



RESTORING THE “UNBROKEN CONTINUITY OF OUR HISTORY”: COMMEMORATION OF THE GREAT WAR IN THE FORMER RUSSIAN EMPIRE

La restauración de la «continuidad ininterrumpida de nuestra historia»: la conmemoración de la Gran Guerra en el antiguo Imperio Ruso

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A combination of factors has ensured that commemoration of the First World War in the lands of the former Russian Empire has lagged far behind the rest of Europe. The fact that the conflict led directly to the collapse of the tsarist regime and its replacement with a Bolshevik state focused attention elsewhere. The immediate demands of fighting the Civil War and then the establishment of the Soviet state provided a strong counter-narrative to the mainstream European story of grief, commemoration and loss. Veterans of the “imperialist war” sat uneasily in the new Soviet state during the inter-war years where, under Stalin, even private commemoration became difficult. Despite a partial return to Russian national traditions during the “Great Patriotic War” of 1941-1945, this largely ensured that the defeat of Nazism would be the defining experience of Russia during the century, legitimising the Soviet state and confirming her status as a global power. After 1989/1991 the memory of the Great War re-emerged from this shadow, more clearly as the midwife of national independence in the successor states of the tsarist empire, and with the return of the Russian state this has continued, perpetuating the narrative that her experience was not typical of the rest of Europe.



Abstract

Memory; Commemoration; Russia; Great War; Independence.
Canadá; Primera Guerra Mundial; identidad nacional; militarismo; recuerdo



Key words

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Fechas

Una combinación de factores ha asegurado que la conmemoración de la Primera Guerra Mundial en las tierras del anterior imperio ruso se haya quedado atrás con respecto al resto de Europa. El hecho de que el conflicto desembocó en el colapso del régimen zarista y su reemplazo por un estado bolchevique centró la atención en otro sitio. Las exigencias inmediatas de los enfrentamientos en la Guerra Civil y posteriormente el establecimiento del estado soviético ofrecieron un marcado contrarrelato frente a la historia principal europea de dolor, conmemoración y pérdida. Los veteranos de la «guerra imperialista» encajaron mal en el nuevo estado Soviético durante los años entre guerras donde, bajo Stalin, se hicieron difíciles incluso las conmemoraciones privadas. A pesar del regreso parcial a las tradiciones nacionales rusas durante la «Gran Guerra Patriótica» de 1941-1945, esto aseguró en gran parte que la derrota del nazismo sería la experiencia definitiva de Rusia durante el siglo, legitimando el estado Soviético y confirmando su estado como potencia global. Tras 1989/1991 la memoria de la Gran Guerra resurgió de esta sombra, más claramente como la comadróna de la independencia nacional en los estados sucesores al imperio zarista, y con el regreso del estado ruso esto ha continuado, perpetuando la narrativa de que su experiencia no es la típica del resto de Europa.



The First World War is often lazily characterised as the “forgotten war” in Russian national history and collective memory.¹ As Jay Winter noted, Russia had missed out on the “memory boom” that had overtaken the rest of Europe in the wake of the conclusion of the conflict and “in Russia... the First World War simply vanished as a subject of public discourse, eclipsed by the Revolutions of 1917 and the civil war that followed it” (2006, p. 43). The conflict resulted in the collapse of the Russian Empire and the November Revolution. The Bolsheviks, who did not aim to lose the territories on the periphery of the Empire, were largely successful in restoring some of the non-Russian territories back into the Soviet State. Nevertheless, in the Soviet Union commemoration of the Great War was seen to threaten the very integrity of the state, as it would allow for a counter-narrative to develop against orthodox state history in which non-Russian nationalities could gain independence, as the Poles, Finns and Baltic peoples had in the wake of the 1917 revolutions. A further strand of Soviet historiography on the conflict in Russia emerged, which argued that the country had less at stake than the west European powers, that Russia was only reluctantly dragged into the conflict, and sacrificed herself at the behest of her Entente partners.² The tsar failed to calculate the risks of the war for the empire and it became almost a “shameful” episode, not worthy of a great power. As late as 1990, the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* described the First World War as an “imperialist, unjust war”, and this is how the conflict had been portrayed throughout the long history of the Soviet Union.³ Subsumed in Bolshevik discourse into the “greater war” of 1914-1921, encompassing the revolutions of 1917 and the bloody Civil War, it was consigned as the tragic last act of tsarism before the inevitable revolution. The result of this was that for much of

1 The official website of “Monument to the Heroes of World War I”, run by the Russian Military History Society, not only outlines a narrative of the war under the title “A forgotten war”, but also offers short descriptions of Russia’s “forgotten victories”.

