

Russia's Postcommunist Past

The Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the Reimagining of National Identity

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National monuments typically serve as aesthetic manifestations of dominant visions of history and collective identity, but they can also generate a contestation of the past they are intended to cement. Defending this two-pronged interpretive approach, this essay attends to the changing symbolic power of a unique national monument—the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The study traces the cathedral's historic role in Russia's national self-definition during the last two centuries. The cathedral's construction under tsars, destruction under Stalin, and the postcommunist rebuilding accompanied and justified a particular version of national identity. The role of the cathedral as a magnet for competing versions of Russia's traumatic past is illustrated by the controversy over its rebuilding after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Following the call of Benedict Anderson to regard nations as “imagined communities,” scholars across the humanities have sought to investigate the formation of public memory and national identity.¹ Although Anderson's argument addressed nation building in the nineteenth century, his observations acquired new relevance after the dissolution of the communist bloc, when many countries had to renegotiate their national self-understanding by interpreting anew their historical and cultural heritage. Predictably, this search for a new identity began by disavowing old symbols of state power—from renaming cities and streets to taking down monuments of communist leaders. However, official commemorative



Fig. 1. Cathedral of Christ the Savior, rebuilt 1994–2000. (Photo by author.)

efforts that followed the initial wave of iconoclasm took different forms in the countries of the former communist “camp.”

This essay examines one such commemorative project—the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow (figure 1)—as an emblematic event in postcommunist Russia’s effort to come to terms with its totalitarian past. Initially erected to celebrate Russia’s victory over Napoleon, the cathedral is an iconic building whose nineteenth-century construction glorified the unity of the state, the Orthodox religion, and the people. The structure’s demise in 1931, ordered by Stalin, symbolized the victory of the communist ideology. In the 1990s, the vanquished landmark came to symbolize the struggle over public memory because conflicting attitudes toward the Soviet and tsarist past were reflected in discussions about its resurrection.

The rebuilding ignited a controversy over the project’s role in the difficult work of coming to terms with the nation’s traumatic past.

This controversy indicated that reinventing the nation's identity is not a simple matter of replacing monuments of the Soviet era with symbols of prerevolutionary Russia. Other countries of the former communist bloc as well as non-Russian republics of the former USSR found it relatively easy to separate their national pasts from the period of Soviet domination. But Russia could not legitimately blame outside invaders for the cultural devastation wrought by seven decades of communism. There, "a discourse of identity forfeits from the outset the possibility of constructing some *other nation* onto which might be loaded the negative moment in the recreation of a national community."² Consequently, in Russia any project that sought to promote a positive national vision would have to address this predicament.

The rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was presented by its sponsors as a symbol of national spiritual renaissance and an act of historical restitution for the sins of the Soviet regime against its people and the Orthodox Church. The project's motives and means drew extensive public criticism, however. Critics argued that as a replica of its ill-fated original, the new Cathedral of Christ the Savior not only divested the nation of the responsibility to remember its past but also lent the moral authority of Orthodox spirituality to nationalism and state capitalism.

The Cathedral of Christ the Savior presents an intriguing case study for scholars of public memory because this structure carried the burden of *several* successive attempts to define Russian history and national character. As such, it offers an opportunity to investigate continuity and change in invocations of national identity. Scholars of architecture and Russian history have shown that the biography of the cathedral in the nineteenth century, its tragic fate under communism, and its recent rebuilding attest to the reciprocal relationship between monuments and political regimes that sponsor them.³ Building on this research, I argue that the postcommunist "resurrection" of the cathedral imitated the strategies of national self-definition employed by both tsarist and Bolshevik regimes. But monuments are more than material manifestations of hegemonic national narratives. Whereas the destiny of the cathedral as a state emblem has rested in the hands of its powerful patrons or enemies, its symbolic role in the discourses of memory and national identity has relied on an array of actors with varying powers to leave an imprint on public culture. I therefore suggest that the postcommunist debate over the appropriateness of the

rebuilding project offers us a glimpse of a much broader, albeit oblique, controversy about reckoning with the country's totalitarian past.

This argument develops in several stages. I begin by situating my reading of the cathedral's symbolic role between two competing interpretive approaches to the political meaning of monuments. Second, I trace the evolution of the design of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as a reflection of changes in the discourse of national self-definition. I then turn to the cultural situation in the 1980s to show the emergence of competing memories that would later collide in the postcommunist controversy over the rebuilding of the cathedral. I conclude by reflecting on the value of controversy as a mode of public memory construction.

MONUMENTS AND POLITICAL MEANINGS

The role of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Russia's national self-definition demonstrates that the relationship between memorials and their political import is contingent upon the manner in which their symbolism enters stories about the national past and present. This understanding mediates between two critical approaches regarding the rhetorical power of monuments—one that focuses on the political aesthetics of memorial artifacts and the other that draws attention to their reception by various publics.

Monuments are at once historically anchored expressions of particular ideologies and magnets for rival interpretations of identity and history. On the one hand, they can be seen as versions of history "written in stone" to represent a hegemonic vision of collective identity and public memory.⁴ As Kirk Savage notes, "Public monuments are important precisely because they do in some measure work to impose a permanent memory on the very landscape within which we order our lives."⁵ Products of their time and political situation, they are often designed not so much to promote remembrance of past events as to fix present cultural norms and power relations.

In the United States, for example, commemorative practices played a significant role in what Robert Bellah termed "civil religion," a master narrative of the nation as a chosen people.⁶ Public memory was constructed and displayed on behalf of the people, but neither for nor by the people,

however. According to John Gillis, “on both sides of the Atlantic, national commemorations were largely the preserve of elite males, the designated carriers of progress.”⁷

Commemorative aesthetics, according to this view, is an expression of political and cultural ideals. By paying close attention to formal and iconographic aspects of memorial artifacts, scholars are able to comment on how they embody and promote particular ideologies. For instance, American “civil religion” and similar narratives of national distinctiveness elsewhere found their representation in “dogmatic formalism” and “the restatement of reality in ideal rather than complex and ambiguous terms.”⁸ Soaring columns and obelisks, architecture mimicking Greek and Roman temples, sculptures of mounted military leaders—these artifacts of the nationalist era still dominate public spaces of major cities in the United States and Europe.

Public memory scholars therefore interpret the evolution of commemorative symbolism as a sign of social and cultural change.⁹ They often note Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial’s abstract form and lack of figurative symbolism to illustrate a sea change in the rhetoric and politics of national commemorations.¹⁰ According to Gillis, “the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, with its wall of names, is generally agreed to represent a turning point in the history of public memory, a decisive departure from the anonymity of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and a growing acknowledgment that everyone deserves equal recognition at all times in wholly accessible places.”¹¹ Indeed, commemorations in the West have become virtually synonymous with political expression, and many groups have adopted a self-consciously oppositional aesthetic to convey their points of view. In contrast with officialdom’s “dogmatic formalism,” writes John Bodnar, vernacular culture conveys “what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like.”¹²

The aesthetic form taken by memorials, then, is an important index of prevailing political norms, as it makes visible and legitimizes particular political values and identities. From this vantage point, the decision to rebuild a replica of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior signaled a longing for the era of autocratic nationalism and imperial expansion of the second half of the nineteenth century, during which the structure was completed. The government’s choice of this project over other symbolic ways to come to terms with the Soviet trauma manifested what Svetlana Boym calls

“restorative nostalgia.” The rebuilding constituted an uncritical imitation of nineteenth-century commemorative architectural forms and mythologies instead of a more sober appraisal of the Soviet and tsarist past.¹³

On the other hand, considering memorials as magnets—rather than merely bearers—of political meanings affords us a view of public memory as a dynamic construct. As James Young argues,

Public memory and its meanings depend not just on the forms and figures in the monument itself, but on the viewer’s response to the monument, how it is used politically and religiously in the community, who sees it under what circumstances, how its figures enter other media and are recast in new surroundings.... [M]emorials by themselves remain inert and amnesiac, dependent on visitors for whatever memory they finally produce.¹⁴

Similarly, Andreas Huyssen emphasizes the mutable quality of memory sites by referring to them as “urban palimpsests”: “We have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space, monuments as transformable and transitory, and sculpture as subject to vicissitudes of time.... The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias.”¹⁵

Instead of seeing memory as something permanently—or at least legibly—inscribed on the landscape or conveyed through memorial artifacts, this approach regards discourse about these “sites of memory” as more rhetorically consequential. Sometimes, discourse is all there is left to study, as some memorials never get built while others are destroyed but continue a kind of phantom existence in cultural imagination. Even when a memorial is physically present in the landscape, its immediate and subsequent reception can be at odds with the officially intended meaning, because “the cultural contest that monuments seem to settle need not end once they are built and dedicated.”¹⁶

This approach has generally manifested itself in a shift away from the texture of memorial artifacts toward their reception by audiences. Critics no longer view them as containers or enactments of political ideologies, but rather as “intertextual fragments” that are reanimated in various and often conflicting discourses of memory. As such, monuments, memorials, museums and films can generate both hegemonic and oppositional interpretations.¹⁷ Attending to these interpretations enables the critic to

reconstruct a more dynamic and multifaceted picture of public memory than would be possible by analyzing, however closely, a single prominent memory text.

