s major hall is dominated by a huge arched ceiling bearing eight mosaic panels. The panels depict the most celebrated moments from the Russian military history. Each panel is centered around a certain historical figure, starting from prince (and a Russian Orthodox saint) Aleksandr Nevskii, famous for his victories over the invaders of the German Teutonic Order, and ending with Stalin, reviewing the Soviet troops which had vanquished Hitler’s Germany.

The powerful mosaics were produced by the eminent Russian painter Pavel Korin. Korin was a interesting, and surprising, choice as Shchusev’s partner. He had been trained as an icon-painter before the revolution, and never exhibited much of political flexibility, which many of his colleagues did. Throughout his life, Korin never wavered from his major creative interests — the subjects of Orthodoxy and traditional Russian culture, for which he had been officially ostracized by the Soviet cultural establishment, and relentlessly pilloried by the Soviet media. But with beginning of the war Korin suddenly was in demand again, having received a number of official commissions, the most important of which was for the mosaics at the Komsomol’skaia metro station.

The evolution of the Soviet wartime memorial design demonstrate the drastic shifts the representation of the Soviet identity underwent during the war. The earlier Soviet revolutionary symbols but disappeared from the sight; the same fate awaited any mentioning of Marxist internationalism. The Soviet historical narrative was quietly excised from the history of the international socialism, and replanted on the rich substrate of the Russian historical tradition. The symbolic rehabilitation included the ethnic Russian folklore motives, but, above all, the past martial glories of the Muscovite Tsardom and the Russian Empire. A special place
was occupied by the symbols and rituals of the Russian Orthodox church. Divested of their spiritual meaning, many of them were incorporated into the discursive tissue of the Soviet imperial identity. As the war drew near its close, the image of Stalin appeared more and more often. Conspicuously absent in the first, critical years of war, it came back with a vengeance as the ultimate triumph was drawing near. Not only the Soviet Union re-established a symbolic continuity with the pre-revolutionary Russian history, but Stalin finally firmly situated himself in the context of the Russian imperial tradition. Finally, one may not be but struck at what was missing in the Soviet memorials of this period: the actual memory of the millions, particularly the civilians, who fell victims to the enormous calamity of the war. Far from being concerned with their fate, the first Soviet war memorials had a much different agenda: to celebrate the prowess and the newly redefined image of the Soviet state.