2 For a summary of inter-war developments in the Russian historiography of the First World War, see Sumpf (2014).

3 For more information visit “*Sovetskaya istoricheskaya entsiklopediya*, ‘Pervaya Mirovaya Voyna 1914-18’”.

the twentieth century Russia became detached from the powerful grip of remembering and memorialising the First World War.⁴

Since the fall of the Soviet Union there has been renewed academic and popular interest in the conflict that brought to an end to the ancient regime in Russia and ushered in the world's first socialist state.⁵ If not actually “forgotten”, in recent years the First World War is now returning to the centre of Russian official commemorations, through a conscious and selective utilisation of the past for political purposes. Vladimir Putin, speaking to the Russian Federal Assembly on 4 December 2012, noted that for much of the twentieth-century the First World War was “undeservingly forgotten and struck from our historical memory and history for political and ideological reasons”.⁶ There were a number of reasons for the lack of attention paid to the conflict in Russian historical scholarship and popular memory. The war itself had of course been spectacularly unsuccessful for the Russian Empire, as it appeared to reveal the backwardness of the state. In addition, the focal date for Russia during the last century was always 1917 – the year of revolutions. Furthermore, in the Soviet Union the First World War was employed purely to vindicate the state.⁷ Collective memory was formed through a highly selective use of the Russian past, which was employed to justify the need for a socialist revolution. In many ways the absence of any Russian commemoration of remembrance or armistice day for between 1.8 and 2 million Russian soldiers who were either killed in the conflict, or died of their wounds or infectious disease, merely served to reinforce the sense of separation between the new Soviet state and the rest of Europe.⁸

The subsuming and relegating of the conflict into the wider revolutionary crisis continued in the post-Second World War period after the all-consuming experience of the “Great Patriotic War” of 1941-1945, which took a central place in the acts of official commemoration in the Soviet state alongside the October Revolution, and remains central in the Russian collective memory of the twentieth century to this day.⁹ Meanwhile, the Kremlin’s attempt to promulgate a collective memory of the First World War has been one of the most noteworthy examples of the political use of history for the purpose of a national identity project in post-communist Eastern Europe. The selective use of the past to construct a politically useful narrative has a long history in Russia and the Soviet Union.¹⁰ For much of the last century the conflict was employed as a device of *geschichtspolitik* (politics of history), where a socially-constructed history of the

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4 There is almost no mention of Russia in Winter (1995).

5 Much of this material is also outward looking. See, for example, the *Echoes of the forgotten war* webpage.

6 See “Address to the Federal Assembly”. See also Tolz (2014).

7 See Petrone (2011).

8 This is, of course, understandable as Russia’s involvement in the First World War ceased on 3 March 1918 with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. In contrast to the First World War, it is estimated that up to five million Russians died during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. For the number of Russian casualties during the First World War, see Table 22.1 in Prost (2014, p. 587).

9 Victory Day is still celebrated in Russia and a number of the successor states, such as Ukraine. Unity Day replaced official commemoration of the Bolshevik revolution from 2005. See Merridale (2002, p. 100). See also Daucé, Désert, Laruelle, Le Huérou & Rousselet (2010).

10 See, for example, the work undertaken at the Potsdamer Zentrum für Zeitgeschichtliche Forschung on the “*Erinnerung und Geschichtspolitik in Russland*” (memory and politics of history in Russia); Fein (2000); and Langenohl (2000).

conflict was used “as both the subject and the object of politics.”¹¹ Thus, for ideological reasons, it served the purpose of re-inventing the Russian empire in the form of the Soviet Union.

Instead of continuity, the Bolsheviks had offered an alternative foundation mythology. Their leadership had a new historical tradition to memorialise, that of the revolution and the lives of Karl Marx, Freidrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin. They chose to ignore the First World War in the foundation myth of the Soviet state. This was despite the fact that, as Catherine Merridale has noted, the First World War:

shaped the way even the revolutionaries saw their world, colored their view of death, brought millions of their future subjects into contact with violence and fear for three long years before they came to power and brought it to an end. It claimed not tens, but millions of lives... Few stories illustrate the power of social memory more clearly. (Merridale, 2002, p. 96)

The construction of this myth was not straightforward as the “social memory” of the First World War in Russia, and Eastern Europe more generally, was formed at a time when the fighting was continuing – what is generally known as Russia’s “continuum of crisis” between 1914 and 1922, where the war, revolution and civil war combined into one wider conflict, the lines between which became blurred, especially for those who experienced them. Nikolai Tikhonov (1896-1979), one of the Soviet poets most associated with the First World War, fought in a hussar regiment and then in the Red Army during the Civil War. In his immensely popular collection of poetry *Orda* (The Horde), published in 1922, he often did not distinguish between the separate conflicts, but conflated these experiences of war, leaving the reader to locate the context of the poems themselves.¹²

For the states that succeeded from the tsarist Empire, 1918 served a purpose as the date of commemoration, associated as it was with the establishment or re-founding of nation-states, which emerged from the ruins of the four defeated multi-national empires. Such was not, however, the case for the border-states, above all Ukraine, which were re-incorporated by force into the Soviet state.¹³ The collective memory of the First World War and its immediate aftermath in Poland and Ukraine has served to reinforce differences with Russia, as well as between the two successor states.¹⁴ While Soviet Russia had little reason to celebrate the short-lived Brest Litovsk system, which collapsed in November 1918, it had allowed for the creation of the first nominally independent Ukrainian state, which had subordinated itself to the Central Powers on 9 February 1918, through the signing of a protectorate treaty. In this period, force rather than diplomacy determined the fate of the *Kresy Wschodnie* (eastern borderlands) between Poland and the new Soviet state. German and Austrian troops drove the Bolsheviks out of Ukrainian territory, and secured limited sovereignty for the fledgling Ukrainian People’s Republic, which in turn was soon replaced at the end of April by the Hetmanate

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11 While both terms are socially constructed, the “politics of memory” does not really fit the Russian case, where much of the public discourse on the subject is dominated by the Kremlin, rather than civil society. This ensures that public discourse remains to an extent limited. See Heisler (2008a, 2008b).