This framework moves the weight of signification to historical agents whose rhetorical choices affect the part memorial artifacts play in stories of nationhood. However, what renders these fragments into prominent pieces in a larger puzzle of public memory is their function as “memory knots,” to use historian Steve Stern’s bodily metaphor. Like “a lump in the throat when one is moved” or “a nerve-and-muscle mass that spasms and cries out for relief,” explains Stern,

Memory knots on the social body ... force charged issues of memory and forgetfulness into a public domain. They make claims or cause problems that heighten attention and consciousness, thereby unsettling reflexive everyday habits and euphemisms that foster numbing. One responds even if the purpose of response is merely to find “relief” and return to normalcy.¹⁸

Memory knots permit formerly dispersed or semipublic memories to coalesce into what Stern calls “emblematic memories,” or prominent ways of organizing remembrance and forgetting. Emblematic memory is a “framework for collective remembrance rather than its specific content,” and its generality allows it to “capture an essential truth about the collective experience of society.”¹⁹ In societies in transition, a number of emblematic memories may be battling for hegemony, so considering them in relation to memory knots presents an opportunity to observe the formation of public memory.

Because the biography of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior involves “layers of contested memories, unrealized utopian dreams and serial destructions that continue to haunt the place,”²⁰ the structure lends itself well to an interpretation as a memory knot. Depending on how one presents the story of its construction and demise, the cathedral can be tied to different facets of Russian history and identity. Thanks to its connection to pivotal events in the nation’s past, particularly the trauma of Stalinism, this cultural icon was bound to “stir up and project polemics about memory and amnesia.”²¹ Therefore, arguments regarding the rebuilding can be construed as rejoinders in a debate about the shaping of collective memory through the rewriting of Soviet and prerevolutionary

history. The debate over the moral, aesthetic and political aspects of the rebuilding not only highlighted the “restorative nostalgia” of the project’s sponsors but also brought forth alternative narratives of cultural memory and historical culpability.

THE CATHEDRAL OF CHRIST THE SAVIOR: A BIOGRAPHY
OF A NATIONAL ICON

In Russia, as historian William Brumfield observes, “every facet of culture, architecture included, could ultimately be related to a struggle between competing political ideologies, each of which justified its position by referring to the ‘people’ [*narod*].”²² The story of the construction and destruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior demonstrates that monumental forms performed a key role in defining and legitimizing state power by making visible a particular version of national identity.

The impetus for the construction of the cathedral came after the Russian army successfully repelled Napoleon’s troops in the war of 1812.²³ Suffused by gratitude for this victory, achieved through the bravery and sacrifice of thousands of peasants who had joined the war effort, on December 25, 1812, Tsar Alexander I issued a manifesto proclaiming his intention to erect a cathedral church in Moscow. The cathedral was meant to commemorate the dedication of the Russian people (*narod rossiiskii*) to its “faith and fatherland” and give thanks for the divine intercession.

The manifesto thus expressed the unity of religion, the people and the state that would become a mainstay of the official rhetoric of national identity in the nineteenth century. Yet the original design for the proposed structure epitomized a political road not taken by Alexander’s successors. A young painter of Swedish descent, Alexander Vitberg, won the original design competition. Vitberg envisioned the largest building of its kind at the time: 230 meters high crowned by a dome 50 meters in diameter (by comparison, St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome is only 141 meters high with a dome 42 meters in diameter). The architect conceived of the memorial as a combination of three temples placed on top of each other: a subterranean, rectangular temple, a cross-shaped middle temple, and a circular temple above it. The neoclassical cathedral was to be erected atop the Sparrow Hills, overlooking the Moskva River, the place from which Napoleon had

surveyed the city devastated by the fire of 1812 and from where his army had begun its retreat.

The symbolism of this three-tier structure was both spiritual and civic. The eternal values of the Christian religion were expressed by the ascent from the underground realm of the body through the realm of the soul to the domain of pure spirit. Vitberg explained that the rectangle of the underground temple was analogous to a grave into which a soulless body is laid; the cross of the second temple stood for the soul that mediates between the mortal body and the immortal spirit; and the circle, as the best expression of infinity, symbolized pure divinity.²⁴ While traditional Orthodox cathedrals employed the three-part structure (corresponding to Christ's nativity, transfiguration and resurrection) horizontally, Vitberg's project added the vertical plane to emphasize the intersection of the ecclesiastical narrative of Christ's life with the universalizing representation of human ascent to God.

The civic content of the design was even more unconventional. In particular, the lower temple—the temple of the body—was designated as a memorial to all Russians who had died defending Moscow from Napoleon, from generals to foot soldiers. Such leveling of the social hierarchy was a profound gesture that elevated the wartime camaraderie among the nobility, the middle class and the peasants to the status of a national symbol. Given that almost half of Russia's native peasant population remained in bondage until 1861, to celebrate the military valor of 1812 in this way would be an implicit argument for the political equality of the serfs who made up the majority of the infantry.

Vitberg's patriotic vision was a sign of its times: the triumph over Napoleon intensified the sentiment, held by liberal members of Russia's gentry and the military, that serfdom was historically outdated and immoral. Since the late eighteenth century, liberal periodicals began to use the word *narod* (the people) to describe the nation as a community of equal citizens that included not only the aristocracy but also the merchant class and the peasants. Furthermore, many members of the educated elite, including Vitberg, were influenced by the ethics of Freemasonry, with its belief in a brotherhood of people regardless of class and national differences.²⁵ Tsar Alexander's apparent sympathy to these ideas, evidenced by his support of the so-called biblical societies, was seen by his subjects as

a hopeful sign of the imminence of parliamentary reforms and abolition of serfdom.

Despite the surge of patriotic sentiment that accompanied the groundbreaking for Vitberg's cathedral in 1817, the gigantic project came to a halt shortly after its start, partly due to the mismanagement of funds, partly because Alexander's sudden death in 1825 ended his patronage of the architect. Alexander's successor, Nicholas I, not only put an end to the project on the Sparrow hills by sentencing Vitberg to "internal exile" in a distant province but also significantly altered Alexander's vision of enlightened autocracy. Nicholas's reign began with a suppression of the so-called Decembrists, military officers who on December 14, 1825, led a failed coup to install constitutional monarchy in place of absolutism. Instead of a European union of monarchs and religions advocated by Alexander I, Nicholas pursued a policy of Russian isolationism. While supporting the development of domestic industry and trade and sanctioning the development of institutions of secondary education, Nicholas I severely restricted Russia's contact with both West and East.

A symbolic expression of Nicholas's vision of Russian distinctiveness was the construction of a new version of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in a new location—on the bank of the Moskva River near the Kremlin. The tsar himself chose Konstantin Ton, another Russified architect of European descent, to develop a blueprint for the cathedral. Ton's project, a neo-Byzantine cathedral, marked a departure from neoclassical forms of the eighteenth century. Its cross-shaped footprint, distinctive façades, and gilded onion-like cupolas invoked architectural styles before the times of Peter the Great.²⁶

Ton's aesthetic was a reinvention of traditional Russian forms and as such matched the efforts of the Romanov dynasty to legitimize itself in the face of European political and technological influence as well as political discontent at home. The cathedral was still officially dedicated to the Russian victory in the Napoleonic wars. In addition to the space of worship, it also featured hallways lined with panels bearing names of all generals and officers involved in the campaign of 1812—but not regular soldiers, in contrast with Vitberg's design. The architectural form and décor were also a departure from Vitberg's universalizing aesthetic—they now extolled the distinctiveness of the Russian idea by putting representations of biblical scenes side by side with events from Russian history. The

sculptures and murals celebrated both the story of Jesus Christ as the savior of humankind and the nine centuries of Russian history during which the Lord's mercy had saved Russia through the intercession of saints and the deeds of its valiant princes.²⁷ The main altar was dedicated to Christ, and the two side chapels were named, respectively, after Russia's holy protector Saint Nicholas and Saint Prince Alexander Nevsky.

