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The sacred memory regime and museum exhibitions during the centenary of the First World War in Russia

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Abstract

During the centenary of the First World War in Russia, museums in Moscow and Saint Petersburg organised numerous exhibitions. This article investigates the impact on museums of the “sacred memory regime” typical of that centenary. The efforts of the Russian state to emotionalise the event and the efforts of the Orthodox Church to become an essential partner of the state in the field of war memory explain the massive use of religious ceremonies, symbols, and expressions. In this context, public museums have responded in different ways. Some museums, in continuity with the Soviet museological tradition, have adopted a secular, scientific approach to the display of cult objects. Others, combining the Soviet tradition and the new museology, presented their exhibits in a “sacred-secular” way, using some visual elements that recalled the debt of memory and in a way that was likely to evoke an emotional response. The third group, especially the war museums, presented their institutions as “sacred spaces” by displaying icons, using images of Christ to decorate the space, organising prayers and staging the religious mentality of the people who lived through the war. As a case study, the new museum ‘Russia in the Great War’ in the Martial Chamber in Tsarskoe Selo, is described in detail to analyse this trend.

Keywords: Russia, First World War, exhibitions, war museums, religious objects

Résumé

Lors du centenaire de la Première Guerre mondiale en Russie, les musées de Moscou et de Saint-Pétersbourg ont organisé de nombreuses expositions. Cet article étudie l’impact sur les musées du « régime mémoriel sacré » caractéristique de ce centenaire. L’effort de l’Etat russe pour sensibiliser le public et la participation active de l’Eglise orthodoxe, devenue un acteur incontournable dans le domaine de la mémoire, expliquent l’utilisation massive des cérémonies religieuses et des discours marqués par l’influence de l’Eglise. Dans ce contexte, les musées publics ont réagi de différentes manières. Certains musées, fidèles à la tradition muséologique soviétique, ont adopté une approche laïque et scientifique de l’exposition des objets de culte. D’autres, combinant la tradition soviétique et la nouvelle muséologie, ont présenté leurs expositions d’une manière à la fois sacrée et laïque, en créant une ambiance commémorative et patriotique et en utilisant certains éléments visuels, textuels et sonores pour rappeler le devoir de mémoire. D’autres enfin, en particulier les musées de guerre, se sont présentés comme des « espaces sacrés » en exposant des icônes, des images du Christ, en organisant des prières et en mettant en valeur la mentalité religieuse des personnes qui avaient vécu la guerre. Le nouveau musée « La Russie dans la Grande Guerre », situé dans la Chambre Martiale à Tsarskoe Selo, est étudié de manière détaillée pour analyser cette nouvelle approche dans la présentation du fait militaire.

Mots-clés : Russie, Première Guerre mondiale, expositions, musées de guerre, objets religieux

Introduction

In 2014, Russia celebrated the centenary of the First World War. This international event, in which more than 30 countries took part, is an interesting case for studying the interaction of public memory and religion. In some countries, the commemorative activities of religious institutions and of the state were clearly separate, while in others, such as contemporary Russia, they were linked (*Mémoires* 2014). According to Jay Winter, a renowned specialist on the history and memory of the First World War, the commemoration of the war was conducted either in the framework of a “sacred memory regime” (Turkey, Russia, and some Eastern European countries) or a “secular memory regime” (Western Europe). The secular type of commemoration distanced itself from the ideologies and beliefs of the First World War period, and the dead soldiers had evolved “from martyrs to victims”. In the sacred memory regime, the fallen soldiers were still considered martyrs or heroes, and the commemoration helped build up a belief “that the presence of God in history is immanent” (Winter 2017b). The practicing of this or that memory regime, according to Winter, correlates with the attitudes of the society and of the state to the war as a method of resolving conflicts. The secular memory regime rejects war and grieves the victims, while the sacred regime accepts war, and suffering and death are considered useful for the nation.

My observations of different memory actors during the centenary celebrations (the officials, the Church, right-wing NGOs, mass media) confirm the above hypothesis about the “sacred” regime of Russia’s commemoration. My research question was: how did the state museums, and their curators act in that broader framework? Did they contribute to constructing the sacred memory of the war, or deconstructing it? My research revealed that contemporary Russian museums are sites where the secular and the sacred memory regimes are interacting and overlapping.

Recent scholarship in social sciences has paid attention to the entanglement of religious emotions with national sentiment. By using the concept of the “secular sacred”, authors have expressed an urge to overcome the clear-cut oppositions between the category of “sacred”, primarily associated with ritual and religion, and the “secular”, associated with everything else. Indeed, these categories overlap and mutually enforce each other in multiple areas, such as the political authority or nationalism (Balkenhol, van den Hemel & Stengs 2020). A recent volume *Memory and religion in a postsecular perspective* (Bogumil & Yurchuk 2022) also argues that religion influences the public memory in societies that can be considered as post-secular. Russian museums are one such example. The article by Detelina Tocheva in that volume illustrates that museum curators in Russia can voluntarily combine a scientific approach with religious practice in their work, as in the case of restored chapel in a museified palace. The diversity of approaches in Russian museums can be explained by the fact that the entanglement of memory and religion has various origins: it is imposed from above and it grows from below.

Referring to the linguistic turn in social sciences, Jay Winter (2017) suggests paying attention to the “languages of remembrance” in order to understand how attitudes towards war are formed in a society. He includes in his research different types of

“languages beyond words”: paintings, photography, films, and monuments (Winter 2017a). My research is consecrated to the language of museums, the use of exhibits, spatial settings, design, and curatorial statements in representing and explaining the First World War to the public. When I came to Russia to study exhibitions devoted to the First World War, the use of religious language by museums was not initially one of my research questions.¹ This issue emerged from the field: I indeed observed a mix of secular and religious languages of memory in the state museums where I conducted my research.

At least two dozen exhibitions opened in the former imperial capital, Saint Petersburg in 2014, and more than a dozen in Moscow. The enthusiasm of Russian museums regarding the topic was explained by the fact that the Ministry of Culture of Russian Federation strongly incited Russian cultural institutions to actively participate in the ‘jubilee’ and offered subventions. I included in my study 16 exhibitions in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. They were organised by history museums, by war museums, or by art museums. Several methods of study were used. I observed the museum halls, analysing the visual design, curators’ statements, the presentation of the exhibits, and spontaneous reactions of the public. I interviewed visitors of the Museum of Artillery of Saint Petersburg. After the centenary, I studied in greater detail a new First World War museum that was inaugurated in 2014 in Tsarskoe Selo, a suburb of Saint Petersburg. After having visited it several times, I conducted two in-depth interviews with its founder and director, Georguy Vvedenskii in 2020. To understand the whole spectrum of the events during the centenary celebrations, I also interviewed representatives of the associations that were the most active, such as the Club of Historical re-enactment of Saint Petersburg and the White Cause (*Beloe delo*). The documentary films and fiction distributed by the television channels in summer 2014 were also studied to understand the media follow-up of the event and to analyse the new interpretations of the war that were proposed by the media. I also analysed the discourses of the politicians during the preparation for the centenary (in the Parliament, during the sessions of the Society for Military history, during the sessions of the Centenary Committee, at the inauguration of the new monuments, at the exhibition openings). I also took into account the publications about the First World War published or broadcast by the cultural institutions belonging to the Orthodox Church (radio and television channels, journals, and the Orthodox theological universities).

