WORKSHOP WINDOW

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Soviet War Memorials
by Michael Ignatieff

As you cross the Dnieper river bridge into Kiev, the first thing you see looming up on the tree-lined bluffs opposite is a gigantic silver statue, a frowning Amazon in metal robes brandishing a huge sword in one hand and a shield in the other. She is staggeringly large – at least the size of the Statue of Liberty – and since she is made of glistening aluminium, it is as if she were perspiring with martial effort.

She is a monument to the Great Patriotic War. Hundreds of thousands of Germans and Russians died on the bluffs at her feet during the battles for the city between 1941 and 1943. A shroud of landscaping and grass has been laid over the scene of horror which took place around her: the site manages both to consecrate and obliterate the deaths which occurred there.

The identity of the giant figure guarding the approaches to the city, staring in the direction of the German invaders' advance in 1941 should be obvious: Mother Russia. Yet we are in the Ukraine, which has ancient reasons for resenting the aggrandizing symbols of Russian national identity. Already her symbolic meaning is ambiguous: if she is the embodiment of a myth of national identity – as she is plainly intended to be – she is standing on soil where that unity has always been contentious. Instead of rallying to the Soviet cause either in 1918 or in 1941, many Ukrainians chose to welcome the invader whose path this statue so resolutely bars.

In all her ambiguities – and this is only the first of them – the statue on the

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Dnieper and the cult of the Soviet war dead in general are interesting examples of what Eric Hobsbawm has called 'the invention of tradition.'[1] Invented traditions always stand in an ironic relation to the past which historians struggle to reconstruct. The statues of invented traditions are symbols of forgetting as well as remembering, icons in a cunning, but also self-deceiving process of chosing the past one can bear to remember and consigning the rest – the undignified sorrow, the shameful suffering – to oblivion. If the statue on the banks of the Dnieper re-symbolizes the war-effort of the Ukrainians as a collective rising against the invader, it also selects and deceives in smaller ways. At the base of the monument, there is a long avenue flanked by marble blocks, each inscribed with the name in brass of one of the epic battles of the war. Next to Leningrad, Stalingrad, Kiev herself, there is a block inscribed with the name of Novorrossisk, a naval port on the Black Sea. Compared to the other great battles, the fight for Novorrossisk would have been a minor skirmish had it not been for the fact that a young party propaganda officer named Leonid Brehznev played a minor and inglorious role in the rear.[2] It is no accident, therefore, that Novorrossisk was included in the avenue of honour when an old and befuddled Leonid Brehznev was brought from Moscow to officiate at the opening of the monument in 1980. When masters invent traditions, they have the past re-written as the history of their own glorious beginnings.

Yet these small mendacities, even when known, hardly tarnish the legitimacy of traditions built on such terrible sacrifice. Hardly a family in the Soviet Union did not lose someone in the Second War: the least a society can do for such sorrow is to consecrate it in such a way that every widow, every orphan can believe their father died a hero – whatever the harder or harsher truth of each of these deaths might be. All that dying is a kind of inexhaustible reservoir of legitimacy for these monuments, and whatever little lies their masters seek legitimacy for, they hardly matter in the end.

Yet the fact that the legitimacy of these monuments is awesome, limitless should not lead us take it for granted: we should still try to investigate the remembering and forgetting on which the legitimacy reposes. In particular, we should try to understand how exactly a new tradition is able to sink roots of legitimacy, in particular, how it draws sustenance from older, pre-existing traditions. Is the relation between invented and inherited tradition competitive or collaborative? The Kiev war memorial offers rich material for thought on these questions. The gigantic statue has been placed next door to the Kiev monastery, once the chief symbol of Kiev's historical inheritance. The saints who brought the Christian faith from Byzantium are buried in catacombs beneath the walls of the monastery and their mummified bodies – lying in open graves hewn out of the wet and winding tunnels underground – have always been one of the sacred pilgrimage sites of the Orthodox faith. Every Orthodox believer includes the saints of Kiev in his prayers. For 1500 years the cupolas of the monastery have dominated the city's river approaches, nestling among the tree-tops like a flock of fabulous golden birds.