12 See, for example, Tikhonov’s 1921 poem “Ogon’, verevka, pulya i topor” (Fire, Rope, Bullet & Axe). In Tikhonov (1971, p. 82).

13 See Balkelis (2014) and Miller (2014).

14 See Copsey (2013, pp. 92-96).

of Pavlo Skoropadskyi when the Central Rada was deposed in a German-sponsored coup.¹⁵ After the demise of the *Ober Ost*, separate Ukrainian states collapsed in East Galicia after Polish forces defeated the West Ukrainian National Republic in early 1919, and in March 1921 the demise of Symon Petliura's Ukrainian People's Republic was confirmed at the Treaty of Riga. It was, therefore, the period 1917-1921, in both the Soviet Union and in the new east European nation-states, that became the focus of the development of a new contested historical mythology. In states such as the Second Polish Republic, national identity had to be forged in highly unfavourable circumstances, as the conflict that enabled the rebirth of the Polish state had witnessed Poles fighting for both the Entente and Central Powers. These distinct strands of historical memory lay dormant until the collapse of communism between 1989 and 1991 when they were re-awakened and served as the basis of the "memory wars" that took place in Eastern Europe during the Yeltsin and Putin periods.

Yet the death of so many Russians in the First World War, caused by a conflict that was seen to have been imposed unwillingly on Russia, was remembered, albeit in a limited way, by the Soviet state. The First World War served a dual purpose in the Soviet Union during the inter-war years. First, it served as a vehicle for Soviet propaganda, as an imperialist, class-based conflict that gave birth to the Soviet Union. The interpretation that the war had emerged as a natural offshoot from capitalism – something that Marx and Lenin had long predicted – suited the Soviet leadership well, and also served to mask the crucial role played by the German leadership in fomenting revolution in Russia. In addition to this, the war was employed to support the claim that the Soviet Union was under a constant imperialist, and then fascist, threat from the western capitalist powers. Illustrative of these themes were the large number of works printed by the State Publishing House on the war of 1914-1918 during the early inter-war period. For example, on 1 August 1924, the tenth anniversary of the German declaration of War on Russia, a list of works published on the Great Imperialist War by this publishing house numbered fifty-eight items, including twenty works of fiction and ten memoirs, with the emphasis overwhelmingly on the suffering of ordinary Russians and the capitalist nature of the conflict.¹⁶

The most high profile way that the war was officially remembered in the Soviet Union during the inter-war years was in official publications on the anniversary of the German declaration of war, and later, from the mid-1930s, the organisation of officially sanctioned demonstrations in memory of the "imperialist" war.¹⁷ The nature of these commemorations was strangely impersonal, and very much at odds with the nature of memorialisation in the rest of Europe. In official Soviet publications, the experience of individuals and even the details of battles were hardly mentioned, with the emphasis firmly on the orthodox Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the conflict. Popular discourse was dominated in the mid-1930s by familiar political tropes which blamed the traitorous European Social Democrats, especially in Germany, who had fallen into line and voted for war credits, leading directly to the "bloodshed, over four years, [of] workers and peasants" ("Vo imya chego pogibli milliony", 1934, p. 2). In this way the Soviet public were encouraged to remember the First World War as an increasingly abstract and distant event, which came to symbolise not only the specific conflict of 1914 to 1918, but was also employed to serve as a reminder of the perilous international situation. In 1938, the anniversary of the

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15 See Chernev (2014).

16 "Leningradskoye Otdeleniye Gosudarstvennogo Izdatel'stva" (1924, p. 6).

17 See "K Desyatiletiyu imperialistskoy voyny" (1924, p. 3).

German declaration of war was used to celebrate “International Anti-War Day”, with the Soviet Union the only country taking part. Rather than emphasise the culpability of the moderate left, the regime looked to mobilise the Soviet public by warning them of the dangerous international situation which was “threatening [them with the] danger of a new world war... now once again looming over mankind” as a result of “fascist aggressors [who] again incite world war”, where previously “imperialists [had] plunged the peoples of the world into the bloody abyss of war” (“Fashizm—eto voyna! Sotsializm—eto mir!”, 1938, p. 1).¹⁸ After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 the character of official representation of the previous conflict changed, and the “World Imperialist War” became, down to 1945 at least, “World War I” in the Soviet press, emphasising continuity between “Lenin and Stalin on German expansionism” in 1914 and the invasion of 1941.¹⁹

The anti-imperialist and anti-fascist narratives constructed in the Soviet Union in the public sphere during the inter-war period contrasted with the needs of the new nation states of Eastern Europe, which required a separate historical narrative to be fused with pre-existing national and sub-national histories within the direct context of contested post-imperial spaces and state-building. Where, in the Soviet state, the Great War was deemed “illegitimate”, in the new successor-states, the conflict legitimised their establishment or rebirth. Memory of the First World War, with particular omissions and selection, was widely cultivated, especially at state level, the effect of which was to push the smaller East European states more fully into the West European sphere, rather than that of the Soviet Union.

