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# Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (Russian Empire)

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The fundamental factor in the existence of a Russian cult of the war dead was the public sphere and its particular characteristics in postwar Russian culture and politics, not a divergence from Europe in the Russian war experience. During World War I, ordinary Russians as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations were already planning memorial sites. While no official Soviet World War I monuments were built, the Russian émigré community in Europe and elsewhere developed a cult of the fallen, largely for the same reasons as other combatant nation states.

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## Introduction

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The commemoration of the Second World War in the Russian Federation is one of the most conspicuous features of modern Russian political culture. Foreign scholars have tracked the development of a full-blown, official state-sponsored cult of the Great Patriotic War as it emerged in the Soviet Union after the 1950s, and even the most casual visitor today cannot fail to notice the omnipresence of the war throughout the country and its mass media. This public obsession with the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany is remarkable in part because it seems to have emerged with few historical antecedents. Early Bolshevik [Russia](#) did not cultivate an official cult of First World War dead, and the ideological meaning of the [Revolution](#) and the [Civil War](#) and the structure of Soviet public culture prevented the public commemoration of those conflicts as practiced in interwar Europe. Ironically, the Russian cult of the First World War that did exist was located outside Russia, namely in Europe and other places where Russian émigrés could employ the shared experience of the war as a means to build a community in exile and to form connections with non-Russian people in host nations.

This article will focus on the Russian cult of the World War I dead and its place in Soviet and émigré political discourse and popular culture in the interwar period. During that time, public worship of the sacrifice of the common soldier for the nation gained particular political valence in European and American life, and public commemorations and ceremonies for the war dead became important for some veterans and loved ones in helping them handle personal trauma and the sense of loss. Any discussion of the cult of the fallen must recognize that its institutionalization requires a legal authority over public space, a set of financial investments and a desire for mass communication, all factors that are beyond the power and interest of most people acting as individuals. Karen Petrone, for example, suggests that the memory of the First World War had meaning for people in the Soviet Union, but she also writes of the war's "marginalization" and recognizes that it remained "on the margins of Soviet culture."<sup>[1]</sup> The particular institutional structure and cultural practices of the public thus may be the most critical factor in shaping the form of war commemoration, as a study of the Russian cult of the World War I dead demonstrates.

The modern cult of war dead began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as nation-states took form and political leaders attempted to mobilize political legitimacy and social cohesiveness in modern mass society, but the unprecedented geographic and demographic reach of the First World War intensified official and popular veneration of fallen soldiers. In the interwar period, many governments and civic organizations worked to establish central places of remembrance, create public monuments, and organize military cemeteries. In the 1970s, George Mosse (1918-1999) argued that these forms of commemoration were part of a broader culture of populist right-wing politics in Germany, a view that seemed credible in light of work that linked war memory to aesthetic modernism, cultural pessimism and political illiberalism.<sup>[2]</sup> [Antoine Prost](#), on the other hand, expanded the scope of World War I's public significance to include democratic politics by showing that French war memorials remained embedded in republican civic culture.<sup>[3]</sup> Some have argued that World War I memorialization should not be understood in narrow political terms; [Jay Winter](#), for example, suggests that it met a need for

mourning in a population traumatized by an unprecedented large-scale war.<sup>[4]</sup> Nonetheless, the nation has remained the dominant frame for historical consciousness in modern war commemoration, even for public expressions of individual loss or personal mourning. Promoters of the cult of the fallen of World War II in the Soviet Union, for example, hoped that it would foster a sense of Soviet identity among the country's diverse ethnicities, not serve a narrowly Russian patriotic audience.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Imperial Russia

In late Imperial Russia, a memorial focus on the war dead took shape in the years before 1917, although the continued emphasis on dynastic over nationalist legitimacy impeded the formation of a full-blown popular cult. The monarchy and the state were determined to memorialize the leadership and events of monarchical significance, and state officials exercised great control over public spaces, could intervene in local affairs practically at will, and commanded vast funds compared to grassroots organizations. Official public statues were designed to project imperial power, and official myths generally excluded educated society and the common people from the monarchy's "heroic narratives."<sup>[6]</sup> Nonetheless, in tsarist Russia the valorization of the common soldier had begun by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. The public failures of military and political leadership in that conflict did not leave many generals or political leaders who were credible enough to be worthy of memorialization, although Admiral Stepan Makarov (1849-1904) was a notable exception. A new focus on popular patriotic education in the military and the creation of monuments like that to the crewmen of the torpedo boat *Steregushchii* in St. Petersburg show a greater appreciation for the role of the ordinary soldier as a means to mobilize loyalty to the state.<sup>[7]</sup>