Now they are cast into shadow by the gruesome martial figure on their doorstep. The Kievan skyline is thus the scene of a symbolic competition between two religions – the cult of the war dead and the ancient faith of the poor and excluded of Soviet society – for the spiritual definition of the city. Yet the two symbols also have a collaborative meaning. The monastery – and the Orthodox faith as a whole – stood out as a point of resistance against the Tartar invasions.

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In the second war, the Church was allowed to take its part in rallying national consciousness against a new barbarian invader. If the two symbols compete on the river-side, they also collaborate in the mythic elaboration of national identity, or rather in the fusion of Soviet and Russian symbolic allegiances.

The religious character of this complex process of symbolic collaboration between invented and inherited tradition is no figure of speech. The cult of the Soviet war dead is a conscious attempt to draw meaning for the rituals of the present from the vast reservoir of past suffering. If Soviet society does worship anything it is the horror of its collective sacrifice. All the rituals of Soviet institutions – the army parades, the presentation of civilian awards and decorations, trade union march-pasts, seem to take the war memorial as their focal point. Soviet brides and bridegrooms lay bouquets on the tomb of the unknown soldier on their way to the state marriage office. After a busy week-end, the war memorials are piled high with marriage bouquets. Soviet weddings – like Western registry office weddings – have all of the awkward gracelessness, all the assembly-line hurrying which invariably seems to take over any attempt by the state to invent secular equivalents to religious ritual. In the Soviet Union at least, there is a moment in which some couples at least can connect the destinies of the living to the numberless dead.

The war dominates other aspects of public life in the Soviet Union besides marriages. Veterans wear their decorations and medals to work, and once a year, they gather in parks and squares with surviving members of their own regiments and divisions to remark sadly on their slowly dwindling numbers and to remember old battles. There was a steady, silent flow of veterans at the base of the monument in Kiev. There was a park full of old tanks, artillery and lorries saved intact from the battlefield, and the old soldiers wandered slowly among them, patting them like old comrades.

Soviet television appears to devote even more time than British television to war documentaries and features, and the dominant emotional tone of these programs is as far away from the inconsequential and bumbling jollity of Dad's Army as it is possible to be. I remember one program in which veterans reminisced in front of an audience of fellow comrades in arms and young soldiers. I expected the usual fare of veterans' reminiscence and listened instead to one sad old man, creased with age and bedecked with medals, telling a story I could not understand but whose meaning was clear enough from the immeasureable grief in his voice.

Even the rituals of an Intourist package holiday include a visit to the local war memorial. It is difficult to imagine including the Cenotaph in a tourist's package holiday to London, but this incorporation of the war into sight-seeing is unselfconscious in the Soviet Union. Often enough the droning inconsequence of the guide's commentary or the monolithic bad taste of the monument itself – Kiev's Mother Russia being a case in point – drain such visits of any possibility of felt connection to the lived past.

Yet there are other places which do not let the past escape into inconsequence. In Leningrad's Piskarovskoye Cemetery, the mass graves of the 250,000 people who perished during the 900 day siege of the city by the Germans in 1941–3 stretch away as far as the eye can see. There can be few sights more full of sorrow than graves which cannot name the dead as individuals, which must bow before the horrible number of the dead with the anonymity of collective burial. Relatives sit in silent clusters on benches among the trees listening to the funeral marches

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played over and over on the loudspeakers. In the cemetery's museum, there are the pages of a battered little exercise book in which a seven year old girl laconically recorded the death, one by one, of every member of her family. The diary was found on the child's body.

Ordinary Russians often surprise you with vehement and apparently sincerely felt denunciations of the spiritual emptiness of the West. If they are party members, it becomes tempting to dismiss what they say as cant. Yet a visit to their war memorials suggests a different way to think about the accusation. Compared to the Soviets, we do seem spiritually impoverished in our encounter with the terrors of our own past. What, for example, ever happened to that minute of silence on Remembrance Day? In my parents' childhood, traffic stopped in the streets. In my childhood, I can remember the silence as the one moment in which awe and mystery entered the schoolroom. Compared to the Soviets, we seem happy and shallow amnesiacs.

