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In Search of a Lost War: World War I in the Russian Memory and Historic Policies

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Observatoire

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Introduction

The First World War is often called the “forgotten war” in Russia. In fact, this conflict was long marginalised in the collective memory and the Russian national history, even though it brought about the death of over 1,800,000 Russian soldiers, causing major social and political upheavals which called to an end the old regime. The causes of such an oversight are well known: World War I was delegitimised in the Bolshevik discourse as an “imperialist war” initiated by a hated regime, and little differentiated in the collective memory from the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War, all three conflicts being merged into a decade-long series of violent hardships. While the experience of the Revolution and Civil War was used to develop a real historical mythology, with its symbols and heroes, the legacies of the First World War were quickly put to the side¹. Three decades later, the Second World War, known as the Great Patriotic War, took a central place in the collective memory and in official commemorative devices of which it remains the backbone today more than ever.

At the outset, it must be stressed that such an omission was neither total nor systematic. It concerned mainly public memorial culture. The literature on the First World War written by Soviet and Russian historians is respectable, although suffering from a lack of major synthesis works as well as methodological weaknesses and an uneven coverage of topics. Since the 1990s, the subject has attracted renewed interest in the more general context of historiographical renewal, reassessment of the imperial history and strong interest in the “white pages” of national history. This historiography has recently been analyzed in detail by French scholar Alexander Sumpf² and there are regular updates in Russian, therefore in this paper we will focus on the memorial culture and the “history policies” related to the First World War.

Indeed, once forgotten, this war nowadays seems to be returning to the front stage of Russian commemorations. The renewal of interest does not only (or so much) concern the scientific community, but is especially noticeable in the political sphere. For the past few years, top Russian leaders such as President Vladimir Putin, Sergey Naryshkin Chairman of the State Duma, Vladimir Medinsky Minister of Culture and Sergey Ivanov Chief of Presidential

¹ For more details on the memory of WWI in the USSR, especially during the 1920s-1930s, see K. Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory*, Indiana University Press, 2011.

² A. Sumpf, « L'historiographie russe (et soviétique) de la Grande Guerre », *Histoire@Politique*. *Politique, culture, société*, n° 22, January-April 2014 [www.histoire-politique.fr].

Administration, have been calling to return this war to its rightful place in the national history and collective memory. These statements have been followed by government initiatives: the designation of August 1 as "Day of memory of the Russian soldiers who died in WWI"; creation of a committee led by S. Naryshkin in charge of organising the centennial commemoration of the war; decision to build more monuments in honour of the heroes of this war and to create the first Russian museum dedicated to its history at Tsarskoe Selo near Saint Petersburg. The commemoration of the First World War is now one of the priorities of most public cultural institutions, from the Ministry of Culture to the Russian Historical Society (RIO) and the Society of Russian Military History (RVIO). The federal level activities are completed by local initiatives from regional authorities, private foundations, academic institutions and associations.

Of course, this movement is mainly due to the upcoming centennial. The People who are passionate about the history of WWI are aware of this fact, and fear that there will be a rapid fading of interest following the year 2014. Attempts to engrave the First World War in the Russian collective memory must be understood in the context of the government's will to enforce a "history policy"³. As rarely before, history is now both an object and a tool of political intervention. As an object, history is used to formulate and impose, through commemorations, film production or the "one textbook" for high school curriculum currently in writing, a normative vision of national history, which could potentially put to the wayside conflicting visions with the help of a new memory law⁴. A tool, because homogenisation and monopolisation of the historical narrative has didactic, propagandist and political aims. History must educate to incite patriotism, bind the nation, structure national identity or even be the foundation of a State ideology. It is also widely used as a political or propagandist argument to legitimise action, mobilise support or discredit opponents, as shown by the abundant use of the "fascist" and "banderovets" labels regarding the crisis in Ukraine.

³ Concerning the notion of « history policy » and the history of this phenomenon in Eastern Europe, see M. Lipman et A. Miller, *Istoricheskaya politika v XXI veke* [The History Policy in the 21th century], Moscow: NLO, 2012 ; A . Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit – Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, C. H. Beck Publishers, Munich 2006 (Russian translation: A. Assmann, *Dlinnaya ten proshlogo. Memorialnaya kultura i istoricheskaya politika*, Moscow: NLO, 2014).