During World War I, ordinary Russians and governmental and non-governmental organizations were already planning and even creating memorial sites for war dead. Soldiers built small, informal memorials in combat zones to mark mass and individual graves or to make the feats of their unit known to others. In Russia itself, the semi-official Aleksandrovskii Committee hoped to help local governments and organizations build large monuments devoted to the war dead.<sup>[8]</sup> In 1916, the St. Petersburg city council discussed erecting a monument for the victims of the hospital ship *Portugal*, sunk by a U-boat in the Black Sea. The sculptor I. D. Shadr (1887-1941) originally designed his "Monument to World Suffering" to be a *Portugal* monument, and it was slated for construction on the grounds of the new Moscow City War Cemetery (*bratskoe kladbishche*).<sup>[9]</sup> That same year, the "Russian Society for Remembrance of Soldiers of the Russian Army Who Fell in the War" ran a competition that produced designs for major memorials.<sup>[10]</sup> It is likely that such projects would have become central places for a cult of Russian war dead in any non-Bolshevik post-war Russia.

## The Soviet Union

Early Bolshevik commemoration practice was more characteristic of an internationalist revolutionary state than a nation state. At its core, Bolshevik ideology was forward-looking and triumphalist, with little room for the religious, personal, and retrospective qualities associated with death, defeat, or grief.<sup>[11]</sup> A cult of individual revolutionary heroes instructed the populace about the genealogy of the revolution and displayed the reality of the Soviet regime. The most obvious figure in this narrative was Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), but it also featured other Russian and foreign revolutionaries, politicians, educators, scientists, and cultural figures. Soviet public culture, moreover, was not organized to take the public into account as a group of individuals, whether in the form of critical discussion in civil society or empathetic responses to individual or communal psychological needs. Instead, it displayed symbols and signs to present abstract ideas to imagined audiences, a tendency that emerged in full force in the Stalinist period. The people were shown the history and present reality of the Bolshevik revolution, not the experience of the nation, and events, narratives, and ideas that did not correspond to this agenda were ignored or demonized. Symbols replaced concrete individuals and events to mobilize the populace around an abstract idea rather than any specific lived experience.

Bolshevik leaders in the interwar period thus neither tolerated a popular cult of the war dead, nor did they allow for spontaneous commemoration in the same way as their counterparts in Europe and North America. Various projects that had begun under the tsarist regime for the memorialization of the World War I dead were discontinued, and no Soviet World War I monuments were built. The veneration of the martyrs of the February Revolution, a memorial project that had started almost immediately in early 1917, continued, but it experienced constant delays and difficulties before it was finally able to open years later. Even the Civil War was not well-memorialized outside the depiction of heroic individuals, who were usually from the Red Army or Bolshevik Party leadership positions. No pilgrimages, memorial societies, local monuments, battlefield tourism or other forms of grassroots public commemoration common in Europe seem to have existed for either conflict. Complex depictions of World War I and the Civil War did appear in Soviet literature, but a popular culture of grief and loss did not enter public discourse or space. In official discourse, World War I was a symbol that showed the Party's conception and ideas about imperialist war rather than a concrete event that spoke of the experience of individuals.<sup>[12]</sup> Similarly, the commemoration of the October Revolution and the Civil War took place in official military parades and militarized demonstrations that served to "intimidate external and internal enemies," not represent the events themselves.<sup>[13]</sup> Personal commemoration and non-official ideas about World War I, especially those that involved religion, gendered heroism or patriotism, did not sit well with official priorities.<sup>[14]</sup> The public burial of General Aleksei Brusilov (1853-1926) in 1926, for example, took place because he was a unique personage who had particular relevance in the Soviet present as a successful tsarist general who had nonetheless worked for the Bolshevik regime.<sup>[15]</sup> His funeral cannot be considered part of a broader cult of the common soldier of the First World War.