To understand how the museums were involved in the construction of memory regimes, I first of all examined the presentation of exhibits related to faith and religious practices. All allusions to religion in visual design and audio-guides were also noted. I also noticed that museums displayed objects that do not refer to any particular religion but that have been highlighted and ‘singularised’ in the explanations of the guides, in the curatorial statements, and in the emotional language of museum exhibitions. These exhibits referred to suffering and death useful to the nation and belonged to the category that could be described here

1 This fieldwork was part of the multi-sited research project “Revisiting commemoration” (Antichan, Gensburger & Teboul 2016) that was particularly focused on the perception of the exhibitions by the visitors. This research was financed by the LABEX ‘*Les Passés dans le Présent*’.

as secular sacred objects. Drawing upon the display of the objects and museum presentations, I analysed the museums' discourses about the fallen soldiers, asking: Were they presented as victims (useless deaths), as martyrs (useful sacrifices), or as heroes (admired for outstanding courage)?

The first part of this article introduces the broader context of the current memory landscape in Russia and stresses the respective contribution of the main actors during the centenary (the state, the Church, the right-wing NGOs, and public historians) to the reinterpretation of the First World War in 2014. In the next sections different strategies of museums will be analysed. The sacralisation of the war museums as temples of patriotism will be described using the case of the new museum 'Russia in the Great War' situated in Tsarskoe Selo, a suburb of Saint Petersburg. The 'secular' scientific approach to the presentation of the cult objects will be approached using the case of the Museum of the History of Religion of Saint Petersburg. And finally, the 'sacred-secular' emotional presentation of the war as the most typical strategy will be described using the data from all exhibitions in question.

Constructing the sacred memory of the First World War: The main actors outside museums

The official memory politics

In 2014 the First World War was commemorated on a national level for the first time in Russian history. The decision to commemorate the beginning of the war was announced by Vladimir Putin in his discussion with Members of Parliament in 2012 (Makarkin 2014). The following year, the state created two structures directly responsible for the preparation of the jubilee: a committee for the coordination of the centenary presided over by the Speaker of the Parliament, Serguei Naryshkin, and a new organisation entitled the 'Society for the Study of Military History' headed by the Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii. The state invested considerable funds in the promotion of the event and also created a memory infrastructure in Moscow, Petersburg, and several Russian regions (Pakhalyuk 2016; Petrone 2015; Tchouikina 2016). On 1 August 2014, the anniversary of the declaration of war on the Russian Empire, a new monument was inaugurated on Mount Poklonnaia in Moscow, in the presence of the president Vladimir Putin, who made a speech, the Patriarch Kirill, and other officials.

There were many reasons why it was so important for the Russian state to celebrate this anniversary in 2014. In constructing Russian national identity on a patriotic and heroic narrative, the state strived to create a symbolic continuity between the military victories of the imperial period, the Soviet victories, and the present-day strength of the Russian army. The centenary was meant to construct a symbolic continuity between the "Patriotic War" (with Napoleon, in 1812), the "Great War" (1914-1918), and the Second World War known in Russia as "The Great Patriotic War" (1941-1945) (Miller 2015). Russia's victory in the Great Patriotic War became a highly important political instrument in the 2000s; a symbol of the unity of Russia, a metaphor expressing contemporary Russian force and 'greatness'. Scholars have argued that the population enjoyed celebrating the victory in that

war in an active, performative way by taking part in the processions of “Immortal Regiment” (Fedor 2017; Gabowitsch 2018), or the motor rallies from Russia to Germany (Gabowitsch, Gdaniec & Makhotina 2017). All throughout the 2000s the memory of the Great Patriotic War has been sacralised and sanctified. Chapels or churches were built on important memorial sites; senior officials attended with representatives of the Orthodox Church on important dates (Wood 2011), and Stalin appeared on new icons (Kormina 2013). Yet despite the many signs of the interplay of memory and religion in the remembrance of the Great Patriotic war, Soviet commemorative scenarios still dominated in the 2010s, limiting the use of this memory for contemporary purposes. With its unique status, and being historicised, the 1945 victory is not completely instrumental to sacralising the war as such. The centenary of the First World War gave the authorities the possibility to experience a more universal model of commemoration of Russia’s wars, including within this the Imperial Army, the Church, and the Tsar.

The centenary also became a turning point in the celebration of war, as it coincided with the first Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict over the Crimea and Donbass. The authorities used their interpretation of the history of the First World War to introduce the topical geopolitical agenda. The political discourse insisted on the idea that in 1914, Russia was forced by circumstances to enter into the war and defend the Serbian people. So, the parallel with the official interpretation of the Ukrainian conflict was quite evident, since it insisted that the government was helping the supposedly victimised Russian population of Ukraine. The authorities also used this occasion to reinforce Russia’s symbolic connection to Serbia. A Russian military graveyard in Belgrade was renovated, and a monument to Russian and Serbian soldiers was financed by Russian foundations and opened at Kalemegdan fortress in Serbia.

Despite the century that had passed, 1914 was commemorated as if it were a living memory. The events all resembled a symbolic return to the pre-revolutionary situation, as if the nation were once again mourning the dead, erasing the Bolshevik upheaval and the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and symbolically including the Russian Empire in the victory of the Entente at the end of the First World War. In his speech on 1 August 2014, Vladimir Putin insisted that “traitors to the national interests” (meaning the Bolsheviks) had “stolen the victory” from the Russian army.²

Television

The interpretation of the war, transmitted by the state-controlled television channels, contained several ideas. The main innovation consisted of showing the continuity between the Imperial Army and the Soviet army. The television series “The First World War” featured as its main protagonist Rodion Malinovsky, born in Odessa in 1898, who participated as a volunteer in the First World War and during the Second World War, became a Marshal of the Soviet Union, and later a Minister of Defence. These TV series served as an illustration of Vladimir Putin’s speech on 1 August 2014 where he uttered that the soldiers who fought in the

2 For more information on that speech, please refer to the Kremlin website: <<https://tinyurl.com/yec8br93>>

Imperial army transmitted the traditions of the latter to the Soviet army. Thus, the victory on the Eastern front during the Second World War was symbolically anchored in a long military tradition. Another idea transmitted by the mass-media insisted on the patriotic feeling of the population and their readiness to die for the motherland. The film “Battalion”, dedicated to the famous episode of the formation of the female battalion by a female officer Maria Bochkareva³ in 1917 was one of the best illustrations of that statement. Another idea consisted of showing that the war was not useless, anti-national, or anti-popular (as famously claimed by Lenin), but that it defended Russian national interests. In an archive-based documentary series “Great and Forgotten War”, a non-academic historian and a journalist who produced radio and television programmes and documentary films, Victor Pravdiuk, reproduced arguments defended by the ministers of the Empire during the conflict, taking them for granted. Also, on many occasions during the commemorations, the Bolsheviks and other oppositional parties were shown as traitors, whereas Tsar Nicholas II was completely rehabilitated and glorified. Finally, the leitmotif of the centenary, a kind of motto accepted by all the actors and the public, was the idea that the First World War had been *unjustly* forgotten and needed to be restored to the national memory. If the official discourse at large was not readily accepted by everyone because of its militarist overtones, the announced goal of establishing a historical continuity, of providing new information, and paying a debt of memory seemed to be consensually accepted.