⁴ N. Kopusov, *Pamyat v zakone*, *Russkiy zhurnal* [online: <http://www.russ.ru/Mirovaya-povestka/Pamyat-v-zakone>].



Why Commemorate the 1914-1918 War? The Uses of History in Russia

The new «national novel» which is being written in Russia through the leaders' statements, press campaigns and educational or commemorative policies, is above all an unbroken narrative. It restores "links between historical epochs" and corresponds to a "united and uninterrupted millenary history that gives us inner strength and teaches us the general direction of the nation's development"⁵. How can the First World War be integrated into it? Of course, it is a crucial episode between the Old Regime and the Soviet period, but also a tricky one since it could reveal tensions between these two major historical, memorial and ideological blocs. Such integration requires a lot of work in order to review and adjust the interpretative and commemorative patterns. This aim might appear as "squaring the circle".

It is indeed impossible to maintain the traditional Soviet approach, in the context of widespread rehabilitation of the Romanov monarchy and in particular of the last czar, Nicholas II. According to that approach, the war was both a proof of the czarist regime's total disability and a sort of necessary evil (to facilitate the Revolution). It justified the disastrous end of the war in March 1918 (because of huge territorial losses) by the supreme need to save the young Soviet Republic. The radically opposite position, which sees the Bolshevik regime as the absolute evil, makes it easier to interpret the First World War and explain the failure of Czarism (through the theory of treason, for example). Nevertheless, such a vision is difficult to combine with the positive assessment of the Soviet experience, which dominates in the official discourse and seems to be shared by the population.

One solution to this memory challenge recently came from President Vladimir Putin himself. In June 2012, answering to a senator's questions, he gave his interpretation of the First World War. Sweeping the term "imperialist" and emphasizing the defense of geopolitical interests by the countries that participated in the 1914-1918 war, the Russian president compared the conflict with the Great Patriotic War. He explained the "forgetting" of the first by a political will on the part of the Bolsheviks, who wanted to erase the memory of the "treason" they had made by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. However, he added that the Soviet leaders "made up for their fault before the country" during the Second World War.

⁵ Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, 12 December 2012.



a) History of Wars in the Service of Patriotism

This interpretation, widely reported by the media and stakeholders of memorialisation, is a good example of the process used to remove tensions and (re)melt imperial and Soviet periods in an “uninterrupted millenary” history, a *magistra vitae* history capable to “teach the meaning of the nation’s development”. This approach is characterised by a high degree of syncretism and pragmatism, which lead to integrate everything that can be used to glorify Great Russia, a powerful state that transcends historical periods, ideologies and political regimes. The historical narrative is thus the pivot of patriotism, understood as absolute love for the Fatherland and unconditional loyalty to the government. Patriotism has become a key concept of the Russian public life, covering both a dominant moral and a form of relationship between the citizen and the state⁶. National and especially military history play a key role in the learning of patriotism, as do (para-)military institutions involved in patriotic education programs. Despite a clear preference for victorious wars with issues perceived as indisputable, such as the Second World War or 1812, other battles are included, from the moment they give examples of heroism, loyalty to the homeland and to the “fighting duty” [*voinskij dolg*]. The memory of the First World War therefore has its place beside the Second, as well as less known conflicts such as the campaign against Finland (1939-1940) or the war in Afghanistan.

Whereas the history of battles serves as a lesson by giving examples of patriotism through heroic acts, the veneration of perished heroes gives the opportunity to practice patriotism in time of peace and to fulfil one’s civic and patriotic duties through commemorations. In the case of the First World War, the “duty to remember” takes on a special moral meaning, as it is to restore a «historical injustice» by overcoming oblivion. As proclaimed by the Society of Russian Military History (RVIO) on its website⁷:

The memory of the glorious and tragic days in the history of the Fatherland is one of the pillars of the revival of Russia [...] The participation of Russia in the First World War is one of the glorious pages of military history, a page that has not been sufficiently studied yet, just as the role of our country in this war has not been measured at its fair value. Nowadays, this war is for many Russians an unknown war, a war without a name. However, it saw the emergence of

⁶ See Françoise Daucé, *Les usages pratiques du patriotisme en Russie [The Practical Use of Patriotism in Russia]*, Question de recherche, n°32, CERI – Sciences Po, June 2010.