The new patriotism of the 1930s did not rehabilitate World War I or bring about a fundamental change

in commemorative practices. The Stalinist Great Retreat integrated some aspects of the Russian past (above all leaders and historical events that demonstrated successful state-building) into a self-conscious brand of Soviet patriotism, but it did not revive Russian nationalism. Any tsarist wars that were defined as imperialist remained excluded from the pre-revolutionary heritage of Bolshevism. The memory of World War I in particular was used to distance the Soviet regime from non-Soviet politics and culture.<sup>[16]</sup> “Tsarism,” wrote one newspaper columnist in 1939, “conducted the war in complete agreement with the Russian bourgeoisie and in its own imperialist interests.”<sup>[17]</sup> This separation between Soviet and non- or anti-Soviet ideas of war was clear in newspaper articles that emphasized the exceptionality of the Bolshevik Party’s steadfast rejection of the conflict.<sup>[18]</sup> Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) himself reinforced the importance of World War I as the greatest example of imperialist war when he personally intervened in the publication of an article on Friedrich Engels’ (1820-1895) view of imperial Russian foreign policy that was supposed to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the war. For Stalin, Friedrich Engels erred in considering imperial Russian foreign policy and Russian agency as a primary source of tension in late 19<sup>th</sup> century-world diplomacy. The publication of this article, Stalin argued, would represent an official endorsement of the view that the war had been brought about by diplomatic and political factors rather than capitalist imperialist development and was therefore inappropriate.<sup>[19]</sup> The official Soviet memory of World War I was never about the representation of a specific event but always about the public presentation of an example of imperialist war in general.

## The Emigration

A Russian cult of the World War I dead grew among Russian émigrés, and largely for the same reasons as in other combatant nation states. It rallied veterans and organizations around a common military culture, was a focus for social welfare fundraising, offered an outlet for personal and communal grief, and provided a common cultural point of contact with non-Russians in host nations. The military geography of Europe, in particular the wartime presence of Russian soldiers in combat zones on the [Eastern](#), [Western](#) and [Balkan fronts](#) and in [prisoner-of-war camps](#) in Central Powers countries, meant that there were many physical sites of memory that could be integrated into émigré war commemoration. As a writer in the émigré newspaper *Vozrozhdenie* noted in 1927, “It seems there is no state in Europe where there are no Russian war cemeteries.”<sup>[20]</sup> The émigrés’ understanding of their community as the Russian nation and their existence inside a functioning civil society meant that Russian people abroad, unlike in the Soviet Union, commemorated World War I in terms similar to their counterparts in interwar Europe and North America. One can therefore find the observance of important anniversaries in the émigré press and public, pilgrimages to important local sites, participation in non-Russian commemorative practices, and the creation of World War I monuments. War commemoration, in the eyes of émigré leaders, was as necessary for Russians as it was for others. Mikhail Fedorov (1858-1949), chair of the committee dedicated to building a memorial church in France, argued that others had built “great monuments to their heroes” but “until

now, only the memory of Russian heroes has remained forgotten.”<sup>[21]</sup>

Expressions of grief played a role in the overcoming of divisions between individual loss and the loss of the community. In this way, families, friends and communities of émigrés could show their respects to soldiers who had died abroad. War monuments and sites of memory provided some with a place to express personal grief. One “thin woman in black,” for example, wept and prayed next to “the surviving Russian veterans of battle in Champagne” in the belief that “in the mass grave lies her son, an officer of the first regiment, missing in action.”<sup>[22]</sup> More often, individual and social loss went together. On the left wing of émigré politics, a general distrust of the military did not prevent sympathy for wounded veterans and victims of war, and articles about war memorials in newspapers emphasized those aspects. In the opinion of important members of the intelligentsia, establishing social connections was necessary to meet welfare goals in the absence of a state and other powerful social institutions. In Prague, fundraising for a planned war monument to the “True Warrior of Russia” (not realized) was said to contribute to a sense of national unity, the “unification of Russia Abroad, scattered across the globe.”<sup>[23]</sup>

Émigré monuments to World War I were also important as a means to maintain social and institutional cohesion among émigré military groups.<sup>[24]</sup> Many Russians abroad were Civil War veterans who had evacuated Russia after being defeated in 1920, and who were able to cultivate a distinctive memorial culture of the White movement in emigration. This White culture commemorated certain important dates, individuals, groups and events from the Civil War, and White veterans built monuments to their experience in places where they had landed after the Crimean evacuation (on Gallipoli, for example). World War and Civil War often ran together in White memorial practices, for the movement’s “stab in the back” myth linked the image of enemy Germans with traitorous Bolsheviks to salvage White military honor in defeat. In this milieu, the war experience provided positive examples of military leadership, and war commemoration was a way for military organizations to claim a leading role among émigré veterans. Memorials served as the physical manifestation of nationalism, patriotism and military values such as duty and honor. But Civil War commemorations were less common than ones for World War I because the former spoke to a narrower audience. Non-Russians found meaning in the international war experience but obviously had no links to Russo-centric events such as the Russian Civil War.