Concurrently, in order to perpetuate the myth that the First World War was imperialist rather than defensive in character, the new Soviet state engaged in the publication of pre-war official diplomatic documents from the archives of the tsarist Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to implicate the former regime with culpability for its outbreak. One of the first acts of the new Bolshevik regime had been to issue the Decree on Peace on 8 November 1917, one of the provisions of which was the publication of all secret treaties confirmed by the Russian government.²⁰ The release of these agreements was initially directed against the Provisional Government, but they also served a dual purpose, which was to show that Prince Lvov and Kerensky were merely continuing the same policies of the old imperial regime.²¹ Further documents were released to counter the tsarist claim that the conflict had been fought in defence of small nations threatened by German and Austro-Hungarian militarism. The result of the selective release of secret documents, and the renunciation of tsarist debts, served to ostracise the regime internationally, with the result that the Allied and Associated Powers decided that the Russian question was to be dealt with militarily, rather than diplomatically, in the peace conferences that followed the conclusion of the Great War (Alston, 2006).

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18 In 1939 the emphasis shifted to blame Great Britain for the outbreak of the “Bloody Imperialist War”, see “Dvadsat’ pyat’ let tomu nazad” (1939, p. 5).

19 See “Lenin i Stalin o germanskom imperializme” (1942, p. 4).

20 See Zalkind (1921).

21 Trotsky, the first People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs of the new Bolshevik government, left the task to his Deputy Commissar, Ivan A. Zalkind and N.A. Markin. Together they published seven pamphlets, totalling 130 documents, between November 1917 and February 1918, in addition to a number of revelations published in *Pravda* between 23 November and 6 December 1917. See *Sbornik sekretnykh dokumentov iz arkhiva byvshago Ministerstva inostrannykh del* (Petrograd: Izd. Narodnago komissařnata po inostrannym delam, 1917-1918).

The initial glut of publications temporarily ceased as a result of the demands of fighting and winning the Civil War.²² Publication of further material resumed after the appointment in 1921 of Mikhail N. Pokrovsky, a Russian Social Democrat and an internationally respected historian, as the head of the new *Tsentrarkhiv* (central archive). Under his leadership, the scattered imperial Foreign Ministry archives were centralised and this allowed for a more systematic release of documents from the archives, where, between 1922 and 1941, 106 issues of the journal *Krasnyi arkhiv* were published. The aim for Pokrovsky was “to expose the secrets of imperialist policy and diplomacy”, with particular emphasis on the Straits question and the Middle East, something which most clearly emphasised the expansionist aims of the tsarist regime and imperialist nature of the Great War (Pokrovsky, 1992, p. 1). Weight was also given to the financial situation in the period before, and during, the war to reinforce and further justify the Bolshevik repudiation of tsarist loans and war debts.

The publication of Russian as well as German diplomatic documents in the immediate post-war period provoked a “battle by means of the archival documents” (Pokrovsky quoted in Spring, 1996, p. 71), over the character of the Great War, and especially, over the question of war guilt.²³ The common goals of the Weimar and Soviet regimes had led to the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo on 22 April 1922, which prepared the way for economic, military and later cultural co-operation between the two revisionist states. Links were soon forged between German and Russian historians who had a common goal in revising the “Versailles” interpretation of German responsibility. One of the most prominent was Otto Hoetzsch, who arranged for the publication of the official Russian collection of Russian documents, *Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya v Epokhu Imperializma. Dokumenty iz arkhivov tsarskogo i vremennogo pravitel'stv*, at the Hartung press in Königsberg.²⁴ This collaboration resulted in the simultaneous publication of over 6,000 Russian documents in German translation between 1931 and 1938, of which only the third series, covering the period 1914 to 1917, was published in full before the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. The collection remained incomplete, as the focus of Soviet historians in the period after 1945 switched firmly to the inter-war years and the origins of the Second World War.²⁵

The change in emphasis of the publication of diplomatic documents reflected wider cultural priorities of the Soviet regime. The “Great Patriotic War” became a central element in the development of Russian identity, as well as a justification of the revolution itself. After 1956, in line with the rather inconsistent policy of de-Stalinisation, Marx, Engels and Lenin, the wider Bolshevik leadership during the period of the November Revolution and Civil War, as well as the leaders of the European revolutionary tradition, were all incorporated into a distinct narrative that further separated Russia from the wider European experience of grief, memorialisation and loss. This estrangement was reinforced in the post-1945 period by the lack of physical “sites of

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22 It was to claim the life of one of the editors, Nikolai Grigorevich Markin, in October 1918 in fighting on the Kama River.