Of course they have their own forgetting: Stalin's slaughter of the peasantry, the decimation of the party in the show trials and purges. These are admitted to official memory only as 'regrettable excesses' required by the fascist and capitalist encirclement of the Soviet experiment in the Thirties. I heard more than one young Soviet citizen tell me, when we broached these subjects, that the war proved, not that Stalin was right exactly, but that his insistence on ruthless national sacrifice was necessary. In a sense, the war memorials are a vindication of that terror, a consecration of a dreadful sacrifice which began not in 1941 but in 1929. In swallowing up all the dead – those who died in Siberia with those who died on the Front – the monuments perform a ritual of forgetting: they make it possible for some at least to forget that history allowed a choice to the Soviet experiment, that there was a way to mobilize a country for war which did not require it to be dragged through the horror and dishonour of fratricide and police terror.

It is perhaps because Soviet citizens have so much they need to forget that they remember what they remember with such intense passion. In the recurrent nightmare of socialist construction since 1917, the Great Patriotic War can be made to seem the one moment of genuinely collective effort which was not tarnished by terror and fratricide. Yet once again, there is so much that the resolute symbol of national unity on the banks of the Dnieper is commanding the Soviet people to forget: the desertions of whole divisions in the summer and autumn of 1941, the enthusiastic welcome given to the invader by peasants in the western provinces, the Vlassov division which fought for the Germans, the mass executions to stop the haemorrhage of deserters. The Great Patriotic War had many elements of a civil war, and it is this above all, which the monuments command the older generation to pass over in silence when telling the story to their children.

For a foreigner, the very dates on the monuments are an act of amnesia, 1941–1945. Just as the official Soviet history of the Glorious October Revolution consigns to silence the extent to which the success of the Bolsheviks depended on the consent and encouragement of the German General Staff, so the war memorials obliterate all trace of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 1939 and the crushing of Finland.

It sets one thinking about the forgetting at the core of our own rituals of war remembrance. The Soviets have no monopoly on acts of collective amnesia. While it is inevitable that at the Cenotaph, the massed veterans should forget the criminal

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stupidity of the generals, the revolts of conscripts in 1918 and the squalid and brutal executions of young deserters, and remember only the courage and the sacrifice of their friends, it is important too that historical truth stand out against the pieties, sentimentalities and forgetting of collective remembrance.

War memorials function not only to make the past bearable again; they function to make it usable for the future. In the Soviet Union, foreigners are taken to war memorials in order to see with their own eyes the most tangible proof the society has to offer of its desire for peace. Any conversation with a Russian about nuclear war begins and ends with the last war, and it is impossible to come away from the cemeteries and not take seriously the Soviet insistence that they will never be the first to start the next one.

Yet the cult of the Soviet war dead is deeply ambiguous. Russian is a militarized society: the highways are full of military traffic, the sidewalks crowded with men in uniform. In a country which is at once an empire and a developing society struggling to meet the needs of its population, this diversion of resources from domestic to military purposes requires constant justification. It cannot be justified with public argument. The Soviet military budget remains a state secret: not even gross aggregate figures of expenditure are available to the domestic population. In the absence of legitimation by public debate, the Soviet military build-up is justified with symbols. War memorials are the churches of the Soviet military build-up.

The sacrifices and self-denial required of citizens in a planned economy also find their justification in the war memorials. At the base of the gigantic figure on the banks of the Dnieper, there are a series of bas-reliefs depicting women harvesters bending over their bales, and munitions workers pounding out bullets. The message to the younger generation is clear: meet your production quotas, remember your parents' sacrifices. The statues are little sermons in stone. As with all sermons, the question is who is listening. If last year's Soviet production figures in industry and agriculture are anything to go by, the ideology of common effort and sacrifice needs all the symbolic reinforcement it can get.

It is difficult for a foreigner to get any idea of how successful these monuments have been in transmitting the values of war-time to the generations born in peace. It is significant that the Kiev monument is less than two years old. The further the war recedes in actual memory, the more insistent becomes its inscription in collective myth, the more grandiose and gigantic the war monuments have to become. One searches the young faces trying to discern the impact of these symbolic evocations of a time they never knew. At the Kiev monument, I saw one young soldier in uniform trying to photograph two of his comrades. He placed them between a pair of anti-aircraft guns left behind in the landscaped park and then kept moving his friends around so that he could get the golden domes of the Kiev monastery in the background of his picture. Which of these two symbolic allegiances, the one in the foreground or the one in the background, exerts the strongest pull on this generation of soldiers?