The Orthodox Church

The centenary of the First World War was also an excellent occasion to secure the status of the Orthodox Church as a partner of the state in the commemoration of wars. Recent publications have shown that the Church has become an important actor in the field of history and memory in Russia in recent years. Zuzanna Bogumił and Kathy Rousselet in particular have drawn attention to its contribution to the memory of Soviet repression (Rousselet 2007; Bogumił 2018). Alexander Agadjanian (2017) claims that the conservatism both of Putin’s politics and of the Church have contributed to the rapprochement of Church and State in the ideological sphere. The Church has thus become an important instrument of the state’s politics based on the ideas of patriotism, Russianness, anti-Western orientations, heroic military traditions, and patriarchal gender roles. Irina Papkova and Dmitry Gorenburg (2011) pointed out that Patriarch Kirill, in power since 2009, has managed to achieve several goals, including the acceptance of religious instruction in public schools, the restitution of Church property, and the introduction of chaplains into the armed forces.⁴ That is why cultural institutions belonging to the Orthodox Church (radio and television channels, their journals, and Orthodox theological universities) produced their own discourse in 2014 about the role of the Church during the armed conflict and the exploits of heroic priests at the fronts.

3 Maria Bochkareva (1889-1920) exceptionally received permission from Tsar Nicholas II to be recruited into the army. Distinguished in battles, she was promoted to Officer in 1917. Then she created the first female battalion in Russian history. Its main goal was to set an example for men who deserted the fronts. The majority of the members of the women’s battalion died in battle. After 1917, Bochkareva joined the anti-Bolshevik army forces and was executed by the Red Army during the Civil War.

4 This last factor was particularly important at the time of the centenary, as the introduction of the chaplains had been strongly criticised in the press.

In addition, the centenary brought to life a new series of conflicts around Church property. In the Soviet Union, spatial traces of the First World War were systematically erased, and tombs and military cemeteries were destroyed nearly everywhere in the 1950s (Kasparavicius 2014). During the centenary, the Orthodox Church started to label the urban spaces where First World War tombs had been destroyed as 'sacred' (*sakralnoe mesto*) and endeavoured to appropriate these spaces. One very interesting example involves the Church's activities on the land belonging to Sokol Park in Moscow. This park was constructed in the 1950s on the site of the Fraternal Cemetery for War Victims (Petrone 2011). In the process of creating the park, the graves and the chapel were demolished. In 1998, a new Transfiguration Chapel was constructed. At the beginning of August 2014, Patriarch Kirill himself performed a funeral service in the chapel 'for the leaders and the warriors of the motherland'. The aim of this service was probably to symbolically grant this park a status as the main memorial place for the First World War. The Church's activities in Sokol Park continued during subsequent years. In 2015, the remains of Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich Romanov⁵ and of his wife were reinterred in the Transfiguration Chapel. That same year, a capsule with soil from Gumbinnen (Gusev) near Kaliningrad, the only battleground of the war on the territory of the Russian Federation, was also brought to the chapel, and Church representatives explained that 'this soil was covered by the blood of Russian warriors during the First World War'.⁶ Finally, in 2017 the Russian Orthodox Church organised a three-day-long requiem for all warriors buried in the cemetery, and eighteen thousand names were recited during the event.

The actions of the Church were important in many ways for the reinforcement of the sacred memory regime during the centenary. By announcing the presence of the sacred spaces and objects, the Church was claiming that the memory of the First World War is materially present in contemporary society. Moreover, the cooperation of state officials with the Church helped reinforce the emotional attitude to the war and its outcome. Priests were present at the inauguration of the new monuments by the public authorities and public prayers created a solemn atmosphere.

Right-wing NGOs

The right-wing forces in civil society also participated in the introduction of the sacred memory regime. Non-governmental organisations active in the field of memories of the Great War have several characteristics: their members identify themselves as religious believers and monarchists; they have deeply anti-Soviet political views; and they are fascinated by the anti-Bolshevik resistance, with particular respect for the White Army formed after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty in 1918. Some of these associations were active long before the centenary, but in 2014 their involvement was noted in the press and became more visible. They carried out several types of activities: historical re-enactments and the staging of battles (see **Figure 1**); the restoration of graves and the installation of memorial plaques, signs and monuments; the search for new information on unburied soldiers and

5 The Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich Romanov, an uncle of Tsar Nicholas II, was Commander-in-Chief of the Russian army from 1914-1915.

6 For more information, see the article "Calumniated war" at <<https://tinyurl.com/2cpnzaha>>

those missing in action; commemorative tourism to the sites of the battles; the establishment of links between the descendants of those who took part in that war; and the commemoration of veterans who were victims of Stalin's purges in the 1930s. Like the Church, these associations have helped to materialise the memory of the First World War by drawing attention to places and spaces, with particular attention to the graves. Since 2008, the association known as the White Cause (*Beloe delo*) has been restoring many of the graves of war participants that have survived in civil cemeteries. They have also raised money from their supporters to restore gravestones and inscriptions.⁷ This attention to graves is particularly important for the construction of a sacred memory regime. While these young people together worked at the cemeteries to restore or clean graves, they were creating a remembering community, bound by emotions and common interests. So, the memory of the First World War became current, related to present-day identities. In 2014, the White Cause together with the Returned Names (*Vozvrashennyye imena*) and the Orthodox radio channel of the Saint Petersburg region *Grad Petrov* initiated the opening of the monument to First World War veterans who had been victims of Stalinist repressions in the 1930s at the site of mass inhumation in Levashovo near Saint Petersburg.



Figure 1. Historical re-enactments, Solyanoi pereulok (Saint Petersburg)

© Sofia Tchouikina 2014.

7 My interview with Oleg Shevtsov, one of the leaders of the White Cause, in 2021.

The ‘Christian historians’ and the discourse of repentance

Alongside members of associations or individual activists, there were also professional historians who were openly claiming their own religious adherence to the Orthodox faith and were intentionally using religious references. These figures insisted on the importance of religious symbols for the memory of the First World War. One well-known specialist in military history, Kirill Aleksandrov, born in 1972, defined himself in one of his interviews as ‘a Christian historian’, a term that can be applied to many public historians active during the centenary.⁸ He prepared several cycles of historical public lectures⁹ that were broadcast daily by *Grad Petrov* Orthodox Radio.

Another active participant in the centenary, Alexei Aranovich, born in 1974, is professor of the history of costume at the Institute of Design in Saint Petersburg and president of the Saint Petersburg club of historical re-enactment. In one of the interviews published in newspapers over this period, Aranovich claimed that religiosity was necessary for military men – it was inseparable from military service. He insisted on the “very close link between the spiritual and technical components of hard military work during the First World War”, explaining that:

The contemporary world is based on other values than the world before the coup d'état of 1917. For our contemporaries, spirituality and everyday tasks are functionally disconnected. And for those soldiers, what did it mean when the Mother of God appeared in the sky near Augustów? Our contemporary rational thinking cannot understand that. But in order to understand that remote epoch, we need to feel how those officers and soldiers in the trenches themselves understood things. Life in the presence of death, under fire – this situation naturally makes a man more religious. A Russian person has always been a profound believer from birth. It is a great tragedy that the Russian people have doomed themselves to a catastrophe, massively withdrawing and distancing themselves from the faith.¹⁰

During the roundtable at the ITAR-TASS news agency concerning the memorialisation of the First World War, Aranovich drew the attention of the audience to the new monument to the regimental priest in Tsarskoe Selo designed by sculptor Vladimir Gorevoy:

You remember this famous expression that the war is not over as long as the last soldier is not buried and not prayed. A priest was accompanying soldiers to the Great war, and he was reading the burial services over them, advancing them to God. This monument commemorates the war of 1914 and at the same time it represents our repentance for these awful, troubled years of the 20th century.¹¹

For several public historians actively engaged in the centenary commemorations, having a serious understanding of the Great War implied ‘repentance’ (*pokaianie*) for the sins of previous generations. The idea of repentance has both a secular and

8 For more information, see the interview with Kirill Aleksandrov, at <https://tinyurl.com/KAleksandrov>.

9 “The sense of the Great War”, “August 1914 day by day”, “The great forgotten war: 1915 and 1916”.