⁷ <http://histrf.ru/ru/rvio/rvio/materiali-syezda/item-47>.



heroes who laid down their lives for "Faith, Tsar and Fatherland". To restore their memory is our duty as descendants.

b) Re-reading the Past through the Present

In addition to this patriotic and moral lesson stands a political lesson. It consists in reinterpreting history through international and domestic events. In both cases, the "presentist" reinterpretations of the First World War are multiple and often ambiguous, with a strong potential for reversing the meaning of events. This reversal enables to move from rhetoric of reconciliation (within society or with Europe, for example) to "historical lessons" that sometimes sound like veiled threats.

Closely linked to the history of the Revolution, the First World War allows to address many themes that are linked to the Russian political agenda. For example, it serves to discuss the relationship between the leader, the elite and the people; to warn against divisions within society and to recall the existence of forces which are ready to exploit them; to talk about chaos and disaster, but also about a Russia rising from the ashes (and restoring its borders). These references, rather discreetly slid in leaders' statements, are expressed quite explicitly and directly, for example, in these instructions relating to the patriotic education of youth⁸:

"World War I, taken in its historical context, teaches us that a great country can disappear from the world map for lack of understanding between the government and society. With its significant resources, the great Russian Empire could have been victorious in the First World War, but it was undermined by domestic political factors, the main one being divisions among elites. The refusal to compromise led to the February revolution, which disturbed the traditional state governance mechanisms of governance. All this caused confusion in the army and ultimately led to the October Revolution and the Civil War. Nowadays, we can observe some disturbing trends which recall the events that took place before the war. Thus we can see that certain social and financial circles are manipulating public opinion and discrediting Russian values, as well as the present and future [of Russia], stimulating a schism in society. The example of the First World War and of the following years teaches us a history lesson of extreme importance, which should not go unnoticed."

⁸ "Methodological Guidelines for the Implementation of the All-Russian Youth Project « The Forgotten Great War »", presented by federal agencies RosMolodezh et Rospatriotcentr [online on the project's website: <http://1914-18.ru/>].



The fact of commemorating the First World War and of highlighting the role played by Russia in the course of the conflict and the final victory of the Entente inevitably leads to the question of the relations that bind Russia to Europe, to consider its place in the European historical, memorial and political space-time. Again, proofreading and updates are multiple, sometimes contradictory.

Often, the memory of that conflict leads to reaffirm the links between Russia and Europe, to include Russian history in the world's history. Russian commemoration players cite other countries as examples to be followed in order to restore the historical injustice done to the memory of the war and of its dead in Russia. Preparations for the centenary provide a convenient way to develop contacts with European countries around the staging of a common past. The Russian leaders involved in the commemoration process have repeatedly stressed the importance of including their initiatives in international programs. Many of them have participated in meetings with foreign counterparts, such as Vladimir Medinski who met with French Minister of Culture Aurélie Filippetti or in October 2013 to discuss the ceremonies of the Normandy landings' 70th anniversary and of the Great War's centenary. In April 2014, an international roundtable "World War I: Culture and Memory" was held in Paris on Moscow's initiative with the participation of Russian members of parliament. The commemoration of the Great War is also mentioned (and sometimes used) as a field to develop cooperation with Eastern European countries that shared the same fate during the conflict.

Of course, this "memorial diplomacy" is largely dependent on the evolution of the relationship between Russia and its European partners, as is the discourse on the First World War in the context of Russian domestic politics. The tendency to use the memory of that conflict to highlight the links between Russia and Europe and recall past cooperation and alliances, is not the only one. It can easily be rejected in favour of another logic, which presents Russia both as a key player in European politics and as abandoned by its allies, who monopolised the victory but were not able to guarantee peace on the long term. In a moderate version of this rereading, the history of the First World War serves to remind that there can be no lasting peace in Europe without Russian participation in the establishment of its foundations. It is what Putin said before the Valdai Club participants in September 2013:

I want to remind you that the Congress of Vienna of 1815 and the agreements made at Yalta in 1945, taken with Russia's very active participation, secured a



*lasting peace. Russia's strength, the strength of a winning nation at those critical junctures, manifested itself as generosity and justice. And let us remember [the Treaty of] Versailles, concluded without Russia's participation. Many experts, and I absolutely agree with them, believe that Versailles laid the foundation for the Second World War because the Treaty of Versailles was unfair to the German people: it imposed restrictions with which they could not cope [...]*⁹.