## France

Émigrés in [France](#) followed the lead of the [French cult of the war dead](#), and French people and institutions played a direct role in shaping sites of Russian war memory there. By the mid-1920s, France was home to the largest number of émigrés (who were tolerated but not necessarily welcomed) in a country with historic ties to imperial Russia. In France, formal ceremonies took place around thousands of local monuments, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris and on Armistice Day as people and politicians sought to use the memory of the war to bolster the Third Republic, display the strength of France and come to terms with millions of war dead. A delegation of

representatives of the Russian All-Military Union (ROVS), the Russian Union of Invalids and the Russian Union of Former Officer-Combatants on the French Front, for example, was “united with the delegation of French combatants” at the funeral of Marshal [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#) in 1929.<sup>[25]</sup> The following year, a French spectator exclaimed “Long live Russia” at a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by émigré military units, who “had remained true allies to France.”<sup>[26]</sup> The French state also controlled the process of battlefield exhumation and the creation of cemeteries for the fallen of all nationalities on French soil, while local communes and citizens helped memorialize Russian soldiers who had died near their towns. The mayor of St. Hilaire was thus declared “a new friend of the Russians” at the dedication of the Russian memorial church next to the Russian Expeditionary Force military cemetery in Champagne in 1938.<sup>[27]</sup>

### **Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia**

The émigré experience in the new Slavic states of [Czechoslovakia](#) and [Yugoslavia](#) shows that the memory of the war existed in an atmosphere of international philoslavism, or general friendship among Slavs as opposed to a specific ideology of [Panslavism](#), a phenomenon that did not pertain to France. In these countries, commemoration of the war was sometimes turned into a declaration of Czech, Serb and Russian solidarity. Czechs and Russians organized pilgrimages to monuments to fallen Russians and Serbs at former prisoner-of-war camps in Czechoslovakia, often with support from the Yugoslav Ministry of Religion. Local people, Russian émigrés and representatives of the Entente and other friendly Slavic nations all participated in memorial ceremonies. Representatives of Bulgaria and France, for example, took part in the consecration ceremony of the Russian memorial church in Prague’s Olšany cemetery. In Belgrade’s Novo Groblje cemetery, a memorial for the Russian soldiers who fell on the Balkan front became a place where officials and the public of Yugoslavia, Britain, Italy, and France conducted Armistice Day commemorations. For these new Slavic states, World War I commemorations helped create public links to powerful allies in the unstable interwar period.

### **Germany**

While émigrés could rely on some form of institutional or at least rhetorical friendship in France, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the situation in [Germany](#) was different. The country was a major center for the emigration in the early 1920s, but the émigré population shrank dramatically after the Great Inflation (1923), the onset of the Depression (1929) and the Nazi takeover (1933). Russian émigrés found little public support from the German state and people and even became the object of internal and external political intrigue after 1933. Locals sometimes honored the graves of the Russian fallen, but the commemoration of an enemy’s participation in the war was not important in mainstream practices of German war memorialization. Émigré monuments were completed mostly under the initiative of the émigré community. In Berlin, the Russian Orthodox cemetery in the suburb of Tegel ran a dormitory and tobacco workshop for invalid Russian veterans, and small markers

were set up for those who died of disease or war wounds. Aleksei von Lampe (1885-1967), the local ROVS leader, relied almost exclusively on the émigré community to fund a monument in 1934. He did not expect German government representatives to attend the dedication.<sup>[28]</sup>

## China

The memory of the shared struggle during the Great War was an important way for Russians to signify their status to other Europeans in [China](#). In Shanghai, the war was an important event for expat Europeans and Americans, who constructed a large war memorial on the Bund in 1924. This monument served to connect foreign residents to each other, especially the victorious allies who organized Armistice Day events that brought together the nationalities of the wartime Entente. In theory, the commemoration of Armistice Day should have been unimportant to Russian people (the country had left the war long before November 1918), but émigrés knew that the war experience connected them to the victorious Entente and they wanted to be included in memorial rituals. Émigré veterans groups laid wreaths at the Shanghai war monument in 1933 and 1934, and the Serebrennikov family, local émigrés of some reputation, noticed that such a wreath was put down at Armistice Day ceremonies in 1930s Tianjin, a sign that they hoped to find recognition of the émigré community by the others.<sup>[29]</sup> They attended so often that it became routine. “I have already seen the ceremonies of remembrance several times,” wrote Aleksandra Serebrennikova (1883-1975) in 1935, “so this time I was tired and stayed home.”<sup>[30]</sup>