10 For information on the discourse of Alexei Aranovich, please refer to <https://tinyurl.com/AAdiscourse>.

11 Speeches (by Alexei Aranovich) at the ITAR-TASS roundtable, available on YouTube at: <https://tinyurl.com/AAutube>.

a religious meaning in Russia. The term entered into use after the success of the film *Repentance* (1987) directed by Tengiz Abuladze dedicated to the understanding and condemnation of the political terror of the Soviet period. Then, in 1993, the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church Alexis called on the Russian people to repent for the deaths of the Tsar's family. This repentance is now performed during the commemoration of the assassination of the imperial family in Ekaterinburg that attracts pilgrims and has become "a major patriotic act" (Rousselet 2015). The mentioning of repentance during the centenary by Christian historians is closely related to their rejection of the 'Soviet project', and of the methods that were used by the Soviet state when it was constructing the Soviet system and implementing Stalinist modernisation. Their negative attitude to the Soviet period is close to the position of the Orthodox Church, which claims that the Stalin-era tragedies of the period from the 1920s to the 1950s can be seen as a punishment for the pre-revolutionary loss of faith (Bogumił, Moran & Harrowell 2015).¹²

For instance, Victor Pravdiuk, a non-academic historian and journalist producing radio and television programmes and documentary films, is the author of the film *Great and Forgotten War*. This film was permanently projected at the exhibition "Steel and Blood" in the Museum of Artillery in Saint Petersburg in 2014. Pravdiuk explained his attitude to the memory of the First World War in the following way:

A rehabilitation of the memory of the Great War means we should restore the visceral connection with our fatherland that we have nearly completely lost. Because for me, the Soviet Union is not Russia, I say this very honestly. Russia was occupied by the Soviet Union. [...] That is why returning to the memory of the First World War means liquidating a black hole into which we tumbled in the twentieth century. And we need to be in touch with our fatherland, without which we cannot survive.¹³

This position is characterised by nostalgia for Imperial Russia. Instead of using distanced historical categories, participants in the centenary commemorations often used emotionally charged words and expressions. For instance, some historians used archaic pre-revolutionary expressions such as '*Gosudar' Imperator*' (His Majesty Emperor Nicholas II) instead of the neutral phrase 'Tsar Nicholas II'. The use of the older term made their language more affective and personal.

All these actors – the state, the Church, memory activists, Christian historians – described the fallen soldiers as 'heroes' and 'patriots' rather than victims. They highlighted the army's exploits, insisting on the fact that the Russian army had won many battles and greatly contributed to the victory of the Entente. They condemned the revolutions of February and October 1917 and instead constructed a continuity between Tsarist Russia and contemporary Russia. The attention to graves, the unburied, the reburied, and the bloody soil symbolically exhumed the First World War as an event with contemporary political significance (Verdery 1999).

12 Jeanne Kormina (2013) argues that in the 2000s there was a "call for collective repentance disappeared from the political agenda of the official Church, to be maintained only by groups of right-wing monarchist Orthodox dissidents". Among the aforementioned memorial activists, some were indeed critical of the current politics of the Orthodox Church.

13 Speeches (by Victor Pravdiuk) at the ITAR-TASS roundtable, available on YouTube at: <<https://tinyurl.com/VPutube>>.

The exhumation of the forgotten war was also perceived by its organisers and most active participants as part of a process of de-sovietisation.

To be successful, this centenary had to reach a wide audience. But Russian society had any tradition of remembering the First World War. For a hundred years, it was considered a useless and “imperialist” conflict, and its memory was effectively erased by that of the Revolution (Sumpf 2014). Even after the fall of the USSR, in the 1990s, it was given little attention (Janeke 2014). So, in 2014 it was necessary to find a way to arouse interest among the potential audience. For this reason, all those involved in the centenary commemorations – the state, the mass media, the cultural institutions, the church, and the memorial activists – sought to emotionalise the event and create a strong and vivid feeling. As the following pages show, Russian state museums also developed a specific language to create a living memory of the Great War. This language of emotions in museums can be analysed as an interaction of different and heterogenous trends: emotionalisation of the memory landscape operated by different non-museum actors, but also Soviet museum traditions of singularisation of everything related to the heroic death, as well as the Western emotional turn in museology.

Sacred memory regime in war museums: Choice of objects, strategies of (de)contextualisation

My observations in the museum halls during the centenary suggested that the war museums in Russia present the war memory as a sacred memory. Research articles about war museums in other countries also indicate that this is a special type of museum that is, according to Jay Winter, a “semi-sacred site”, situated somewhere “between a museum and a memorial”, between telling history and mourning the dead (Winter 2012: 150–151). But in Europe, war museums have undergone significant changes since the 1990s, for reasons including the attempts to construct a common European memory; the centrality of the death of civil victims in the memory of the Second World War that influences the memory of other wars; and the new trends in history (cultural turn, linguistic turn, gender studies, global history) that moved away from national political history and brought new questions. The war museums created in Europe since the 1990s are pacifist and sometimes “post-national”, in the sense that they present the point of view of several countries, including former enemies, as in the case in the Historial of the Great War in Peronne in northern France (Winter 2006, 2017b; Wahnich 2012; Wahnich & Tisseron 2001; Joly 2001). Winter also uses the notions of “horizontal language” and “vertical language” to analyse the design of monuments and expositions. The verticality expresses hope whereas the horizontality is used to symbolise the hopeless situation. In Europe the artistic use of “horizontal language” is very common in war museums and memorials. For example, in the Historial of the Great War in Peronne, the uniforms and arms are laid out in square holes. While looking at them, a visitor thinks immediately about death.

In Russia the role of war museums seems completely different. A proud “vertical language of hope” is used to depict the patriotic engagement of heroes. The

memory of the Great Patriotic War¹⁴ also influences the portrayal of other wars and conveys the idea that war is inseparable from victory. A detailed case study of the new museum “Russia in the Great War” created in 2014 was undertaken in order to understand how the sacred memory of the war was constructed. This will be underlined in the following section.

The history of the museum “Russia in the Great War”: The Martial Chamber in Tsarskoe Selo

Georguy Vvedenski (1954-2021), the late founder and first director of the museum “Russia in the Great War” (Martial Chamber) in Tsarskoe Selo, was an experienced museum curator who had been fascinated by military history since childhood. As a teenager he took part in a history club at the Artillery museum in Leningrad, and at university, he worked as an assistant at the Suvorov Museum.¹⁵ After completing his military service, and obtaining a diploma in history from Leningrad University, he worked in various museums, defended a doctoral thesis, specialised in the history of weapons, and wrote several books on Russian military uniforms. In the 1990s he also taught museology at the Saint Petersburg State Institute of Culture.