A few months later, in the context of the Ukrainian crisis, the Russian Society of Military History, chaired by Minister of Culture V. Medinski, followed this logic to the end, referring to 1914-1918 not only to designate Russia's former allies as responsible for the outbreak of WWII, but to warn against a new wave of European "fascism":

*Once again, fascism if coming from Europe! ... Fascism had germinated in the trenches of the First World War, under the gas attacks, in the cold and hungry houses of Germany, while France and England were living the good life after having crushed the enemy without worrying too much about the consequences. That is when fascism was born, a cold and bloody fascism that transforms souls and hearts to ashes...*¹⁰

⁹ Transcript of the final meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, September 19, 2013 [online: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6007>].

¹⁰ Homepage of the website of the Russian Society of Military History, as of May 26, 2014 [<http://histrf.ru/ru/rvio>].



Homepage of the Russian Society of Military History's website (screenshot, May 26, 2014).

Commemorate ... but where, what, who and how?

Noting attempts to include the history of the First World War in the national historical narrative, we tried to understand the reasons and the possible uses of such claims. We will now see how a new commemorative tradition is invented within the framework of this history policy: that of the "Great Forgotten War".

The analysis of the «why» of these memorialisation attempts discloses a certain number of difficulties. The narrative invention is made on a minefield, both overloaded and empty. It is overloaded with meanings potentially contradictory or difficult to enrol in commemorative schemes, especially as this memorial site is very (and perhaps too) close to another war: the "Great Patriotic War", which is emotionally charged and subject to a large public worship. At the same time, this field is empty, due to missing items. Everything is to be found or invented, because the point is to create a memory almost from scratch, with its symbols, objects, places and heroes, in the absence of living witnesses and of a collective memory. There is a lack of public memorials such as museums or monuments, just as there are few memories and stored objects kept by families. During the Soviet era, veterans of the First World War most of the time hid their decorations and did not speak of their war experience.

We therefore propose to develop here a quick overview of what is being done today to include the First World War in the Russian memory, particularly in the context of the preparation of its centenary. By analysing these initiatives, we will see how their particular authors seek to fill gaps and to address other memorial challenges. From museums and monuments to movies and encyclopaedias on the First World War, everything is still under construction or brand new, deliveries being scheduled mostly for August 2014. Given the incomplete nature of the information and the projects' unfinished stage, what follows is not intended to be exhaustive, and my interpretations are only a preliminary hypothesis.

a) Absent places of memory in amputated territories

The marginal and erased character of the WWI memory in Russia is particularly obvious: there are no public memorials such as monuments, cemeteries, and museums. Due to a lack of interest and hostility from Soviet authorities, such places never existed (especially museums) or have been abandoned or destroyed. It is why the "duty to remember" towards the dead of the Great War is emphasised, and the construction of monuments a priority.



However, this effort meets a is confronted by a particular difficulty: the almost total absence of battlefields on the territory of the Russian Federation. Indeed, following the fall of the Tsarist and later Soviet Empire-State and the loss of "national peripheries" that followed, the regions (Baltic, Ukrainian and Belarusian) that had been war theatres on the eastern front are no longer a part of contemporary Russia. Beyond the phantom pain that it may awaken, referring to the recent memory of the Soviet Union's traumatic collapse, this situation raises a real question: how can a memory be materialised and anchored in a territory in which no fighting took place (think of all the war cemeteries still maintained on Eastern France's battlefields). Several solutions are tested.