Not coincidentally, the year 1832, when Nicholas decided to build the cathedral, was also the year when Count Sergei Uvarov, who soon became the tsar's minister of education, announced the famous ideological formula, "orthodoxy (*pravoslavie*)—autocracy (*samoderzhavie*)—nationality (*narodnost'*).” As Benedict Anderson comments on the invention of “nationality” by dynastic regimes in the nineteenth century, “these new identifications shored up legitimacies which, in an age of capitalism, skepticism, and science, could less and less safely rest on putative sacrality and sheer antiquity.”²⁸ Put in a position of defending the *ancien régime*, the Romanov dynasty and its ideologues engaged in what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger call “the invention of tradition,” a deliberate invocation of symbolic practices that are presented as natural and timeless.²⁹

The doctrine of “official nationality” combined the premodern idea of “Holy Russia” with the emerging romantic nationalist rhetoric of *narod* (the Russian folk). While the ideas of orthodoxy and autocracy were old, nationality “was quite novel—and somewhat premature in an age when half the ‘nation’ were still serfs, and more than half spoke a mother tongue other than Russian.”³⁰ Furthermore, the notion of *narodnost'* (folkishness) initially arose out of opposition to autocracy. It became a focal term in discourses of the so-called “Slavophiles,” who extolled the common people as genuinely patriotic bearers of authentic Russian traditions, including the Orthodox faith. The symbolism of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as an expression of *narodnost'* thus allowed the state to appropriate the rhetoric of Slavophiles and to lend legitimacy to the regime's persecution of liberals and radicals alike.³¹

Despite the connection between Ton's design and the doctrine of “official nationality,” the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was more than a mere aesthetic embodiment of the tsarist ideology. From the moment of its consecration in 1883, it functioned not only as the central Russian Orthodox cathedral but also as a monument to the achievements of major Russian artists. Indeed, careers of many nineteenth-century sculptors and

painters developed in connection with their work on the décor of the cathedral.³² Pyotr Tchaikovsky's "1812," recognized by most Americans as a bravura piece that accompanies fireworks on the Fourth of July, was written for the consecration ceremony. In this sense, the cathedral transcended the political exigencies that motivated its construction and offered an aesthetically powerful justification of Russia's unique historical path from the early Middle Ages to the present.

Because of its enormous size and advantageous location, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior inevitably became an architectural focal point and a tourist attraction. From the height of its observation platform, visitors could see the whole of Moscow spreading fan-like in all directions. It was the first structure that travelers saw when approaching Moscow by train, a sight nostalgically captured by Boris Pasternak in his *Doctor Zhivago*: "The Cathedral of Christ the Savior showed over the rim of the hill, and a minute later the domes, chimneys, roofs, and houses of the city. 'Moscow,' he said, returning to the compartment. 'Time to get ready.'"³³ Thanks to the technology of photography, the postcard image of the landmark became iconic around the world and began to represent Moscow as much as the considerably more ancient Kremlin.³⁴

The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 ushered in an era of militant atheism and cultural iconoclasm. The state employed a variety of methods to suppress the Orthodox Church and other religions throughout the former Russian empire: executions of the clergy, confiscations of church property, the closing of monasteries, church schools and seminaries, and antireligious propaganda. After his ascent to power in the late 1920s, Stalin solidified his rule by crushing the symbolic vestiges of the past and by commissioning architects and writers to develop a unique style to represent a new entity, a Soviet people. By the late 1920s, the party had abolished the idea of a proletariat-led world revolution and resolved to "build Socialism in one country." Consequently, Russia would have to be isolated from the decadent West both politically and culturally.

Stalin ordered the destruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in order to clear space for an even more grandiose structure that would remind all of the glorious Bolshevik revolution and its leader Vladimir Lenin, whose enormous statue would crown a great palace. First stripped of all the valuables over a period of several months, the cathedral was detonated on December 5, 1931. There was no public outcry over this

barbarous act, and the muted reaction of contemporaries—ranging from shock and disbelief to indifference—can be finally parsed from diaries and autobiographies.³⁵

Although the Palace of the Soviets was imagined as an ideological antipode of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, it evoked many of the functions of its destroyed predecessor. Both structures were meant as the most visible representations of the regimes that sponsored them. The palace was conceived as a many-tiered tower that, like the razed cathedral, was intended to dominate the city panorama and anchor the Moscow architectural ensemble. Finally, both structures signaled an official turn in the language of architecture. Although the palace was never built, its design announced a resolute break with the universalistic aesthetic of modernism that reflected a pre-Stalin era of faith in an international triumph of the proletariat.³⁶

The razing of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the development of plans for the Palace of the Soviets on its site constitute an important chapter in Stalin's attempt to redefine the identity of Russia in opposition to its past and to Western modernity. Ironically, in addition to Stalin's policy of terror, Soviet identity relied to a large extent on the symbols and sensibilities of Russian nationalism. Along with a wave of repressions and show trials, the 1930s saw a resurgence of officially approved artistic productions that valorized the feats of Russian princes and tsars. After his cinematographic tributes to the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein created the movies *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944), and novelist Alexei Tolstoy penned his epic about the life of Peter the Great. It is also well known that in the years of the Great Patriotic War (1941–45) Stalin turned to the Orthodox Church to raise the patriotic fervor of the population and to secure Western help by presenting Russia as a defender of Christian civilization.³⁷

After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev's bold critique of Stalin's "personality cult" allowed for a political "thaw" that in turn led to increased exchanges with the West and a temporary liberalization of cultural life. Architectural grandiosity of the Stalin era gave way to the utilitarian design of nondescript apartment blocks and public facilities. In keeping with the pragmatic spirit of the times, the unfinished foundation of the Palace of the Soviets was transformed into a heated outdoor swimming pool, "Moskva" (Moscow). Still, while Stalinism was condemned under

Khrushchev, it was presented as a corruption of Leninist principles rather than an extension of the Communist Party line. Even though masses of people were no longer sent to gulags, cultural and ideological dissent was confined to underground discussion circles and *samizdat* publications.³⁸ Open discussions of cultural and historical heritage would not emerge until the 1980s.

PASSIONS OVER THE CATHEDRAL: RETELLING THE TRAUMATIC PAST, REIMAGINING THE NATIONAL IDENTITY

The stages in the biography of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior—from its conception as a tribute to the war of 1812 under Alexander I to its reinterpretation as an embodiment of “official nationality” under Nicholas I, to its destruction as an emblem of the vanquished “old world” under Stalin—render the significance of this national monument multilayered and historically complicated. Its function as an “intertextual fragment” in discourses of national identity and historical culpability, therefore, depends on which aspects of its complex symbolism one chooses to emphasize. Before turning to the postcommunist debate over the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, it is useful to attend to the major trends in memory work in the years preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union, the period commonly described by two Russian words, *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost*’ (openness).

Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*’, first initiated as reforms within the upper echelons of the Communist Party in the mid-1980s, helped to erode the officially fostered piety toward the Marxism-Leninist version of Soviet history. Previously confined to underground *samizdat* publications and literary accounts of the Stalin era published in the West, revelations about the state’s crimes against its citizens began to appear in mainstream magazines and newspapers. For several years Soviet citizens hungrily consumed journalistic and literary exposures of their country’s history.³⁹

Political pluralism and the expansion of religious freedom in the years of *perestroika* yielded a variety of often conflicting approaches to confronting the Soviet past and reimagining Russian identity. While it is difficult to capture the entire spectrum of these attitudes toward history, one can

describe three main emblematic memories or meaning frameworks—liberal-pluralist, reactionary-xenophobic and romantic-nationalist.