Proud of his aristocratic origins, he was well aware of his family history, and the First World War was of particular significance to him, as his grandfather (whom he knew personally) had fought in the war, while his great-grandfather had died at the front. From his mother, an opera singer, he inherited a passion for theatre. He particularly enjoyed taking part in historical re-enactments, wearing uniforms and staging battles. Since there was not a single museum on the First World War in Russia, he had been dreaming of the creation of such a museum since the 1970s and had a precise idea of what elements would be necessary. The centenary offered the opportunity to realise his dream. After the official announcement that the great forgotten war should be returned to Russian national memory, the direction of the Museum Ensemble situated in the Saint Petersburg suburb *Tsarskoe Selo*¹⁶ (where Vvedenski had been employed since 1993) accepted his proposal to restore the building known as the Martial Chamber (originally destined by Tsar Nicholas II to house the Russian Army Museum) and to use the space inside to create the museum of the First World War¹⁷ (see **Figure 2**).

14 The Great Patriotic War is the term used in Russia to refer to the Eastern front of the Second World War.

15 Aleksander Suvorov was a Russian marshal active in the 18th century.

16 Tsarskoe Selo, a suburb of Saint Petersburg, used to be a summer residence of the Tsars, including Tsar Nicholas II. The current Museum Ensemble includes several palaces, churches and other buildings that belonged to or were built by the imperial family. Tsarskoe Selo was badly damaged during the Second World War, and some of the buildings are still being restored.

17 Legally, the museum is an integral part of the Tsarskoe Selo Cultural Heritage Site.



Figure 2. The building of the Martial Chamber, exterior view
(Museum ‘Russia in the Great War’, Martial Chamber, Tsarskoe Selo)

© Sofia Tchouikina 2014

Vvedenski played an important role in the preparation of the centenary at the national level. He was one of the founders of the Society of the Military History, an organisation that was responsible for developing an ideology for the event. He took part in preparatory meetings with other cultural figures, and even met Vladimir Putin on one occasion. Vvedenski approved of the domestic and international policies of the Russian authorities and agreed with Putin’s government that Russia had nothing to learn from the West for the time being and that the West was determined to weaken Russia. His political views also coloured his view of history: he saw the February and October Revolutions of 1917 as the results of foreign conspiracies. Despite his anti-Western political views, he attended meetings of the International Association of Military Museums and spoke quite good English. But he was absolutely convinced that there should be no foreign influence in the process of creating his First World War museum, and he had to fight hard to defend his point of view. Initially, the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation suggested that he use a well-known museum design firm, Ralph Appelbaum, for the project. Vvedenski vehemently opposed this proposal, arguing that “a war museum always transmits ideology”. In his opinion, a foreign company could bring its ideological influence to bear on the design. That is why he insisted on using only Russian designers. In an interview, when I asked him about his attitude to the horizontal language of commemoration and the pacifist attitude that is now typical of new war museums in France and in other countries, he replied that these trends were not useful for Russia.

The museum “Russia in the Great War” as a sacred place

Georguy Vvedenski saw his museum as a sacred space in many ways. Both the building and the exhibition were consecrated by a local priest. Father Michael, a priest from St. Sofia’s Orthodox Cathedral in Tsarskoe Selo, had been a paratrooper earlier in his career, so he was proud to cooperate with a war museum. In the same interview, when I asked him why some museums cooperate with the Church and organise prayers in the museum space, Vvedenski replied that he thought it was quite natural, as “a museum is also a spiritual institution” (*dubovnoe uchrezhdenie*).¹⁸

Vvedenski had several reasons to consider his museum as a sacred place. The first was the museum’s direct link to Tsar Nicholas II, who was canonised as a martyr saint by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000. The last Russian tsar had personally ordered the construction of the Martial Chamber and created the Army museum within it. Financed by state funds and private donations, the museum was opened in 1917, only to be closed a few months later. The restoration and reopening of this museum in 2014 could be seen as the realisation of the Tsar’s will. Unsurprisingly, Nicholas II is given special attention in the museum with his belongings, the interiors of his office and, above all, his military uniforms, elegantly and proudly displayed. The exhibition of the Martial Chamber led me to conclude that one of the means of constructing ‘sacredness’ with a museum is to accentuate the beauty of objects, to singularise them by their attractiveness. The objects related to Nicholas II and his family were beautified by the museum setting. Various quotations displayed in large letters transmitted the idea that Nicholas II was not to blame for the outbreak of the conflict. This new museum originally did not have its own collections and had to purchase objects from private collectors. But some authentic objects of Nicholas II and his family were available. After the Revolution, someone hid the Tsar’s personal belongings in the attic of one of the buildings in Tsarskoe Selo, the former imperial summer residence; they were eventually discovered by museum curators and remained hidden throughout Soviet times. Now these objects are on display, and some of them have been transferred to the Martial Chamber for exhibition. This miraculous rescue of the Tsar’s belongings (clothes, utensils, arms) contributes to the museum’s deep connection with the memory of the last emperor.

The second reason why Vvedenski considered the building as a sacred space was his curatorial intention to create a spiritual atmosphere that could correspond to the mentality of the soldiers at the front. In response to my question as to why there were so many religious symbols and objects in his museum, he replied: “At the front there are no atheists; when death is so close, everyone is a believer”.¹⁹ Georguy Vvedenski himself took part in historical re-enactments of battles and liked to wear military uniforms. By wearing uniforms, wielding arms, and taking part in staged battles, he sought to understand the psychology of the men who had fought, and he wanted to transmit his knowledge through the museum. To represent the frontline soldier’s mentality as accurately as possible, Vvedenski displayed different types of icons that were mostly painted in post-Soviet years, but which corresponded to certain

18 My interview with Georguy Vvedenski, 4 January 2020, Saint Petersburg.

19 My interview with Georguy Vvedenski, 13 February 2020, Tsarskoe Selo.

established traditions or concrete episodes in the history of the war. On the guided tour I attended in 2020, he explained the purpose of each icon. The icon of Saint George in the showcase dedicated to the heroic defence of the fortress of Osoviec²⁰ corresponded to an episode on the Eastern Front when a small detachment of Russian soldiers managed to repel the German attack for several months. From the Bulgarian monastery on Mount Athos, the soldiers received an icon of Saint George with a blessing that would help them defeat the Germans. The special significance of this episode, according to Vvedenski, was that Bulgaria was on the opposite side – but spiritually, the Bulgarians supported the Russians.

According to Vvedenski, every kind of armed force in Imperial Russia was ‘protected’ by a saint, and this fact was represented in the exhibition. The corresponding icons were placed in the museum according to themes. For example, in the hall dedicated to the fleet there is an icon of Saint Nicholas, while an icon of Saint Ilya is in the hall devoted to aviation. Besides that, there were regimental icons on display. Every regiment had its own saint corresponding to the day of its foundation in the Church calendar. For instance, if according to a Church calendar a regiment was founded on the Feast of the Holy Trinity, this regiment considered the icon of the Trinity to be their principal spiritual protection. This main icon was also reproduced on the regiment’s flags until 1900, when the same image of Christ was adopted for all regimental flags.

Let me stress here that the use of icons in this museum suggested their status as ritual sacred artefacts inviting prayer rather than museum exhibits providing information. The icons were placed on the walls, and not in the display cases, without any labelling or explanation (see **Figures 3 & 4**). Visitors can only get to know about the saint protecting the regiments if they join the guided tours. In fact, the information about the protection of the armed forces by certain saints is not widely known. When I asked why there were no inscriptions under the regimental icons, Vvedenski rather evasively replied that he ‘did not want to distract the visitor’s attention’. This lack of contextualisation in the presentation of the icons forces the visitors – at least those who consider themselves to be believers – to engage with them as images of Orthodox saints rather than as artefacts denoting the historical organisation of the Russian army.