23 In addition to the publication of Russian diplomatic documents, Karl Kautsky collected and published German documents in 1919 in four volumes. See Kautsky, Montgelas & Schücking (1919). See also Mombauer (2002, pp. 45-77).

24 This proved necessary, due to the shortage of paper in the Soviet Union, as the regime prioritised rapid industrialisation. The cooperation also included the medical treatment of Pokrovsky in Berlin for bladder cancer. See Spring (1996, pp. 75-76).

25 In the post-war years only very limited publication of tsarist era diplomatic documents took place, mainly concerning Russian-Bulgarian relations in the nineteenth century.

memory” to the First World War, as much of the fighting had taken place outside of the Soviet Union. On Russian soil, only one memorial survived the Stalinist policy of desecration of sites of memory, in stark contrast to the war against Nazi Germany.²⁶

Outside of the Soviet Union, the Russian contribution to the Entente war effort was effectively marginalised. The numerous and largely unassimilated Russian émigré communities in France and the United States made a point of keeping the memory of the war alive in order to maintain a link between themselves and their Russian (pre-revolutionary) identity.²⁷ A positive counter-narrative of the First World War emerged among the émigré communities, built around the cohesion of their officer and veteran organisations, that, according to Aaron J. Cohen (2003), enabled a “personal cathartic effect for war veterans in the emigration” (p. 74). In the histories produced by the émigrés there was an emphasis placed on the vital role played by Russia in the first months of the war, with particular attention placed on the Brusilov offensive of 1916, where the Russian forces continued to attack, long after any hope of victory had disappeared, at the behest of France.²⁸ The Russian émigré communities also cultivated sites of memory to preserve their contribution to the Entente war effort on the western front, where the 44,319 men of the Russian *Ekspeditsionnyi korpus vo Frantsii* (REF) fought from March 1917 until the end of fighting in 1918.²⁹ The memory of the contribution that these troops made to the Allied cause was complicated by the fact that when news of the February Revolution broke in April 1917, a number of the soldiers demanded to be sent back to Russia. After the disastrous failure of the Neville Offensive in early May of that year, the 1st and 3rd Brigades participated in the wave of mutinies which spread throughout the French army.³⁰ Despite the mixed performance of the REF, the Cimetière Militaire Russe de Saint-Hilaire le Grand, located at Mourmelon le Grand on the Marne, served as an important émigré site of memory during the Soviet period, the cemetery containing the remains of 915 Russian officers and men, around a quarter of the total who died on the Western Front.³¹

In the last years of the Soviet Union, and in the immediate post-Soviet period, there was a move towards normalising the Russian memory of the Great War through the incorporation of some émigré myths and interpretations of the conflict into Russian collective memory. Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of “glasnost” and relaxed censorship enabled public debate to take place over the Soviet interpretation of Russian history (Petrone, 2015, p. 129). Particular interest was paid to the role of the First World War and this continued after the collapse of the Soviet

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26 The monument located in what remained of the Moscow City Fraternal Cemetery was to the memory of Sergei Aleksandrovich Shlikhter, a student of Moscow University who died of his wounds on 20 June 1916. See Petrone (2011, pp. 1-5).

27 It is estimated that around 1.5 million Russians fled or were expelled from Russian territory in the years after 1917, including over half a million in Germany, some 200,000 in France and around 20,000 in the United States. See Hassell (1991, p. 3) and Raeff (1991).

28 See, for example, Danilov (1927), cited in Cohen (2003, p. 76).

29 See Cockfield (1999).

30 These mutinies culminated in the shelling of the REF camp near La Courtine on 5 September 1917, which resulted in the deaths of ten REF men and the wounding of a further forty-four. See Poitevin (1938). In January 2014 the “Association pour la mémoire de la mutinerie des soldats russes à La Courtine en 1917” was established. For more information see “Statuts de l’Association ‘La Courtine 1917’”.

31 The site was acquired by the French government and in 1937, on the initiative of the Association des officiers russes anciens combattants sur le front français, a chapel was built at the site to commemorate the memory of the remaining 3,000 Russian casualties of the REF. For more information see Husson (n.d.). Putin, on his state visit to France in November 2000, visited the Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois Émigré Russian Cemetery, the burial site of numerous White émigrés, rather than the Cimetière Militaire Russe de Saint-Hilaire le Grand.

regime. In 1998, in the Moscow suburb of Sokol, the Transfiguration of the Saviour Chapel (sometimes called the *Primirenniia narodov*, reconciling the nations) was dedicated on the site of the former All-Russian War Cemetery. The cemetery, which included the graves of around 17,500 war dead, had been systematically destroyed after 1932.³² The dedication of *Primirenniia narodov* was an important event in the return of the First World War to Russian memory, through a fusion of Orthodox Church symbols with old tsarist and White military traditions. On 1 August 2004, marking the ninetieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war, an additional, and larger, memorial complex was inaugurated at the site, with the opening ceremony attended by a number of Kremlin representatives, including Mikhail Fradkov, the Prime Minister, Sergei Ivanov, the Minister of Defence, and Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, Mayor of Moscow.³³ This site has become the principal focus of the religious memory of the First World War in Russia, and émigré, Cossack and White groups, such as the “*Dobrovol’cheskiy korpus*” (Volunteer Corps), have used the anniversary of Armistice Day, 11 November, to hold a march through central Moscow to the chapel to commemorate the memory of those who died in the Great War, as well as those who fell in the area of the cemetery in November 1917 fighting against the Bolsheviks.³⁴