The work of the so-called Memorial Society epitomizes the liberal tendency. Supported by the leading intellectuals of the “thaw generation,” this grassroots movement arose out of frustration with the state’s reluctance to investigate the Soviet past officially and to make restitution to victims of repressions a national policy. Members of the group dedicated their free time to researching and bringing to light the names and biographies of all victims of the Stalin regime. Before such work was allowed by the state, some of the members took considerable risks by copying classified files in archives and publicizing their findings.⁴⁰

In addition to their efforts to declassify files of Gulag prisoners, Memorial sought to find an appropriate way to commemorate them in some form of public art. The society sponsored an open design competition in the late 1980s in order to construct a permanent memorial to Stalin’s victims.⁴¹ The submissions that poured in showed just how difficult it was to find material expression adequate to this kind of remembrance. It was one thing to publish lists of names, but it was an altogether different task to express the magnitude of the regime’s crimes against its own citizens in a monumental vision. One prominent architect openly wondered if Soviet artists, schooled in the triumphalist tradition of “socialist realism,” had the aptitude to craft a monument that “embodied popular memory—which is sincere, quiet, stern, humble—versus propaganda history which is wordy, didactic, grandiose and aggressive.”⁴²

Many design submissions looked to Russian Orthodoxy for the iconography of collective suffering and repentance. After all, during the Soviet regime, dissident writers and artists had turned to religion as a source of moral courage in the face of ideological oppression. Banned from the public sphere and writing “for the drawer,” they had often appealed to the divine authority as the ultimate arbiter of history and their place within it. Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem* compared the poet’s plight to that of Christ at the time of the crucifixion. In *Doctor Zhivago*, Boris Pasternak calls on the symbolism of the Last Judgment to assert the righteous path of the artist as distinct from the official path toward communism charted by the country’s leaders.⁴³ Religious symbolism was prominent in the *perestroika*-era film *Repentance* (dir. Tengiz Abuladze, 1984), which depicted the struggle of private memory against state-sponsored forget-

ting by telling a story of a Christian believer who persists in digging up the body of a recently deceased Stalinist mayor to remind her compatriots about his crimes.

The Memorial Society's leadership, however, considered religious idiom inadequate as a symbol of communal identification. Radical democrats among the members of Memorial viewed religion not as a distinct anchor of a new democratic identity but as one among many other important democratic values, such as freedom of speech and assembly. Consequently, they "saw a monument as merely a complement to civic action—the real guarantee against a return to totalitarianism—and to research—the embodiment of a continued search for truth."⁴⁴ The Memorial Society's design competition generated multiple aesthetic and ideological approaches to public remembrance, but the national monument to victims of repression—one that could simultaneously embody historical justice as well as a sense of collective coming to terms with the tragic past—has not been built.⁴⁵

By creating awareness about the scope of the regime's crimes, the movement succeeded in illuminating the "blank spots" of Soviet history and restored dignity to many thousands of unjustly persecuted citizens. But the emphasis on collective accountability and a continued search for historical truth proved less effective as a unification device. The waning of public interest in past repressions may be explained by the "information overload and distaste for dwelling on the past" as well as the official resistance to the idea of a national process of truth and reconciliation.⁴⁶ From a rhetorical standpoint, however, Memorial's limited success in shaping public memory resides in the lack of a symbolic policy toward the past. As a result of its reluctance to articulate a coherent narrative of national unity, Memorial lost the opportunity to influence the ongoing discussion of national self-definition. Having won Gorbachev's support in official rehabilitation of political prisoners and removal of barriers to free speech, democratic activists moved on to other issues. In so doing, they effectively ceded the rhetorical field to proponents of nationalism, both secular and religious.

If the Memorial Society represents one side of the remembrance culture of the late Soviet period, another group named Pamyat (which means "memory" in Russian) stands for an opposing tendency. Originating in the activist work of the All-Russian Society for the Preservation

of Historical and Cultural Monuments, Pamyat became a venue for an eclectic blend of monarchist nostalgia, nationalist pride, Stalinist revival and vocal anti-Semitism. Several of its members were well-known artists and intellectuals, such as “village writer” Valentin Rasputin,⁴⁷ painter Ilya Glazunov, sculptor Vyacheslav Klykov and mathematician Igor Shafarevich. The more extreme among them, such as Shafarevich, were eager to blame all the ills of the Soviet era on the Jews, who had supposedly destroyed the country’s spiritual heritage and led to the genetic impoverishment of the Russian people. In Pamyat’s revision of Soviet history, Stalin was a strong leader whose patriotic vision and policies had been undermined by Jews and “cosmopolitan” intellectuals. One of Glazunov’s largest canvases, titled “The Mysterium of the Twentieth Century,” is a vivid effort to exculpate Stalin by depicting him as the Father of Peoples and an architect of the Soviet victory in World War II.⁴⁸ In Pamyat’s account, the Jews in Stalin’s circle, particularly Moscow city planner Lazar Kaganovich and Palace of the Soviets architect Boris Iofan, were the ones responsible for the barbarous detonation of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.⁴⁹

Pamyat’s rhetoric of scapegoating is an extreme manifestation of nationalistic sentiment.⁵⁰ However, the nostalgia for prerevolutionary cultural values and longing for a strong state became more central in public discussions of history and national identity in the late 1980s and beyond. Frustrated by political fractiousness and economic instability, more and more people were beginning to lose confidence in democratic reforms and to consider them an unwelcome Western influence. By then, the Soviet Union had definitely lost the Cold War and the policy of *glasnost* had revealed the desperate condition of the country’s social infrastructure. Against this backdrop, narratives of Russia’s past national greatness and cultural uniqueness were bound to appeal to all citizens who felt humiliated by the country’s present condition.

Thus a milder form of nationalist rhetoric, resembling prerevolutionary discourses of the Slavophiles, ascended to prominence in the public sphere. Nationalist rhetoric of the late 1980s and early 1990s invoked Russia as a long-suffering “motherland,” and its people a victim of Communists (in the past) and pro-Western reformers (in the present). Among the victims of the communist regime were the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Tsar Nicholas II and his family, the Russian earth, Russian peasants, and the sacred values of the Russian past. This narrative found

its expression not only in publications of intellectual and artistic elites, such as Stanislav Govorukhin's film *The Russia That We Have Lost* (1992), but also in everyday litanies and laments.⁵¹ Seeing Orthodoxy as a natural attribute of Russian identity, Slavophile discourses interpreted the destruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as a metaphor of the cultural genocide wrought by the communist regime. Yet the question of historical culpability was treated with some ambivalence: the militant atheism of the Bolsheviks was seen as an anathema to authentic Russian cultural values, but its success in the destruction of cultural heritage was perceived as a result of the population's complicity. Thus a documentary, *Cathedral of Christ the Savior: Truth and Bonfire*, shown on Russian television as part of the series titled *The Tribunal of History: Documents Demonstrate and Accuse*, declared: "Old Rus' is crucified and we are her executioners."⁵²

In sum, several years before Moscow's government decided to rebuild the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the razed cathedral had already achieved iconic status in discourses of memory. Pro-democracy activists considered it as one among many crimes of the Stalin regime against its people, believers and nonbelievers alike. Liberally inclined Orthodox Christians regarded it as a symbol of collective suffering. Slavophiles believed the cathedral was an expression of Russia's distinct Christian identity, and its demise a testimony to the destruction of Russia's cultural and religious heritage. Advocates of a return to the strong state found in it a triumphant emblem of strong and unified Russia not yet weakened by Western modernity. Ultimately, these interpretations represented rhetorical choices in a broader cultural conflict over reckoning with the country's traumatic past. When Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov announced the decision to "resurrect" the cathedral in May 1994, the controversy over the goals and means of the rebuilding project reopened the issue of historical truth and accountability.