20 The Fortress of Osowiec (now northeastern Poland) was besieged and attacked several times by the German army during the war. The most famous Battle of Osowiec was fought on 6 August 1915.



Figure 3. Entrance to the exhibition: icons on the wall
(Museum 'Russia in the Great War', Martial Chamber, Tsarskoe Selo)
© Sofia Tchouikina 2014



Figure 4. Icons on the wall (without inscriptions)
(Museum 'Russia in the Great War', Martial Chamber, Tsarskoe Selo)
© Sofia Tchouikina 2018

The sacred secular symbols of nationhood and sacrifice

The third reason, why, according to Vvedensky, his museum could be considered as a sacred space is the fact that the war marks a particular moment when the deep connection of the population to the country and the nation was very strong. He told me several stories that illustrate the national pride of Russian soldiers and their capacity for sacrifice. During the tour, he showed me 'a sacred exhibit' (*sviatynia*) related to the death of heroic martyrs. The Russian 112th Infantry Regiment from the Urals was encircled by the enemy in Poland near Augustów in 1915. As the combatants did not have any more ammunition, they took their flag, wrapped it in a soldier's uniform and planted it in the ground. Then they attacked the enemy without any weapons, and they all died. Found in Poland in 2007, the flag was sold to an American collector; after a few years it was bought by Russian collectors and found its way into the museum. Restored by a specialist in fabrics, it now takes pride of place in the centre of the main hall. This flag, which is quite large, is displayed at a distance from the others and its central position underlines its special significance.

As will be described later, regimental flags containing the Byzantine motto 'God with us' (*S nami Bog*) were used in several exhibitions. In the Martial Chamber, the use of the phrase 'God with us' as a symbol of the divine presence in the history of Russia was most obvious. Besides the authentic flag in the display case, the museum had also ordered several copies, and these new flags were used as wall decorations (see Figure 5). Here again, the method of singularising certain objects because of their beauty and aesthetic quality was being used. In addition, the depiction of Christ from this flag was placed on the ceiling of this museum, which made the museum space look like a church (see Figure 6).

The Martial Chamber exemplifies the museum's involvement in the construction of the sacred memory regime as discussed by Winter. This construction is based on different connotations of the sacred, which are represented by different types of objects: those that have an original religious and ritual use, such as icons, or the secular sacred objects that relate to heroic death of the soldiers. All together, they create an interpretation of the war as a useful and heroic human sacrifice for the sake of Russian nation protected by the divine providence. The representation of a spiritual connection between the tsar and the army reinforces the impression of a logical beauty of the Empire and of its guidance.

The Martial Chamber in Tsarskoe Selo is far from being the only example of the construction of the sacred regime in museums. I will briefly discuss another war museum that participated in the centenary: 'Suvorov Museum in Saint Petersburg'. Aleksandr Suvorov (1729-1800) was a marshal of the Russian Army, famous for his victories, his strategy, and principles. The museum was constructed in 1904 on the order of Nicholas II and was financed by the Tsar himself and by donations. It was closed after the Revolution but then reopened under Stalin. In 1988-1998 it was restored, and since that time it has become, according to its website, 'a temple of the Russian military glory'.



Figure 5. Newly made flags 'God with us' used as a decoration in the museum hall
(Museum 'Russia in the Great War', Martial Chamber, Tsarskoe Selo)

© Sofia Tchouikina 2018

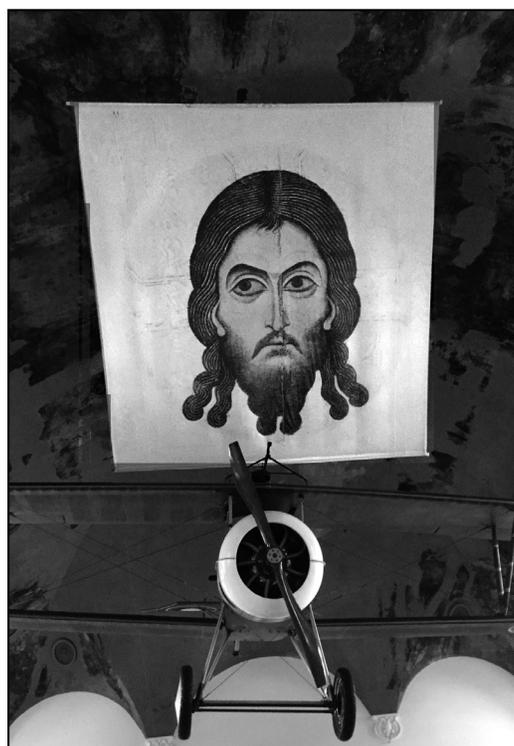


Figure 6. Ceiling of the museum
(Museum 'Russia in the Great War', Martial Chamber, Tsarksoe Selo)

© Sofia Tchouikina 2018

In 2014, the museum prepared an exhibition titled ‘Soldiers of the Great War’ devoted to the everyday life at the fronts. A vernissage opened with a memorial Orthodox ritual service. On that occasion, the archimandrite responsible for the spiritual needs of the army in the eparchy of Saint Petersburg, Aleksii (Ganzhin), remarked in his sermon that “for the first time in the last hundred years, within the sacred walls of the Suvorov Memorial Museum there has been an Orthodox sermon”, claiming that this was “a sign that a real memory of all those who died for their motherland is returning to this house”.²¹ In saying this, the archimandrite confirmed my hypothesis that the centenary of the First World War marked a turning point in the relations between the Church and the War museums, and that the latter should be considered as spaces in which the sacred memory regime can be grasped. He also dedicated much of his speech to the importance of praying for the soldiers. He insisted on the direct connection that exists between the victories of the Russian army, and faith: “The heavenly host on the Russian flag guarantee to the Russian army its might and potency”.²²



Figure 7. View of the slogan ‘Down with war’ in the Martial Chamber - © Alex Chuykin 2022

In the spring and summer of 2022, the Suvorov museum was active at the ‘cultural front’ of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The museum prepared an exhibition, ‘Suvorov, a path to immortality’, that travelled all over the Donbass, and in June 2022 it opened in the newly conquered town of Kherson.²³ Unlike the Suvorov museum, the Martial Chamber has not been involved in the cultural conquest of Ukraine. Its legal status as an integral part of the Tsarskoe Selo Heritage Site does not predispose it to take such initiatives. Moreover, in the spring 2022, one of the Martial Chamber’s exhibits – a huge slogan “Down with war” (*Doloi voynu*) carried by demonstrators in 1917 during the Revolution – was spontaneously interpreted as an anti-war statement by several visitors I interviewed after their visit (see Figure 7)²⁴.

21 For information on that speech, please refer to: <<https://tinyurl.com/mryn778x>>

22 *idem*

23 For information on this exhibition, please refer to: <<https://tinyurl.com/yvbwpd87>>

24 My interview with a family living in Saint Petersburg who visited the Martial Chamber in March 2022. They sent me photos of their visit.

Presumably, geopolitical events will change the perception of some of the exhibits displayed in war museums, and in the long run, museum curators will be forced to modify the exhibitions according to the dominant political discourses.

A secular form of presentation: The case of the Museum of the History of Religion in Saint Petersburg

Some museums in Russia are still attached to a Soviet museological tradition that consisted of secularising the cult objects. The nationalisation of private collections and of the property of the religious institutions in the 1920s-1930s brought to the museums a big number of cult artefacts. Deprived of their original functions, they were shown to the public in a scholarly way that clearly imposed a distance between the supposedly “archaic” religious past and the Soviet modernist present (Hirsch 2005).