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “Great Patriotic War” has continued to be an important factor in the development of post-Soviet identity under both the Yeltzin and Putin regimes, as well as in the former Soviet republics outside of Russia.³⁵ The re-integration of the history of the First World War has been more uneven, but has witnessed the coming together of a number of divergent narrative threads, which mirror political and economic developments in Russia. In the Yeltzin era the theme of “the new Russia” dominated official rhetoric, and sought to contrast contemporary developments with those of the Soviet era. In the decade after 1991, attempts were made to look at the First World War as part of a wider conflict, with a particular weight given by Russian historians to an inclusion of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1920 in their accounts, seeking to counter what were seen to be dominant Polish narratives about the Katyn massacres.³⁶ This emphasis was for the purpose of attempts to “normalise” the excesses of Stalinism, through a counter-examination of the plight of Soviet prisoners-of-war, many of whom died in Polish captivity.³⁷ By contrasting the victorious popular history firmly established around the memory of the “Great Patriotic War”, this project sought to construct a new historical memory of the First World War, which emphasised Russia’s victimhood, seeking to balance out the wider twentieth-century narrative of Russia under Stalin as perpetrator of crimes (Tolz, 2014, pp. 261-275). Memorialisation of these events tended to be complicated by a reluctance of the state under Yeltzin to fully embrace the memory of the First World War, and the fact that the sites of memory linked to the Polish-Soviet War were not located on Russian territory.

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32 The marginal importance of the Great War during the Yeltzin period meant that the site only narrowly avoided being turned into a shopping centre in 1997.

33 For more information visit “Zapozdaloye pokayaniye”.

34 For more information visit “Panikhida po pogibshim uchastnikam Pervoy mirovoy proydet v Moskve” (2014).

35 Victory Day is still celebrated in Ukraine on the anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. See Hösler (2009).

36 It was seen to be useful to characterise right-wing interpretations as mainstream views on the Katyn massacres. See Nowak (2013).

37 This narrative was continued with the inauguration, in 2005, of the “Day of National Unity”, which commemorated the 1612 liberation of Moscow from Polish-Lithuanian rule, and also falls on the feast day of the Russian Orthodox icon of Our Lady of Kazan. The day replaced both the Soviet celebration of the October Revolution as well as the Day of Accord and Conciliation.

This trope has subsequently been replaced with a more recent narrative which relegates the Soviet period to within what Putin has called the “integrity of the thousand-year long history of our country”, emphasising continuity in the Russian past.³⁸ This trend has led to the development of a new methodology in the teaching of history by the Council of the Russian History Society, directly incorporating these politically-led themes into Russian schools. Central to this transformation is the place of the First World War, which looks to place “Russia... [at] the epicenter of the ‘great upheaval’ [of] 1914-1921”.³⁹ With the approach of the centenary of the First World War, the narrative still seems unable to emerge from the shadow of the wider political concerns of the state. In the meantime, historians in Russia and in the West are beginning to devote more attention to the study of the conflict on the Eastern front with, for example, the establishment of a major international research project, “Russia’s Great War”.⁴⁰ This project has been initiated with the aim of putting Russia’s experience into international context and investigating her “continuum of crisis” as a special period of Russian history, rescuing the war from being an “historical afterthought”.⁴¹ The interest has not only been academic, with many leading figures in and around the Russian establishment making political capital out of returning the war to what they see as its rightful place in the national historical narrative as well as a wider collective memory, claiming that it “occupies a special place in Russian and world history” (SRio, *Kontseptsiya novogo uchebno-metodicheskogo kompleksa*, p. 46).⁴² Under Putin, the return of Russia as a great power has led to an emphasis on imperial grandeur, beyond that of the “Soviet Empire”, and has included the development of a religious character by including the Orthodox Church in the memorial process.

The return of stories of individual heroism by ordinary Russians in the conflict has been more successfully incorporated into the new Russian narrative of the Great War.⁴³ In recent years, these threads have been enthusiastically picked up again by the regime, where President Vladimir Putin used them prominently in the centennial commemorations of the German declaration of war on Russia to unveil a monument to the “heroes” of the First World War at *park Pobedy* (Victory Park), the central site of Russian military memory located above Moscow at *Poklonnaya Gora*. The fact that the First World War has been integrated into a site dedicated to the glorious, and victorious, Russian past is noteworthy as the space makes reference to the Great Patriotic War as well as the 1812 campaign against Napoleon. The process of choosing the design of the memorial, which despite being supported in the main by the government was also paid for by public subscriptions, was opened up to the public in a popular vote in the summer of 2013.⁴⁴ The winning design, by Andrei Koval’chuk, the People’s Artist of the Russian Federation, aimed to reinforce the view that the conflict should take its place within the long

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38 Full Vladimir Putin’s intervention can be accessed at “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly” (2014).