Unlike most controversies over national monuments in Western democracies, the debate over the rebuilding ensued *after* the decision had been already made by Mayor Luzhkov and Patriarch of All Russia Alexi II. The "resurrection" of the destroyed cathedral was presented by the authorities as a long-overdue symbol of national atonement and reconciliation. The Russian Orthodox Church—one of the main victims of the Soviet regime—provided the wording for a public announcement issued by the oversight committee appointed by the mayor. Published by major Moscow newspapers on September 16, 1994, the call for unifica-

tion around the rebuilding of the cathedral was also a plea for national repentance and sacrifice:

A blessed time has come to heal our bleeding souls; we all need repentance. Let the resurrection of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior become an act of communal spiritual repentance. Our fatherland is getting better with difficulty, our hearts are heavy and many of us live in hardship. But a time of social ills is a time for great deeds. Let us carry out this deed.⁵³

Unlike the stale verbiage of the “apparatchik speak”—the only dialect spoken by most Russian politicians—the address appealed to the populace by invoking the religious idiom. The emphasis on *communal* spiritual repentance, however, seemed to deny that some members of the community needed repentance more than others. Russian Orthodox leaders couched their approval of the state’s support diplomatically by not naming the Soviet government’s systematic murder and persecution of its citizens for any expression of dissent. When construction work was already underway, the Orthodox Church issued an address that reiterated the redemptive nature of the project without singling out the Soviet period:

In the last century, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was created in memory of the victory of the Patriotic War of 1812. Since then much blood has been shed in our land. The cathedral that is being resurrected today will become a place of worshipful remembrance not only of heroes of 1812 but also of warriors and all our compatriots who died in wars and upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁴

This strategic ambiguity allowed the Orthodox Church to portray itself as a peacemaker in the work of national reconciliation, but it also enabled ideologically different viewpoints to converge in praise of the project.⁵⁵ The Orthodox faithful could see it as a return to the old spiritual values and cultural institutions stifled by the Bolshevik revolution, while the former Communists in the government could see it as a way to heal current political and economic schisms. Igor Pokrovsky, a Soviet-era architect who oversaw the project in its initial stage, admitted that by taking up the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as its major cultural cause, the government was diverting its attention from other pressing economic

and cultural needs. But, he stressed, “The main problem today is to avoid a civil war. And one can avoid it only by uniting the ‘Russian people.’ Unification can be achieved only through an idea. A nation not unified by a moral idea is a mob capable of anything.”⁵⁶

Although the idea of historical redemption and restoration of Russian heritage had a broad appeal for both liberals and moderate nationalists, many questioned the appropriateness of such a project for the slow work of cultural and spiritual renaissance. The common concern was that instead of encouraging repentance and historical reflection, the proposed replica would actually amount to forgetting the more recent “upheavals” of the twentieth century. Even some clergy doubted that repentance could be accomplished by a mere display of pious emotion. In the words of one Moscow priest,

It takes a real change of heart, a turning toward God. We could do something much more humble to memorialize the tragedy—a small chapel that would remind us of the need for the people’s repentance instead of a giant that would pacify the conscience. [The rebuilding could signal that] we can destroy and rebuild as we please. This could instill some proud thoughts, God forbid.⁵⁷

This sentiment harkened back to some of the *perestroika*-era proposals for the monument to Stalin’s victims, which had called for small-scale symbolic gestures on the site of the destroyed Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The grandiose task of rebuilding, in contrast, resembled Soviet-style “construction sites of the century” that lasted many years and required continuous infusion of money from public funds.⁵⁸

Many of those who took issue with the rebuilding project did so because they saw a chasm between the moral imperative to expiate the sins of the Soviet era and the desire of those in power to use the project as a public-relations campaign. Given the perceived anti-establishment ethos of Russian Orthodox religion during the Soviet era, the state’s appropriation of its rituals and rhetoric appeared hypocritical at best.⁵⁹ The irony of former communist bosses abruptly turning religious was not lost on Russian Orthodox believers. As prominent journalist Pavel Gutionov remarked, “I am offended as a Christian. Look, the most ardent Christians today are the former adepts of the party of ‘militant atheists,’ who in their ripe age have finally learned how to cross themselves correctly.”⁶⁰ Some observers

pointed out that the cooperation of the Church and Moscow city officials was nothing short of political theater on a large scale:

When big bureaucrats use such deadlines of the construction process as “Easter,” when the mayor of Moscow, the head architect and all other administrators cross themselves before opening committee meetings, the familiar reality collapses and yields a theatrical effect of phantasmagoria, of grandiose theater replete with exalted utopian pathos and decorative symbols of statehood.⁶¹

To counter the official rhetoric of redemption, liberal journalists traced the connection between the different incarnations of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the political regimes that commissioned them. The popular magazine *Ogonyok*, which in the years of *perestroika* was in the vanguard of critical explorations of cultural and political topics, devoted a special issue to the cathedral. Instead of timeless continuity, critics saw examples of absolute power exercising its control over public memory by changing Moscow's landscape. The latest example was therefore an extension of both Russian imperial *and* Soviet cultural policy, rather than an honest act of reckoning with the country's traumatic past.⁶² An article in *Iskusstvo kino* (Cinema art), tellingly titled “The Four Cathedrals of Christ the Savior,” made a point of showing how each version of the cathedral—from Vitberg's unfulfilled design to Stalin's unfinished Palace of the Soviets to the current rebuilding—was an attempt of the ruling regime to ground its legitimacy in a seemingly timeless idea of “the people.”⁶³

Similarly, discussions of the structure's aesthetic integrity and its faithfulness to the original objected to the idea of a speedy recreation of the cathedral on both historical and moral grounds. Even before the Moscow government announced its decision to rebuild the cathedral, art professionals insisted on the technical impossibility and historical arrogance of the restoration. The destruction of the cathedral had wiped out the collective experience of dozens of famous architects, painters and craftsmen whose work on the cathedral had extended for almost half a century. Echoing the neo-Slavophile laments about the loss of religious and cultural heritage, critics argued that it was impossible “to gather the vaporized artistic splendor of the Russian empire—the holistic ensemble of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior—after seventy-five years of concerted destruction of culture in general and of Christian culture in particular”:

[T]he destroyed Cathedral of Christ the Savior, as a terrifying image of the revolution preserved in our memory, is perhaps more significant than a cathedral rebuilt anew. One cannot enter the same river twice, even after convincing oneself that it is “the same river.” And “the very same cathedral” replacing the demolished one would relieve us of our collective responsibility for the horrible sin that took place—whether we admit it or not—because of our consent. Only very superficial people are able to erase from memory the entire historical period, to pretend that nothing had happened.⁶⁴

However, “pretending that nothing had happened” turned out to be precisely the approach taken by some of the project’s architects and sculptors. When the construction commenced, it became apparent that the new structure was a “novodel” (new model). New plans for the cathedral included an underground 150-car garage, a 1,500-seat theater, a refectory and elevators. In addition to these modern conveniences, methods of building and materials used for the construction and decoration were also new, which alarmed art historians and architects. Because only fragments of the interior were preserved and almost all of the murals were destroyed when the original cathedral was blown up, the task of restoring the décor was even more daunting than that of the building itself. A special press conference, held under the name “The Cathedral of Christ the Savior—from Sacredness to Show Business,” accused the parties in charge of the project of “falsification of historical heritage.”⁶⁵ Participants in the press conference, among them art professors and Culture Ministry officials, were particularly critical of controversial sculptor and head of the Russian Arts Academy Zurab Tsereteli for his “vulgar imitation” of the original’s décor, most notoriously represented by the sculptor’s choice of dark bronze—instead of light marble—to replicate the figures of saints and princes that adorned the cathedral’s exterior (figure 2). Tsereteli and his supporters argued in turn that their materials and techniques were at least as good as or superior to those of nineteenth-century sculptors and painters. This response, naturally, only gave more weight to complaints about the “show business” quality of the construction.

Moral and historical objections in the press were often entwined with criticisms of the financial aspect of the project. The rebuilding occurred in the wake of Boris Yeltsin’s economic reforms, commonly referred to



Fig. 2. St. Dionysius blessing citizen Minin and Prince Pozharskii. Relief in the niche of the north façade of the cathedral. Sculptor Z. Tsereteli used bronze in the place of marble when replicating original sculptures by A. Loganovskii. (Photo by author.)

as “shock without therapy,” and, with unemployment and prices on the rise, lavish construction costs reminded many of a growing gap between the rich and the poor, not of national unification. Indeed, the cost of the project was officially estimated at over \$500 million, although the actual figure was likely to be significantly higher. The bulk of the funds came from the city budget and federal subsidies even though Luzhkov used his control over the city’s commercial space to coax contributions from the private sector. Commenting on this fundraising approach, some newspaper headlines dubbed the project “the cathedral of vanity,” questioned rhetorically whether the rebuilding constituted “redemption or indulgence,” and asserted that the cathedral was becoming “a symbol of Russian capitalism.”⁶⁶ Defenders of this strategy argued that by accepting funds from the government and from the new rich the Orthodox Church was “using the human sin of vanity for a good purpose”; after all, government officials and the city’s entrepreneurs were more likely to invest in a highly visible building with instant heritage located in the city center rather than in some half-destroyed chapel in a distant province.⁶⁷

To downplay the role of city and state budgets and to stress the project's reliance on charitable contributions (and hence its broad public support), the names of the most generous donors were inscribed on marble plaques in the lower museum level of the rebuilt cathedral, as if linking these names to those of Russian military heroes of 1812. The explicit recognition of contributors to the "resurrection" of the cathedral thus became part of the museum's official story of the construction, destruction and rebuilding. The replica of a vanquished cathedral now functioned not only as a major piece of the country's glorious past but also as a celebration of state capitalism.