Next door at the monastery, the crowds waiting to pay their respects to the saints buried in the catacombs are as thick as they were around the war memorial. Later at a service in Kiev's Vladimir Cathedral, the church was packed with the aged and poor of Kiev, but also with earnest young faces caught up in the reverent and fervent devotion of old Russian religion. The archbishop who arrived to officiate was no frail survivor of the *ancien regime*, but a strong-voiced and

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muscular man in his fifties whose every gesture spoke confidence in the future of his flock.

It will never be a dissident faith like the Catholic Church in Poland. It has made its peace with the new Czars as it made its peace with the old, and its traditions co-exist with Soviet ones in a highly complex relation both of competition and collaboration. It is a symbol of this collaborative relationship that it is the state which pays for the gilding of the golden domes which compete with the giant statue for the Kiev skyline.

To a foreign visitor – especially one with personal ties to the Czarist and Orthodox past – the invented traditions of the Soviet present seem markedly impoverished in relation to the inherited traditions of the pre-1917 epoch. Socialist realism has such a narrow range, such a limited command of the registers of human experience: the monuments manage to convey the heroic and the grandiose, never the humble and the particular. Yet in a society which knows no other public aesthetic than this one, which still suppresses its own avant-garde of the 20's, which has isolated Soviet public taste from the entire range of 20th century art, it may well be that these monuments have a resonance for the Soviet citizens who view them which must ever escape a Western heart.

When allowances are made for the possibility that socialist realism does move Soviet citizens, it still seems a monochromatic register of national mythology compared with the richness of more ancient Russian traditions. Indeed the Soviet system seems now to base its appeal to the people as much on the re-appropriation of these ancient traditions as on the invention of new ones. In the Moscow Metro, Pushkin is quoted in marble as the hearty singer of the indomitable spirit of the Russian people. The old palaces and churches are re-gilded and re-opened as museums of the people, no longer the symbols of a decadent regime, but the triumph of the Russian native genius in art and architecture. The sumptuous Czarist palaces have a complex symbolic resonance: the mirrors and parquet floors, the gold inlay everywhere are at once an evocation of the power of the Soviet system which now has them in their custody and at the same time a celebration of the skill and artistry of the anonymous Russian craftsmen whose labour was poured into their opulence.

Yet there are limits to the extent to which a regime which is the heir of a revolution can ground its own legitimacy in symbolic appropriation of the pre-revolutionary artistic and religious past. There are limits too in the extent to which an entrenched and profoundly conservative empire can continue to evoke its own fiery heritage of revolution. The myth of Father Lenin seems to become more tenuous with every passing year. In this emerging symbolic vacuum, the myth of the Great Patriotic War has become the only relatively unproblematic source of myths of national unity. Yet its power as a source depends on memory, and as the memory of war past fades its effectiveness as a symbol reposes increasingly on the constantly trumpeted threat of war to come. If the Western military threat did not exist, it would be as necessary for the Soviets to invent it as the Eastern military threat has proven to be for the West. The religion of military preparedness in the United States and the religion of the war dead in the Soviet Union need nothing so much as each other. In the invented traditions of both sides, there is nothing more dangerous and sinister than the increasing militarization of their symbols of national identity and consciousness.[3]

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NOTES

1 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); see also C. Lane *Rites of Rulers: Rituals in Industrial Society, the Soviet Case*, (Cambridge, 1981); for a lucid and fascinating examination of the interaction between Soviet rituals and Buryat traditions on a Siberian collective farm, see Caroline Humphrey *Karl Marx Collective: Economy, society and religion in a Siberian collective farm*, (Cambridge, 1983), especially chapter 8.

2 Z. Medvedev *Andropov* (Oxford, 1983), ch. 2. Medvedev was himself involved in the battle for Novorrossisk.

3 An earlier version of this paper was presented to the King's Historical Society, King's College, Cambridge. I would like to thank Gareth Stedman Jones, Istvan Hont, John Barber, and the graduate and undergraduate students who attended the paper for their comments and suggestions which I have done my best to incorporate in this version. See also Regis Debray, *Critique of Political Reason* (London, 1983) for a tendentious but interesting analysis of the religious character of Soviet ritual; see also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

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