39 See “Soveta Rossiyskogo istoricheskogo obshchestva” (2013, p. 46).

40 For a recent western account that seeks to view the Great War as part of a wider crisis, see Holquist (2002).

41 For more information see “Russia’s Great War & Revolution”. In Russia, the Russian Historical and Russian Military History societies were reconstituted in 2012.

42 See also “Rabota nad Kontseptsiyey novogo uchebno-metodicheskogo kompleksa po otechestvennoy istorii zavershena” (2013).

43 See, for example, the “Family archives” page on the official website of the *Monument to the Heroes of World War I*.

44 It has been suggested that the popular vote was subject to rigging, with the “winning” design receiving only the third highest number of votes in the public poll, and the two most popular not being included in the second round of voting, in which the winner also received fewer votes than two other designs. For more information visit “Monument to the Heroes of World War I”. See Petrone (2015, p. 142).

continuity of Russian national history, symbolised by a large Russian flag with military figures in a battle scene and soldiers departing for the front, being blessed by an Orthodox priest. The similarity between this symbolism and the predominant narratives of early émigré interpretation of the war is marked.⁴⁵

The melding of the politically useful aspects of the émigré interpretation with some aspects of the Soviet – namely the use of 1 August as the focal point of Russian commemoration of the First World War – allows for a cohesive narrative of Russian victimhood at the hands of German aggression. The official centenary celebrations in Russia have been characterised by a special emphasis on this date, which in December 2012 was designated “Day of Memory of the Russian Soldiers who Died in WWI”, one of Russia’s “Days of Military Glory”, and first marked in 2013.⁴⁶ This was but one aspect of the official move to mark the centennial commemoration of the war. On 1 August 2014, at the unveiling of the monument at *Poklonnaya Gora*, President Putin spoke of “restoring the historical truth about the First World War... we are re-establishing today the unbroken continuity of our history [through] incorporating the First World War’s ‘sacred memory’” and also a desire to “restore the historical truth... that victory was stolen from the country” (“Unveiling of a monument to world war I heroes”, 2014). In reincorporating the memory of the First World War, the Russian President continued his government’s policy of reinterpreting Russian history in an attempt to bolster support for his regime, while distancing Russia from its Soviet past, suggesting that Russia only suffered defeat in the Great War due to being stabbed-in-the-back by the Bolsheviks, who had “betray[ed] the national interests” (“Unveiling of a monument to World War I heroes”, 2014). In July 2013, speaking at the Seliger Forum youth camp, Putin linked the downfall of the tsarist regime directly to the actions of the Bolsheviks, who

wanted the defeat of [their] own country in the First World War... I must say that they made a [vital] contribution to the defeat of Russia. And it was an amazing situation in which Germany itself surrendered to the Entente countries, and Russia lost [to] the losing country, Germany, and with grave consequences – the loss of large areas. (“Vstrecha s uchastnikami foruma ‘Seliger-2012’”, 2012)

Putin further emphasised the Pan Slavist nature of the conflict through mention of the defence of the “brotherly Slavic people” of Serbia, and in this way the commemoration of the Great War has been employed as another element in the regime’s attempt to forge a more assertive foreign policy in eastern Europe, looking to link-up with émigré groups and members of the Russian diaspora, especially in the Baltic States and Ukraine (“Vstrecha s uchastnikami foruma ‘Seliger-2012’”, 2012). The Orthodox Church has enthusiastically fallen in behind the Kremlin line. Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev, Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow, spoke at a ceremony at Transfiguration of the Saviour Chapel on 1 August 2014, to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the war, where he outlined his interpretation of events. Rather than being an “imperialist” war,

[i]t was a struggle for our homeland, for its independence, its sovereignty. It was a struggle for the salvation of the brotherly Serbian people – for the preservation of Orthodoxy. And

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45 See, for example, the memoirs of a Baron Taube, a former senior official at Choristers’ Bridge. Taube (1928). An attempt is also being made to rehabilitate White generals to a similar status to that which General Alexii Brusilov almost alone enjoyed during the Soviet period. See, for example, “Geroi Pervoy mirovoy voyny”.

46 For more information see “Vneseny izmeneniya v zakon o dnyakh voinskoy slavy i pamyatnykh datakh” (2012).

it is not the fault of those who gave their lives that Russia did not achieve victory... During the war, there was a revolution, and then a betrayal of power, almost the whole of Ukraine, a significant part of Russia, [was] given to the enemy, who in turn suffered a complete defeat. (“Svyateyskiy Patriarkh Kirill sovershil litiyu o upokoyenii geroyev Pervoy mirovoy voyny”, 2014)

This interpretation, emphasising as it does the territories of the tsarist empire that were lost in the wake of the First World War, makes oblique reference to the fact that no official Russian representatives were allowed to argue the case of Russian territorial expansion at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, ensuring that she lost out on what are seen to be legitimate territorial gains, such as the Austro-Hungarian province of East Galicia. During the early stages of the war, the tsarist regime did little to hide its irredentist war aims; in August 1914, General Aleksei Brusilov, then in command of the Russian Eighth Army, stated that “we are entering Galicia, which, despite its being a constituent part of Austria-Hungary, is a Russian land from time immemorial, populated, after all, by the same Russian people” (Lemke, 2003, p. 199).⁴⁷ Beyond her borders, in the Putin era Russia has employed “soft power” through the use of political discourse in order to influence the internal politics of those states which have a significant Russian ethnic minority.