The Museum of the History of Religion that opened in 1932 in Leningrad within the USSR Academy of Sciences (as the State Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism) was one of the brightest examples of that approach. The museum was a research institution for the multidisciplinary study of religion. The approach to exhibiting objects was based on anthropological principles, and used comparison between cultures (Shakhnovich 2020). Showing that religions existed in all historical formations, the museum demonstrated religious artefacts and the social conditions under which these objects were made. The use of visual effects, like animated scenes, mannequin groups, diagrams, and tables, lent the museum a scientific ‘language’ whereby every object was shown as part of the religious system (Teryukova 2015).²⁵

In 2014, its exhibition ‘For faith, the Tsar and the fatherland’ was the only one exclusively dedicated to the topic of religion at war. The goal was to treat the whole spectrum of problems related to the so-called “spiritual front” (*dukhovnyj front*): in other terms, a moral struggle against the enemy. Notwithstanding its ideologized title,²⁶ this exhibition adopted a secular scientific approach to the display of cult objects and religious practices, in line with the historical origins of the institution as a museum of study of religion and atheism.

Numerous exhibits related to the spiritual front were on display: garments and gowns belonging to chaplains, portable objects necessary for performing services at the front before and after battles (trunks, censers, thuribles, etc.); documents issued by the Church hierarchy; photographs from the front; religious symbols represented on different personal objects belonging to soldiers such as snuff boxes, handkerchiefs, belts; and personal crosses or medallions belonging to the soldiers and officers. Unlike the Martial Chamber’s icons displayed without contextualisation, the exhibits and legends were clearly situated in their epoch without any allusion to today’s Russia and its army. Every object, whether an icon, a document, or a painting, was accompanied by a detailed explanation on its historical use.

25 In the 2000s, thirty years after the end of state atheism, the museum displayed all world religions and considered its mission to be to “promote tolerance” (Teryukova 2012).

26 ‘For faith, Tsar and the fatherland’ is a military motto that had been in use in the Russian Empire since the 19th century.

The documents issued by the Church hierarchy during the war showed the ideological role attributed to the Orthodox priests at the front. The priests had a difficult task, working with soldiers in despair who were sometimes tempted to desert. The original documents showed that defeatist views were widespread, meaning that the priests' work grew harder as time passed. During the fighting, priests usually had to stay at headquarters, but sometimes they participated in the battles and inspired the soldiers with their presence. Special attention in the explanation panels is paid to the legends that circulated about the courage of priests and their capacity to use persuasion – for instance, by persuading the enemy to surrender without a battle.

The museum also paid attention to the soldiers' beliefs, including testimonies of miracles. The legend about the apparition of the angels to British soldiers in Mons was compared to the apparition of the Mother of God to Russian soldiers in Augustów. In a comparative perspective, these legends were presented to visitors as culturally remote phenomena, rather universal for their epoch.

This was the only exhibition to mention the repression of First World War veterans in the post-revolutionary period. For instance, we see a regimental icon donated to a regimental church by a high-ranking officer, Dmitri Shelekhov. The inscription explains that he had been wrongly accused of anti-Soviet activities and was executed in 1931 along with several other former officers.

Having specified the origins of the exhibits, their owners, and use, the curators of the Museum of the History of Religion created an intellectual distance between the authentic objects and the contemporary worldview of the visitors. The detailed descriptions and contextualisation of the displayed cult objects attributed to them the status of ordinary exhibits. By explaining their typical use and their aesthetic value, the curators desacralized these objects. So, the particularity of this museum is that it shows the priests' work and the soldiers' faith as a particular historical configuration.

There were no sacralised secular objects in the exhibition and no mention of the debt of memory, blood, or sacrifice. The display was not commemorative, but analytical and comparative. The exhibition contained several authentic objects that could particularly touch the visitors. Among them, the pride of the museum, a 'portable church': a case with the priests' objects and clothes (see **Figure 8**) and some personal objects belonging to famous personalities, like the icon of Saint George donated by Georguy Rasputin to the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich Romanov, the uncle of Tsar Nicholas II, who was Commander in Chief of the Russian army in 1914-1915.



Figure 8. ‘Field Church’: a suitcase of a chaplain with all the necessary objects for a service (Exhibition ‘For Faith, the Tsar and the fatherland’, Museum of the History of Religion, Saint Petersburg)

© Sofia Tchouikina 2014

Emotionalisation as a compromise between secular and sacred memory regimes

The emotional turn and Soviet museum traditions

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Russian museums have acquired knowledge about contemporary museum technologies and the new trends in museology. Museum staff have participated in seminars on arts management in Russia and abroad, and communicated with foreign colleagues within international associations (Tchouikina 2010, 2015). They have become quite aware of the fact that European and North American historical exhibitions use emotion to appeal to the broader public (Fleming 2004; Watson 2015). Western museums nowadays use personal stories, immersion, contemporary art, impressive design, sounds and colours, and digital devices. This approach has a certain influence in Russia, especially in the big cities. During the centenary, the trend towards the emotionalisation of museum exhibitions has proved to be quite useful. Museums have tried to entertain, surprise, impress or deeply affect visitors, often at the expense of critical historical narratives.

Yet in creating emotional settings, Russian curators were also drawing on Soviet museum traditions. In Soviet times, museums used to create a solemn atmosphere by sacralising certain types of secular objects. These ‘singularised’ exhibits were most often related to death, suffering, blood, or sacrifice, and museum curators set them apart from other, more ordinary objects, or symbolically highlighted them with flowers. Items related to death and self-sacrifice represented regional or national

communities, becoming their secular sacred treasures. Visitors were supposed to behave respectfully near these objects.²⁷

During the First World War centenary, museums also singularised secular sacred objects, either by reserving a special location for them within the exhibition, or by highlighting them with lights and colours. By using these and other techniques, museum curators try to conciliate the opposites: the sacred and secular memory, the triumph and trauma, pride and mourning, militarism, and pacifism.

Staging the debt of memory in museum halls

Museum exhibitions on the First World War have shared one common trait. Explicitly or implicitly, they have rejected the Soviet narrative of the conflict as useless and imperialist.²⁸ Independently of the thematic angle of the exhibitions, their introductory texts always stressed the need to repair a 'historical injustice', because for a long time the war had been 'forgotten': the 'heroic deeds' of the army were not sufficiently glorified, there were few monuments to the soldiers and officers, the losses were not adequately mourned, and the importance of the Empire's participation in the war was not properly understood. In this sense, the curatorial text of the exhibition 'Entente, 1914-1918' in Moscow is quite eloquent:

The thread of history was severed, the continuity between Russian and Soviet history disappeared, the deeds and heroism of several generations were forgotten or depreciated. But the force of the nation consists in having a common historical memory –memory of the exploits of our ancestors in times of arduous trials.

In this way the curators of the exhibition indicated that their main task was to repay 'the debt of memory' to the warriors and repair the break in the historical memory of generations. As one curator of the Alexander Suvorov Memorial Museum²⁹ in Saint Petersburg put it: "This war was forgotten, and extraordinary lies about it were spread; and this is an offence against those people who were in the army: the peasants, the urban middle class, the intelligentsia".³⁰

The debt of memory was represented in museum halls by spatial settings. At the exhibition 'Entente 1914-1918' in Tsaritsyno, in Moscow, the last hall was entitled 'Memory of the war'. Here secular sacred objects were exhibited: personal photographs and letters of soldiers who had died at the front.