Despite the controversy, the project proceeded at unprecedented speed. The foundation was laid on Orthodox Christmas Day, January 7, 1995. The first service in the yet unfinished cathedral took place on Easter 1996. By Moscow's 850th anniversary in 1997 all construction was completed, and internal decoration was finished in December 1999. The Great Consecration of the Cathedral was performed on August 19, 2000. Popular fears that the "novodel" would become a "dolgostoi" (protracted construction) were not realized, and the cathedral's décor looked opulent and expensive.

Along with the museum housed in the basement of the cathedral (built in the former foundations of the Palace of the Soviets), the official story of the main Russian cathedral was conveyed in a documentary produced in 1997 to coincide with the celebration of Moscow's 850th anniversary. In its account of the construction and destruction of the cathedral, the narrative presented a sequence of events and *dramatis personae* that directed the attention to the guidance of the Church fathers during the long construction period and their stewardship over the Russian people before and after the Bolshevik revolution. Second order of importance was given to the tsars whose decrees had made the construction possible, and the artists who had carried out the work. The villains were, of course, the Bolsheviks, and the martyrs were the priests who had remained steadfast in their faith after the state began persecution of the clergy and believers. The central tragic event—the spectacular detonation of the cathedral—was preceded by even more excruciating documentary footage of its interior being literally torn apart. The tone of the narrative brightened with the transition to the 1990s, signaling a "new turn in the fate of Moscow." The film conspicuously left out the years that prepared

this shift, nor did it explain how the Orthodox Church recovered after the blow it had been dealt by the Communists. Controversial aspects of the rebuilding were omitted in favor of the focus on the unity of Russia's political and religious leaders, business people and artists, all of whom presumably acted on behalf of that elusive entity, the Russian people. As the film's narrator intoned, "The people itself (*sam narod*) brought back its sacred treasure." Coming full circle to the exalted cadences of the 1812 decree issued by Alexander I, the film asserted the cultural and spiritual continuity between Russia's present and its prerevolutionary past.⁶⁸

As a symbol of post-Soviet cultural politics, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior celebrated the emergence of the discourse of "patriotism" and indicated the official appropriation of the emblems of imperial Russia as markers of postcommunist identity. The cathedral's neo-Byzantine architecture and décor imply a return to a mythical Russian past before the time of Peter the Great, a time of saints and warrior princes who had defended "mother Russia" from external enemies. This design, adopted by Tsar Nicolas I in 1832, had replaced the one chosen by his predecessor Alexander I for its unique blend of Christian spirituality and civic purpose. The ideological significance of the contrast between the two versions of the cathedral—and hence a more nuanced narrative of the prerevolutionary past—was eclipsed by the postcommunist iteration of the monument. Like its nineteenth-century original, the newly rebuilt replica conveys a simplified narrative of national identity based on restoration of origins and defense of the ancestral home.

Recently, the Moscow government and the city's business leaders dedicated a statue of Alexander II, during whose reign the original cathedral had been completed, on the grounds of its speedily constructed replica (figure 3). In so doing they yoked the political meaning of the rebuilt cathedral to the idea of a strong state modeled on the autocracy of the nineteenth century. Hence, by "resurrecting" the martyred Cathedral of Christ the Savior, postcommunist Russia's political and business leaders not only appropriated the oppositional rhetoric of Russian Orthodox spirituality but also signaled an end to political fractiousness and debates over the Soviet past of the *perestroika* era.

At the same time, this "construction project of the century" functioned as a "knot of memory," spawning sobering journalistic explorations of the cathedral's nineteenth-century history, publications of eyewitness



Fig. 3. Monument to Alexander II near the rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior.
(Photo by author.)

recollections of its destruction, and accounts of cultural politics of the Stalin era. Besides exposing the willful amnesia of patriotic “restorative nostalgia,” these discourses served to extend the polemics about the trauma of Stalinism by reopening the debate about historical memory and accountability—the debate that the rebuilding was meant to render mute.

However, the controversy’s limited impact on commemorations and other rituals of nationhood of the Yeltsin era indicated that critical memory, especially the kind advocated by the Memorial Society in the



Fig. 4. Sculpture of St. George slaying the dragon crowns the roof of the Manezh shopping mall near the Kremlin. (Photo by author.)

1980s, had given way to unreflective patriotism. The new Cathedral of Christ the Savior joined other new buildings and monuments that rose in the city during the tenure of Mayor Luzhkov. Under his leadership the city came to resemble a historical theme park replete with patriotically flavored attractions.⁶⁹ The Manezh square next to the Kremlin, a major site for political demonstrations during *perestroika* and the early 1990s, was transformed into the largest upscale underground mall in Europe, and the area above it into a series of fountains populated by bronze fairy-tale creatures and the statue of St. George slaying the dragon, all wrought by Zurab Tsereteli, whose penchant for large-scale design and excessive ornamentation matched the mayor's taste (figure 4). Ironically, Tsereteli's massive sculpture of Peter the Great—picturing the first “Western” tsar standing on a ship—was installed near the bank of Moskva River just half a mile downstream from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, producing an incongruous juxtaposition of the “Westernizing” Russian monarch with an artifact of an epoch that had repudiated Westernization.⁷⁰

Cultural critics in Russia today are less able to question the authorities directly, due to increasing government control over mass media and other forms of civil society. Instead, journalists must rely, as in the Soviet times, on circumlocution and euphemism. During the controversy over the rebuilding, many commentators turned to the enduring source of Russian cultural memory—its literature—to illuminate the many subplots in the story of the cathedral. Thus, the failure of Vitberg's project was reflected in Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, whose main character wheeler-dealer Chichikov was one of those who got rich from his involvement in an unnamed large-scale construction project in Moscow. Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, itself a monumental meditation on the historical meaning of 1812, offered a more compelling portrait of the national character than either Vitberg's unrealized design or Ton's cathedral. Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, a satirical portrait of Moscow under the Bolsheviks, described the atmosphere of greed, social climbing, and paranoia that marked the complicity of cultural elites in the persecution of religion and the destruction of the cathedral. Some observers quoted Pushkin to point out parallels between Moscow in the nineteenth century, when the new rich were building their gaudy mansions, and the post-Soviet 1990s, when the new rich were pursuing similar architectural self-aggrandizement.⁷¹ These kinds of rejoinders pointed to a different kind of national self-understanding—the one that is forever suspicious of official pieties and insists on speaking truth to power, even if this speech is coded as irony. This Russian tradition, briefly displaced by the bold anti-establishment journalism of *perestroika*, may remain the sole politically safe avenue for contesting official memory.

CONCLUSION

This essay's exploration of the changing symbolic power of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior began with a premise that monuments, while serving as aesthetic manifestations of dominant cultural and ideological positions, can also generate a contestation of the past they are intended to cement. The present study validates this premise, but it also reveals limits of the position that privileges contestation as a mode of public memory construction. I suggest that the relative openness of a memorial to different interpretations

is not sufficient to sustain multiple—and equally viable—versions of the past. Whereas all parties may enjoy visibility in the moment of controversy, not all imprint themselves onto the fabric of public memory.

In rebuilding the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the authorities in the government and the Orthodox Church attempted to redirect public attention away from the traumatic legacy of communism and to “manufacture redemption by giving presence to an even more distant past.”⁷² The controversy around the project, however, revealed that the struggle over the rewriting of Soviet history, which began in the years of *perestroika*, was still alive. In the absence of other public mechanisms of national “truth and reconciliation,” arguments concerning the motives for, as well as the means and goals of, the rebuilding allowed for the questioning of the officially sponsored restoration of Russia’s greatness.