The first solution is to use the exception of the Kaliningrad (Königsberg) region, where important battles between the Russians and the Germans took place in 1914, regardless of whether at the time and until 1945, this territory was part of former East Prussia. Nowadays, this region with tens or even hundreds of WWI burial sites is at the heart of the conflict's centennial commemoration. Several inaugurations are planned in 2014, among which a large monument (author: Salamat Shcherbakov) and a federal museum in Kaliningrad (Königsberg), as well as a historical military memorial in Gusev (Gumbinnen), where one of the first major battles of this front took place in August 1914, moreover a victory for Russia. Several monuments and commemoratives plaques will be installed in important burial sites, including near destroyed military cemeteries. However, these measures are insufficient given the quantity and the catastrophic state of most burial sites. Their number is still not known with precision, and the peculiarities of national legislation mean that even those who are identified often do not have the status of cemetery or monument¹¹.

Apart from the Kaliningrad region, most of the Russian WWI soldiers' graves are outside the national territory, in the regions of the Eastern Front battles or even further west in Europe (it is then Russian soldiers of the expeditionary forces or war prisoners). It is why the federal programme for the centennial commemoration includes, for example, the construction of an Orthodox chapel in the war prisoners' cemetery of Bolzano (Northern Italy), the layout of a Russian necropolis in Belgrade, as well as the search for graves and works on burial sites situated in Ukraine. It goes without saying that this part of the

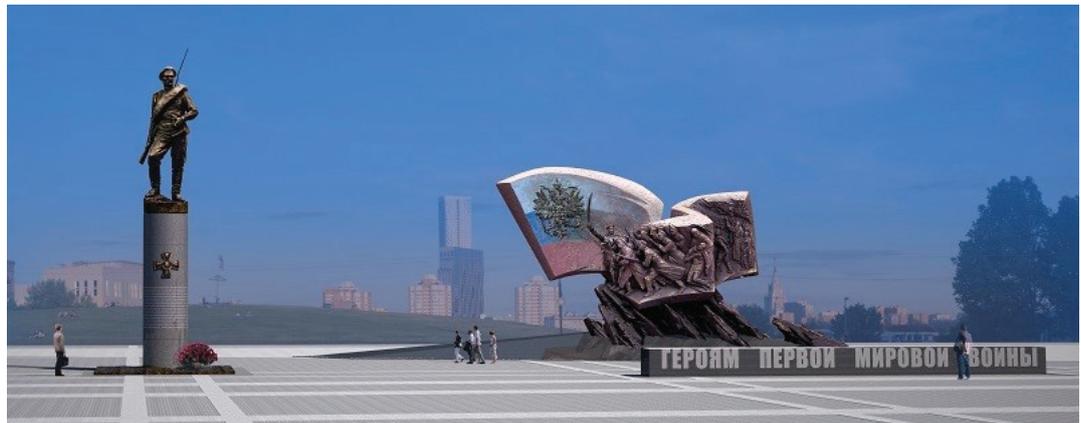
¹¹ In 1939, there were about 2,200 burial sites (among which 500 individual graves) in East Prussia. Only 1,200 remained in 1945. In 2011, an expert counted 66 monuments and 70 collective burial sites (K. Pakhalyuk. «Zakhoroneniya i pamyatniki Pervoy mirovoy voyny na territorii Kaliningradskoy oblasti», [Burial sites and monuments of the First World War in the Kaliningrad region], *Voyennaya arkhologiya*, 2011, n°6, pp. 52-59 [online: <http://www.august-1914.ru/pahalyk.html>].

commemorative program is particularly dependent on the news: recently, in the words of *Le Monde* (April 6, 2014), "a collision between this past and the news" led to cancel Putin's visit to Courcy (Marne), where the Russian president was to inaugurate a monument in honour of his compatriots who died in the Nivelle offensive in 1917.

Finally, it should be noted that the memory of the dead is nevertheless present on Russian soil, especially in the cities behind the frontline where military cemeteries were built to accommodate the bodies of the soldiers who died from injuries in hospitals. Among the former, the "Brotherly Cemetery of Moscow" in the Sokol district was created during the war, in 1914, then rebuilt in the 1990s. During the Soviet era, its monuments and church were destroyed to transform the cemetery into a park, and several buildings were built on its territory. During the perestroika-era, enthusiasts began to rebuild the memorials, and the city ended up creating a memorial, which was inaugurated on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the beginning of the war. It became the main WWI memory site in Moscow.