## Conclusion

A cult of the dead of World War I did exist in Russian culture but not on the territory of the Soviet Union. The post-imperial Bolshevik government, whose leaders had a negative understanding of the place of the war in revolutionary history and constructed a public culture that did not take genuine popular grief or civic activism into account, did not memorialize the war in the same way as national states in Europe. Instead, its heroes were the revolutionary individuals who founded or inspired the world's first socialist state. Many Russians abroad, however, did revere their fallen heroes and for many of the same reasons as their European and American counterparts: as a way to build social and political solidarity within the nation and to give expression to personal and community grief and loss. Judging by their interest in war memory during the war and in the emigration, Russian people probably would have devoted much time and energy to memorialize World War I on Russian territory had it not been for the formation of the Soviet Union. Under Vladimir Putin, the site of the former Moscow City War Cemetery has recently been dedicated as a “Memorial Park Complex for the Heroes of World War I,” and the Russian Federation has added 1 August as a day of memory for Russian soldiers who fell during the 1914-1918 war to the official list of military holidays. The fundamental factor in the existence or non-existence of a postwar Russian cult of the war dead thus lies in the particular characteristics of the public sphere in postwar Russian culture and politics, not in any divergence from Europe in the Russian war experience or Russian people's views of the war.



Section Editors: [Boris Kolonitskii](#); [Nikolaus Katzer](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ Petrone, Karen: *The Great War in Russian Memory*, Bloomington 2011, pp. 18, 21.
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8. ↑ Stockdale, Melissa K.: *United in Gratitude. Honoring Soldiers and Defining the Nation in Russia's Great War*, in: *Kritika* 7/3 (2006), p. 465.
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10. ↑ Stockdale, p. 468. For some of the designs, see Ogonek, 29 May 1916.
11. ↑ Merridale, Catherine: *Night of Stone. Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia*, New York 2002, pp. 115-117, 129.
12. ↑ Cohen, Aaron J.: *Oh, That! Myth, Memory, and World War I in the Russian Emigration and the Soviet Union*, in: *Slavic Review* 62/1 (2003), pp. 81-82; Malysheva, Svetlana: *Sovetskaia prazdnichnaia kul'tura v provintsii. Prostranstvo, simvoly, istoricheskie mify (1917-1927)* [Soviet Provincial Festival Culture. Space, Symbols, Historical Myths (1917-1927)], Kazan 2005, pp. 171, 177.
13. ↑ Malysheva, S. Iu.: *Obraz voiny v istoricheskoi mifologii rannesovetskogo prazdnika* [The Image of War in the Historical Mythology of the Early Soviet Festival]. in: Narskii, I. V. et al (eds.): *Opyt mirovykh voyn v istorii Rossii. Sbornik statei* [The Experience of the World Wars in Russian History. A Collection of Articles], Cheliabinsk 2007, p. 167.
14. ↑ Petrone, pp. 70-76.
15. ↑ See Petrone, pp. 30-32.

16. ↑ Cohen, Oh, That!, pp. 78-79.
17. ↑ Pravda, 1 August 1939, p. 5.
18. ↑ Krasnaia zvezda [Red Star], 1 August 1939, p. 1; Pravda, 1 August 1924, p. 4; Komsomol'skaia pravda [Komsomol Truth], 1 August 1939, p. 1.
19. ↑ Stalin, I. V.: On an Article by Engels, issued by [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org), online: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1934/07/19.htm> (retrieved: 9 December 2013).
20. ↑ Vozrozhdenie [Renaissance], 20 July 1927, p. 3.
21. ↑ Hoover Institution Archive, Emel'ianov Papers, Box 12, Folder 20.
22. ↑ Poslednie novosti [Latest News], 2 July 1929, p. 3.
23. ↑ Nedelia [The Week], 19 July 1929, p. 3.
24. ↑ Cohen, Oh, That!, pp. 73-76.
25. ↑ Poslednie novosti [Latest News], 25 March 1929, p. 1.
26. ↑ Poslednie novosti [Latest News], 7 September 1930, p. 1.
27. ↑ Poslednie novosti [Latest News], 7 June 1938, p. 4.
28. ↑ Bakhmeteff Archive, ROVS Papers, Box 62.
29. ↑ Kitai i russkaia emigratsiia v dnevnikakh I.I. i A.N. Serebrennikovykh, 1919-1934 [China and the Russian Emigration in the Diaries of I. I. and A. N. Serebrennikov], volume 1, Moscow-Stanford 2006, p. 114.
30. ↑ Hoover Institution Archives, Ivan Serebrennikov Papers, Box 1A, Book 6.

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