Compared to the mainstream discourse of redemption, however, oppositional memories were at a rhetorical disadvantage. They emphasized the “negative moment” in the national past either by continuing to excavate the roots of repressions or by dwelling on the impossibility of fully restoring the “Russia that we lost.” They thus invoked the nation as a community of fellow sufferers (or worse, dupes, informers and executioners) at the moment when the national self-esteem was already at an all-time low. Because these oppositional discourses were stressing the “no” more strongly than the “yes,” to quote Kenneth Burke,⁷³ their appeal lacked the force of positive transcendence.

By contrast, the discourse of “restorative nostalgia,” as embodied in the replica of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and other architectural displays of Russian distinctiveness built in Moscow in the 1990s, offered tangible symbols of positive identification. Historically, too, this has been the dominant mode of national self-definition over the last two centuries. Despite the change from the tsarist to Bolshevik ideology, Stalin’s use of the symbols of dynastic statehood and his co-optation of the Russian Orthodox Church to boost the patriotic fervor of the population during World War II testify to the cultural tenacity of this pattern.

The privileging of controversy also assumes a more or less equal access to the production and dissemination of information and images. Oppositional memories may survive by being passed from person to person, but their ability to gain traction as capacious emblematic memories depends on their continuous public presence and circulation as well as on



Fig. 5. Impersonators of Lenin and the last tsar Nicholas II posing together for tourists near the Red Square. (Photo by author.)

easily accessible and retrievable traces. As Pierre Nora famously remarked, modern memory “relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image.”⁷⁴ Archival memory, so taken for granted in the West, is severely underdeveloped in Russia, and there seems to be little official interest in providing the public with easy access to opinions that may be unflattering to political and cultural power brokers. The controversy over the Cathedral of Christ the Savior eventually came to an end, and only avid students of the Yeltsin era are now motivated to access its published traces, scattered as they are among Moscow’s libraries and archives.

Contestation of cultural memory begun in the *perestroika* era yielded to a nostalgic yearning for cultural certainty and political stability of Brezhnev’s “stagnation” period. Although not banned outright, critical

investigations of Soviet and Russian history are confined to the periphery of mainstream media, and center stage is taken by an eclectic collage of nostalgic relics of the past. Impersonators of historical figures mingle with tourist crowds in the Red Square (figure 5), shoppers at the GUM department store gaze at installations dedicated to World War II heroes related to the sales personnel of expensive boutiques, and Peter the Great stands on his bronze ship in the midst of the Moskva River with his back to the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

NOTES

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Rhetoricians have contributed to this literature by examining discursive strategies employed by public figures and groups to invoke a particular portrait of "the people." See Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'the People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61, no. 3 (1975): 235–49; Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*," *ibid.*, 73, no. 2 (1987): 133–50; Celeste M. Condit and John L. Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). In addition to studies of verbal discourse, a growing body of scholarship has addressed the link between visual and spatial symbolism and the constitution of identity. See especially Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and Gregory Clarke, *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations of a Theme of Kenneth Burke* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).

2. Michael Urban, "The Politics of Identity in Russia's Postcommunist Transition: The Nation against Itself," *Slavic Review* 53, no.3 (Autumn 1994): 733.

3. For the history of the cathedral's design, construction and destruction, see Yevgenia Kirichenko, *Khram Khrista Spasitelia v Moskve / The Temple of Christ the Savior in Moscow* (Moscow: Planeta, 1992). For the history of the site of the cathedral that includes the rebuilding in the 1990s, see Konstantin Akinsha and

Grigorij Kozlov, with Sylvia Hochfield, *The Holy Place: Architecture, Ideology, and History in Russia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007). In telling the story of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the authors focus on the biographies and aesthetic-ideological orientations of the major “players” (architects, tsars, priests, Soviet and post-Soviet state leaders), rather than on issues of cultural memory and national identity. The book represents an approach that I argue is useful but not sufficient in understanding the role of monuments in public memory. Akinsha et al. view the Cathedral of Christ the Savior—and its unrealized replacements—as aesthetic manifestations of ideologies of Russian and Soviet rulers. I argue that state-sponsored monuments are that and more—they are sites of memory that are capable of mobilizing public imagination beyond the ways envisioned by their sponsors and designers. On the recent rebuilding of the cathedral in the context of postcommunist memory practices, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), chap. 8; and Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), chap. 6.

4. See, for example, Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

5. Kirk Savage, “The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument,” in Gillis, ed. *Commemorations*, 143.

6. Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967): 1–21.

7. John R. Gillis, introduction to idem, ed., *Commemorations*, 10.

8. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 13–14.

9. For a discussion of the evolution of commemorative iconography in the United States, see Ekaterina V. Haskins, “‘Put Your Stamp on History’: The USPS Commemorative Program *Celebrate the Century* and Postmodern Collective Memory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 1 (2003): 1–18.

10. See especially Sonja Foss, “Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *Communication Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1986): 326–40; and Carol Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson and Enrico Pucci, Jr., “Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a Prototype,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77, no. 3 (1991): 263–88.

11. Gillis, introduction, 13.

12. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 13–14. For example, the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt uses multiple individually crafted panels of fabric to display its message of private grief and public outrage. See Peter S. Hawkins, “Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt,” in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996), 133–55.

13. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41–42, 100.
14. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), xii–xiii.
15. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 7.
16. Savage, “The Politics of Memory,” 143.
17. For example, Marouf Hasian regards the film *Saving Private Ryan* as an “intertextual fragment where audiences, rhetors, and critics coproduce their interpretations of the rhetorical meaning of D-Day and the Good War.” See Marouf Hasian, “Nostalgic Longings, Memories of the Good War and Cinematic Representations in *Saving Private Ryan*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 3 (2001): 338–58.
18. Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 120.
19. Ibid., 68, 105–6.
20. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 101.
21. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile*, 123.
22. William C. Brumfield, *A History of Russian Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 393.
23. Historical details related to the conception, construction, and destruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior are presented most thoroughly in Kirichenko, *Khram Khrista Spasitelia*.
24. Ibid., 29.
25. Vera Tolz, *Russia* (*Inventing the Nation* Series) (London: Arnold, 2001), 62–65. Akinsha, Kozlov and Hochfield stress the link between Vitberg's design and the Masonic theory. The authors point out that Masonic foundations of Vitberg's project have been deliberately ignored by most scholars as a reaction against the anti-Semitic and nationalist obsession with discovering Masonic symbols everywhere as evidence of “the Jewish Masonic plot” against Russia (*The Holy Place*, 24–31).
26. See Tatiana A. Slavina, *Konstantin Ton* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 1989).
27. The sculptural ensemble encircling the cathedral's facade is a vivid representation of national distinctiveness. Arranged counterclockwise—the direction of the religious processions on major church holidays—the sculptures presented both the events of divine history (such as David's victory over Goliath and Moses's over Pharaoh) and Russian history as a succession of divinely inspired events (such as Saint Sergius of Radonezh blessing Dmitri Donskoi before the Battle of Kulikovo (1380) and Saint Dionysios blessing Prince Pozharskii and citizen Minin before the liberation of Moscow from the Poles (1612). On the sculptural ensemble of

the cathedral, see Kirichenko, *Khram Khrista Spasitelia*, 69–85, and Akinsha, Kozlov and Hochfield, *The Holy Place*, 60–66.

28. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 85.

29. Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*.

30. *Ibid.*, 97.

31. On the rule of Nicholas and the doctrine of “official nationality,” see Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825–1855* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). On nationalism, see Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Inquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), and Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. On Slavophiles, see Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles: A Study of Romantic Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952). On Westernizers, see Isaiah Berlin, “The Marvelous Decade,” *Encounter* (December 1955): 22–43. On Alexander Herzen, one of the early Westernizers and a contemporary of Vitberg, see Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).

32. An account of the artists who worked on the original cathedral is presented in Kirichenko, *Khram Khrista Spasitelia*, 69–130. See also Akinsha, Kozlov and Hochfield, *The Holy Place*, chap. 17.

33. Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 165.

34. See Kirichenko, *Khram Khrista Spasitelia*, 158–203.

35. Kirichenko reproduced a poem bemoaning the impending destruction of the cathedral, penned by Nikolai Arnold. It begins and ends with a refrain: “Farewell, the keeper of the Russian glory, the magnificent Cathedral of Christ, our gold-headed giant that once sparkled above the capital!” The poem was copied by hand by scores of Muscovites (*ibid.*, 238). The only artist who publicly protested the destruction was Apollinari Vasnetsov, who wrote a letter to *Izvestiia* defending the historical and cultural value of the cathedral. See “Protivostoianie Apollinariia Vasnetsova” (The opposition of Apollinariia Vasnetsov), *Nashe nasledie*, no. 35–36 (1995): 80–89. But there was surprisingly little dismay expressed by other members of the artistic intelligentsia. Akinsha, Kozlov and Hochfield quote the diary of the famous children’s author Kornei Chukovskii, who recalls the events of December 5 with no emotion whatsoever (*The Holy Place*, 122–23).