But today another site seeks to become the central forum for WWI commemoration. It is the centenary's flagship project: the construction of a large monument to the heroes of the conflict. From the beginning, everything was done to give it a highly symbolic and popular character. Launched by the Society of Russian Military History at the initiative of descendants of veterans, supported by the government and the president himself, this project is subject to fundraising, and the competition has resulted in a "popular vote" via internet¹² and an exhibition of the top 15 projects at the 1812 War and Great Patriotic War Museums. The place chosen for its construction speaks for itself: it is the Victory Park memorial (known as Poklonnaya Gora) in Western Moscow, a memorial site dedicated to the Second World War and also related to the memory of the war of 1812. In this way, WWI is integrated into the story of the great "patriotic" wars.

¹² Contest process and presentation of the project <http://1914.histrf.ru/monument/voting/>. The results of this vote, suspected of fraud, did not have any effect on the winner's choice by an expert panel: <http://zemskiy-sobor.livejournal.com/38469.html> et <http://lenta.ru/news/2013/09/18/monument/>.



Project of a monument dedicated to the "Heroes of the First World War" (final version), Memorial of the Victory Park in Moscow (<http://histrf.ru/ru/rvio/activities/projects/item-30>).¹³

The winning project depicts important themes for the "national narrative" which is written in Russia today: a great country with uninterrupted history, based on traditional values (especially Orthodox faith), heroism and the sacrifice of its children. It is a gigantic national flag (made of colored bronze), which serves as a background for high reliefs depicting battle scene, with a nurse supporting a wounded soldier and a scene representing the departure for the front with women and children farewelling men, under the blessing of an Orthodox priest. The flag represents the continuity of the Russian state through time, and across political regimes. Through the use of this familiar symbol, the author tries to reduce the distance between the spectator and the experience of this unknown war, in order to facilitate identification with its memory.

The themes of heroism and military glory are also present in this monument, as inevitable features of war representations in Russia. They are represented by attacks (cavalry and bayonet) and General Brusilov, one of the few really popular military leaders of the war. However, these themes are treated in a particular way, since the catastrophic outcome of the conflict requires nuances and images that can deal with defeat while giving lessons of patriotism. As in many other projects devoted to this conflict, the solution was found in the notions of sacrifice and duty to the Fatherland, a duty that was fulfilled despite the political vicissitudes. In order to embody it, the sculptor depicted the departure for the

¹³ The monument to the "Heroes of the First World War" was officially inaugurated on August 1, 2014 at the Victory Park in Moscow.



front and completed the "flag" by an isolated soldier statue. A symbol of the ordinary combatants' loyalty, this soldier "did not lose the war", according to the author. "He just received orders to return"¹⁴. In the same interview, the sculptor said that he did not intend to make a "solemn" portrait, but to embody the hardships endured with honor. It also is why the soldier's statue was laid directly on the ground in the former project*: to make it more human and closer to the spectator, despite its size (approximately 5 m). However, in the final version of the monument, it is erected on a 7 meter high pedestal. The monument was initially to be called "To the heroes and Russian soldiers who perished during the First World War", but the final inscription says: "To the heroes of the First World War".

b) In search of heroes

Thus, in this highly political project, the glorification of heroism and the reference to the State have quickly taken over the "duty to remember" and the idea of commemorating all the dead, through a Soviet-style monumental language.

Other memory elements of various kinds (monuments, exhibitions, films) often bear traces of this tradition. But there are also diverging trends that seek for a less formal language and a more human dimension. This tendency can be observed in the recent exhibitions devoted to WWI that took place in two Moscow museums, the Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia and the All-Russian Museum of Decorative and Folk Art. The first presented a collection of drawings and caricatures devoted to the First World War, often produced by mobilised artists, while the second depicted this war through a wider range of artefacts: photos, postcards and other objects, such as the menu of a fraternal meal organised by British and Russian aviators. By staging the regular fighter, his everyday life and emotional world, and by carefully avoiding any mention of the historical context, these two exhibitions seek to reduce the distance between the visitor and the forgotten war, to provide images that affect, disturb and fill a void, while avoiding stumbling blocks related to the interpretation of history.