In contrast to other states that employ soft power, Russia’s “is strongly associated with discourses of a shared past and with the common values, culture and history that arise from it” (Bogomolov & Lytvynenko, 2012, p. 3). Since late 2012 the regime has employed the history of the First World War in order to link back to a common “Russian past”. Members of the Russian diaspora have been active in this process. On 24 August 2014, Vladimir Medinsky, Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation since May 2012 and Chairman of the Russian Military Historical Society, unveiled a monument in Kaliningrad paid for by private subscriptions.⁴⁸ The monument looks to emphasise the common nature of the struggle against Germany, by representing the three social classes of the imperial Russian army: noble officers, peasants and the other classes (*raznočīnec*). Kaliningrad is the only part of the Russian Federation that contains a significant number of burial sites from the First World War. K.A. Pahalyuk estimated in 2011 that there were some sixty-six monuments and seventy mass graves in the Kaliningrad region that had survived the destruction and dislocation of the Second World War and post-war period.⁴⁹ Further memorials are being erected: GS Group, a private holding company with links to the Putin regime, has funded and constructed a First World War memorial park in Gusev (previously Gumbinnen) outside Kaliningrad, the site of the Russian victory over the Germans at the Battle of Gumbinnen on 20 August 1914.⁵⁰ In addition, a further seven memorials dedicated to the “heroes of World War I” are under construction in Russia as well as the planned opening

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47 See also, for example, the “Proclamation to the Poles”, issued by Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the Russian commander-in-chief, on 14 August 1914, in Horak (1964, pp. 212-213).

48 For more information see “Kaliningrad begins World War I Centennial Commemoration”, 2014).

49 Down to 1939 it was estimated that 32,540 Russian soldiers were buried on the territory of East Prussia in some 2,200 individual and mass burial sites, see Pakhalyuk (2011).

50 See “A monument to victims of World War I by Mikhail Shemyakin unveiled in the Kaliningrad region” (2014). In addition to this monument, the Russian Society of Military History organised a re-creation of the Battle of Gumbinnen.

of a museum of the First World War at the Martial Chambre in Tsarskoe Selo.⁵¹ The Russian Federal programme for the centennial commemoration includes the construction of Orthodox memorial sites outside of the Russian Federation, in Bolzano in northern Italy, and in Belgrade, as well as in Ukraine and Byelorussia. Attempts to establish memorial sites in Ukraine have stalled in light of recent political developments.⁵²

The narrative of the Great War is therefore of particular use to the Kremlin in the current political climate, and it has been employed to emphasise a common, shared, imperial Russian past. At the present time in Russia, there is no generally accepted collective memory of the First World War and open discussion of the subject is stunted by the dominance of official state media.⁵³ What has happened in Russia today is that there has been a replacement of one officially-sanctioned interpretation of the First World War with another. Whilst the similarities between the old émigré interpretation and that currently favoured by the Kremlin may well be striking, the latter serves a fundamentally different purpose. Russian émigré interpretations of the war were employed to “normalise” the Russian experience during the First World War, and commemorations and sites of memory were employed to ensure that Russia would keep her place within the Entente (if not the European) experience. Today, official Russian interpretations are having the opposite effect, reinforcing the distinct and separate nature of the Russian experience by emphasising the national character of her involvement, at a time when scholarship of the war is increasingly looking to place the conflict in transnational and international perspective. The process of looking beyond what Putin characterised as the “simple truth” that Russian history did not begin in either 1917 or 1991, but “rather, that we have a common, continuous history spanning over one thousand years”, and the reincorporation of the First World War into this narrative is, at least at the moment, a vital link back to the Russian imperial past (“Address to the Federal Assembly”, 2012). The dual aim of this policy is undoubtedly an attempt to foster patriotism within Russia, while maintaining Russia’s status as a European power. This reinterpretation of the conflict is unlikely to remain unchallenged, as the negative perception of the First World War from the Soviet era is still pervasive in Russia today. It is likely that, in the current international climate, further attempts will be made by the regime to replace old “imperialist” narratives of the conflict with those that emphasise the defensive and wider geopolitical interests of the old tsarist regime. Whether the public and political interest sparked by the centennial will continue it is difficult to say, but it is undoubtedly the case that the First World War is no longer “forgotten” in Russian collective memory, and it is the Russian state that is taking the lead in this process.

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51 The first memorial was dedicated in Lipetsk on 5 August 2014. The other memorials are located in Tula, Smolensk, Noginsk, Omsk, Stavropol and Saransk.

52 See Lisitsyn (2014).

53 See Fein (2009).

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