36. On parallels between the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the design of the Palace of the Soviets, see Kirichenko, *Khram Khrista Spasitelia*, 242–44. See also Alexei Tarkhanov and Sergei Kavtaradze, *Architecture of the Stalin Era* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 19.

37. See Steven Merritt Miner, *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941–1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

38. On Soviet dissidents, see Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993).

39. On the coming to terms with Stalinism during the *glasnost*' era, see David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1993).

40. See David Remnick's account of the Memorial Society, *ibid.*, 101–19. For a sociological analysis of Memorial, see Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

41. For an extensive account of the design competition organized by the Memorial Society, see Kathleen E. Smith, "Conflict over Designing a Monument to Stalin's Victims: Public Art and Political Ideology in Russia, 1987–1996," in James Cracraft and Daniel Rowland, eds., *Architectures of Russian Identity: 1500 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 193–203.

42. Cited in *ibid.*, 195.

43. On appeals to religious moral authority by dissident authors of the Stalin era, see Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

44. Smith, "Conflict," 198–99.

45. To mark the site of a future memorial, a boulder from the Solovetskii prison camp was placed in 1990 in Moscow's Lubyanka square opposite the state security headquarters. See *ibid.*, 200.

46. Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims*, 179.

47. Village writers (*derevenshchiki*) became prominent on the Soviet literary scene in the 1960s and 1970s. Their common theme was the decline of the Russian village as a result of Soviet modernization, along with the loss of traditional values such as family and religious piety. For a description of the movement in the context of other cultural practices of the period, see John B. Dunlop, *The Faces of Contemporary Russian Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

48. For a detailed discussion of this painting, see S. Frederick Starr, "Soviet Painter Poses a Question," *Smithsonian* (December 1977): 101–6.

49. On Pamyat in particular and on Russian anti-Semitism in general, see William Korey, *Russian Antisemitism, Pamyat, and the Demonology of Zionism* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995). Also of interest is a partisan defense of Pamyat in the context of a "history of Russian patriotism" by Oleg Platonov, "Istoriia russkogo patriotizma," *Molodaia gvardiia* (December

2004): 199–226. On the relation between Pamyat and Russian Orthodoxy in the development of “Orthodox fundamentalism,” see K. N. Kostyuk, “Pravoslavnyi fundamentalizm,” *Polis* [Moscow], no. 5 (September 2000): 133–54.

50. Pamyat’s rhetoric of ultranationalism was later taken up by the National Salvation Front (1992–93), a broad coalition of communist, socialist and ultranationalist movements.

51. Anthropologist Nancy Ries describes litanies as “those passages in conversation in which the speaker would enunciate a series of complaints, grievances or worries about problems, troubles, afflictions, tribulations or losses, and then often comment on these enumerations with a poignant rhetorical question (“Why is everything so bad with us?”), a sweeping, fatalistic lament about the hopelessness of the situation, or an expressive Russian sigh of disappointment and resignation.” See her *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 84.

52. *Khram Khrista Spasitelia: Istina i kostyor* (Studio Otechestvo, Russia, 1991).

53. “Obrashchenie Obshchestvennogo nablyudatel’nogo soveta” (Address of the Public Oversight Committee), *Moskovskaia pravda*, September 16, 1994.

54. Quoted in I. M. Ptichnikov, “Delo tserkvi, gosudarstva i vsego naroda” (A concern of the church, the state and the entire nation), *Nauka i religiia*, no. 1 (1996): 3.

55. On strategic ambiguity, see Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 4 (1998): 395–415.

56. Quoted in Mark Deich, “Khram Khrista ili pamiatnik meru?” (Cathedral of Christ or monument to the mayor), *Ogonyok*, no. 48–49 (December 1994): 11.

57. Quoted in *ibid.*

58. The project was likened by some to one of the biggest “construction sites of the century” (*stroiki veka*), the Baikal-Amur Railway (BAM), which became associated with the bureaucratic inefficiency of the Brezhnev era. See, for example, S. Andreev, “Nuzhen li stolitse novyi BAM?” (Does the capital need a new BAM?), *Rossiiskie vesti*, April 13, 1995, 3.

59. It is important to distinguish between Russian Orthodox religion as a source of moral authority, on the one hand, and the Russian Orthodox Church as an institution whose social influence in the Soviet Union was severely circumscribed by the state. This distinction—between Orthodoxy as a usable past and the official Church—continues to be valid in the post-Soviet period. See Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

60. Quoted in Deich, "Khram Khrista," 11.
61. Alla Bossart, "Teatr vremen Luzhkova i Sinoda" (Theater of the times of Luzhkov and the Synod), *Stolitsa*, no. 2 (January 1995): 11.
62. See, for example, Grigorii Revzin, "Khram kak ideia" (The cathedral as idea), *Ogonyok*, no. 18 (April 1996): 40–43; Alyona Solntseva, "Na fundamente Dvortsa sovietov" (On the foundations of the Palace of the Soviets), *Ogonyok*, no. 18 (April 1996): 46–47.
63. Vladlen Sirotkin, "Chetyre Khrama Khrista Spasitelia," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 8 (1997): 90–97.
64. V. V. Filatov, "Vozdushnye zamki" (Castles in the air), *Gazeta nezavisimoi intelligentsii* "Missiia" (Independent intelligentsia's newspaper "The Mission"), no. 1 (September 1993) (n.p.) (available at <http://www.xxc.ru/stati/text007/index.htm>).
65. Evgenii Strel'chik, "Strasti po Khramu" (Passions over the Cathedral), *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, November 24, 1999. See also Viktor Sokirko, "Khrista na vas net!" (You have no shame), *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, December 15, 1997, 2.
66. For representative articles excoriating the sin of vanity evident in the sponsorship of the project, see V. Svetlov, "Khram tshcheslaviia" (The cathedral of vanity), *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, November 26, 1996, 6; K. Freeland, "Khram Khrista Spasitelia stanovitsia simvolom rossiiskogo kapitalizma" (The Cathedral of Christ the Savior is becoming a symbol of Russian capitalism), *Izvestiia*, August 29, 1995, viii; A. Rubtsov, "Iskuplenie ili indul'gentsiia" (Redemption or indulgence), *Obshchestvennaia gazeta*, no. 40 (1995): 6.
67. See Andrei Kurayev, "Khram Khrista Spasitelia: Za i protiv" (The Cathedral of Christ the Savior: For and against). This essay is a version of the controversy from a cleric's point of view. Incidentally, because it is published on a website of the Russian Orthodox Church, Kurayev's piece is probably the only easily accessible (albeit biased) trace of the controversy: <http://www.xxc.ru/stati/kur001.htm>.
68. *Velikii Khram Rossii*, English title: *The Great Church of Russia: Christ the Savior Cathedral, Moscow. Its Past History and Present Reconstruction: 1813–1931–1997* (NTSC, 1997).
69. That Moscow of the 1990s came to resemble a theme park has been noted both by regular Muscovites and by Western scholars of Russian culture. See, in particular, Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, and Smith, *Mythmaking in New Russia*. For reflections on "excesses" of new Moscow architecture, see Alexei Komech, "Arkhitektura izlishestv" (The architecture of excesses), *Itogi*, December 2, 1997, 74.
70. While Peter the Great considered himself Orthodox and in many ways continued his father's policies of state building, his assault on the symbols of old

Muscovy is perhaps the most striking—and most familiar—feature of his reign. See James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

71. See, for example, Alexandr Shamaro, “Chichikov na stroitel’stve Khrama Khrista Spasitelia” (Chichikov on the construction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior), *Vecherniaia Moskva*, February 2, 1994, 2; Dmitry Shvidkovskii, “Priiatnaia nesuraznost’” (Pleasant incongruity), *Itogi*, December 2, 1997, 74.

72. Peter Ehrenhaus, “Why We Fought: Holocaust Memory in Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 3 (2001): 321–37.

73. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes towards History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 22.

74. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7.

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