WWI memorialization players are indeed looking for faces and names that could embody this experience and encourage shared and consensual identifications. Because this war in Russia is primarily a war without familiar

¹⁴ Vechernyaya Moskva, September 18, 2013 [online: <http://vm.ru/news/2013/09/18/skulptor-andrej-kovalchuk-geroj-moego-pamyatnika-ne-proigral-vojnu-emu-prosto-prikazali-iz-nee-vi-jti-214427.html>].



faces or compelling heroes. This gap can be explained by the fratricidal conflict that broke out in 1917. The names of many WWI officers and generals who joined the White movement were known in Soviet Union to be those of sworn enemies responsible for the worst atrocities. Today, with the revision of the revolutionary history and the rehabilitation of the White movement, these men are revalued, but their commemoration as heroes of the First World War is sometimes difficult. Symmetrically, General Brusilov who joined the Bolsheviks enjoyed favorable treatment during the Soviet era, but is now questioned by some historians because of his support for the "Red".

It is therefore not surprising that the construction of the memory of the First World War is often done through images of ordinary soldiers, even anonymous, who can embody the idea of loyalty and sacrifice for their country without blaming military defeats or subsequent political decisions. This logic can be seen, for example, in the movie "Battalion of Death", the centenary's main film project. This fiction film is based on actual events and showcases women who fought in special battalions, showing great courage and selflessness at the most desperate moment of the war in 1917. As emphasized by the producer, the use of female characters aims to depict this war without formal patriotism, "without guns, machine guns or cavalry attacks"¹⁵.

These attempts to find places and people to bear the memory of the "forgotten war" deserve further analysis, which would include the regional component of the memorialization process. In the regions, authorities and historians are searching for places, pictures or events that could serve as a bridge between local identity and the history of the First World War. Such attempts are sometimes contradictory with the "federal" memory policy. Thus, a symbolic battle took place in the city of Pskov concerning the monument in memory of WWI. During a short visit in December 2013, Minister of Culture V. Medinski "offered" a monument "to the soldier of the First World War" to the city, on behalf of the Russian Military History. At the same time, he pointed out the place to install it. Preparatory work was immediately launched, in order to inaugurate the monument a few weeks later. The monument and its location were however disputed by the inhabitants, especially since there already was another monument project planned elsewhere. Besides its low aesthetic quality, the main arguments against Moscow's gift included the location chosen by the minister, which has no connection with the local history of the war (whereas

¹⁵ V. Sokirko, I. Stulov, « Pamyati Pervoj mirovoj » [To the memory of WWI], Website of the Russian Ministry of Culture, December 27, 2013 [online: <http://portal-kultura.ru/articles/country/23835-pamyati-pervoy-mirovoj/?print=Y&print=Y&CODE=23835-pamyati-pervoy-mirovoj>].



the local monument project was to be implemented in front of the building occupied at the time by the General Staff of the northern front), as well as the “artificial” nature of this very large “propaganda” object (the monument should be several meters high). According to its critics, this project was incapable to arouse emotions and to make people identify themselves with the memory of the First World War.



Conclusion

The history of the monument dedicated to the WWI soldier in Pskov refers to a series of questions and issues which are specific to the memorialisation process currently underway in Russia. It primarily allows to better understand the role the State intends to play in this process. Over the past two or three years, the central organisms and especially recent institutions such as the Russian Society of Military History and the Russian Historical Society, which have become key players in the history policy of the government, seized this topic that had long been put to the side of Russian cultural and commemorative life. However, many sideline players were active: enthusiasts, museum professionals, associations and sometimes local authorities (not to mention professional historians, beyond the realm of this article). They now rejoice but remain suspicious of the sudden attention paid to the history of the First World War.

Despite the similarities of speech, which insist on the "duty to remember" towards the dead soldiers, and despite the apparent patriotic consensus, the players of memorialisation do not agree on the meaning to give to the war's memory. Should we glorify a powerful state and the battles it fought? Honor the men and women who fulfilled their duty with dignity? Mourn the dead and remember the hardships they endured? The meanings are multiple, sometimes contradictory, as can be symbols, places, names and faces likely to bear them. Of course, the means, by they media, economic, or administrative, available to the different players of memory cannot be compared. Therefore, it is not surprising that Moscow's version appears to dominate.