27 These Soviet museal techniques are still in use. In literary museums (houses or apartments belonging to writers), the deathbed of a well-known poet or writer was often preserved alongside the personal objects used in his last days. The objects related to death give to these apartments the sacred character of a spiritual place (Gordine 2007; Jirmounskaïa-Astvatsatourova 2007). Historical museums also have this type of exhibit. For instance, in an exhibition about the Siege of Leningrad in the Rumyantsev Palace in Saint Petersburg, the central place was dedicated to the notebook of a teenage girl called Tanya Savicheva who was noting the dates of death from hunger of all her relatives, before her own death. Soviet ideologists used this notebook and its author to create a symbol of the population's suffering and courage in the face of the German invasion of the USSR. (Voronina & Barskova 2020: 321). In a present-day museum exhibition, this small notebook is placed in a separate shelf, and there are flowers near it to show its singularity and its value for the war's memory.

28 Even if the museums use Soviet museal techniques and approaches to museology, they reject some of the Soviet narratives.

29 General Suvorov was an 18th-century hero, but despite this fact, during the centenary this museum organised a temporary exhibition about the First World War.

30 Interview with Anna Savelieva, 30 August 2014.

The wall was decorated with black and white photographs showing a multitude of faces. Electric candles were 'lit' and placed along the wall. The dead soldiers were presented rather as martyrs than as heroes, because there was no mention of their exploits, and they were only represented as ordinary human beings, by their small personal belongings. The solemn atmosphere indicated that the soldiers' lives were lost for an important cause. This hall had no properly religious exhibit, yet it looked like a room for prayer (see Figure 9). The visitors therefore had a choice to perceive the hall as a secular space or as a sacred one according to their personal perspectives and spiritual needs.



Figure 9. The museum hall looks like a room for prayer

(Exhibition 'Entente 1914-1918', Museum Tzaritsyno)

© Sofia Tchouikina 2015



The appeal to “the debt of memory” is typical of all countries (Bienenstock 2014; Ledoux 2016), but its contents and form may vary. Usually when a tragic or traumatic event is recent and the witnesses are still alive, the emotional attitude prevails over an analytical approach. When the witnesses pass away, societies may elaborate a more distanced attitude (Rouso 2016). In Russia, however, this strong accent on the debt of memory of a war that took place a hundred years ago shows that the museums curators tend to reduce historical distance towards the event, by using a language of emotions. The “debt of memory” in the museums appears as the secular version of the “repentance” in the discourses of the Orthodox Church and memory activists as analysed above. It gives the possibility to return symbolically to the Imperial Russia, rehabilitate it and appropriate of its victories, and include them in the construction of contemporary Russian nationalism.

God, the Tsar, the army, and the fatherland in the museum halls: Enlivening the symbols of the Russian Empire

Two big exhibitions in Moscow consecrated to the political history of war reproduced the official position concerning the role of Russian Empire in the conflict: ‘The First World War: The last battle of the Russian empire’ in the State Historical Museum situated on the Red Square, and ‘Entente 1914-1918’ in Tsaritsyno. They impressed visitors with their luxurious design and were the most visited. Political ideas were conveyed through huge quotations on the walls, extracts from speeches and memoirs of contemporaries. One citation was present at both exhibitions. According to curators, it came from the memoirs of a French marshal Ferdinand Foch: “If France was not erased from the map of Europe, we owe it to Russia” (see **Figures 10 & 11**). This and other quotations contained the following message: ‘The Russian army made a great contribution to the victory of the Entente and sacrificed herself for her allies.’ As I observed when I visited, these fragments visibly had an impact on visitors who were reading them aloud and commenting.

These exhibitions used a rich repertoire of both religious symbols and objects, and sacred secular objects to refer the Russian nation and the national spirit. The saint’s representations on flags or everyday objects (kerchiefs, cigar boxes) created a pathetic patriotic atmosphere. The regimental flags containing the Byzantine device “God with us” (“*S nami Bog*”) were used in several exhibitions. In fact, numerous Russian regiments had this motto on their flags. However, I did not see any explanation in the museums of what this device actually meant, or the history behind it. At the exhibition ‘The First World War: The last battle of the Russian empire’ in the State Historical Museum, inside the display case entitled ‘Frontline combat in the Great War’, there were uniforms, arms, and, prominently displayed, the flag “God with us” (see **Figure 12**). In the catalogue, one could find out who owned this flag but there was no explanation of this device or this visual representation. Without contextualisation, visitors rapidly read and understood the content of this flag literally: *God protects Russia*. In another hall of this exhibition, there was a multimedia screen with quotations from priests and Church hierarchs. These quotations affirmed the unity and patriotic sentiments of the nation during the war.



Figures 10 & 11. Big quotation on the wall (in French and in Russian), 'If France was not erased from the map of Europe, we owe it mostly to Russia' (Exhibition 'Entente 1914-1918', Museum Tsaritsyno)

© Sofia Tchouikina 2015



Figure 12. Flag 'God with us' inside the display case

(Exhibition 'The First World War: The last battle of the Russian Empire', State Historical Museum)

© Sofia Tchouikina 2015

Tsar Nicholas II was a central figure in several exhibitions. His portraits were often singularised and beautified through their central position in the hall. The attention in state museums to the tsar is interesting to analyse here. On the one hand, the tsar was a political and military leader of the First World War. On the other hand, he and his family members were canonised by the Orthodox Church in 2000 and are considered as new martyr saints because of their execution by the communists in 1918. The Tsar's destiny attracts the museum-going public and stimulates great interest. According to my observations, the visitors' attention was drawn to his personal objects, uniforms, and accoutrements now on show to the public for the first time. In the exhibition in the State Historical Museum, one hall was devoted to the Tsar's activities at the army's headquarters in Mogilev, where he assumed command of the army in 1915. In fact, the Tsar's decision to become Commander-in-Chief has been frequently discussed in the historical literature, as it had important political consequences. Historians consider that it was a fatal decision and one of the factors behind the Revolution, because all of the defeats of the Russian army were attributed to him in person, and in 1917, being too far away from the capital, he did not realise the scope of protests in Saint Petersburg and lost control of the situation (Werth 2010). But the museum completely excluded all these discussions and merely displayed his uniforms, his possessions, and his letters and papers, and showed documentary films where we can see him taking part in ceremonies, travelling in his personal train, or spending free time with his family. This ceremonial presentation of the Tsar as a unifying figure, who owes his importance simply to his prominent status as tsar, is typical of all the museums in question, and it is quite new compared to approaches over the previous hundred years, when the attitude to the Tsar in the literature had been very critical and his possessions were not displayed. Even though museums did not highlight the canonisation of the Tsar or his status as martyr saint, their interpretation of his activities was not historical either. It drew on the use of his secular sacred belongings with the aim of creating an emotional, rather than intellectual impact on visitors.

In Russia since the start of the 2000s, patriotism became a kind of civil religion promoted by the state and the Church and readily accepted by the population (Daucé et al. 2015; Rousselet 2015). Not surprisingly, all exhibitions served as temples of patriotism, and several of them were consecrated more specifically to the patriotic unity of elites during the war, emphasising their charitable activities in particular. 'Moscow during the First World War' in the Museum of the City of Moscow drew its visitors' attention to different forms of collecting money and clothes for the soldiers and the wounded. 'Saint Petersburg Diary' in the Rumyantsev Palace showed the engagement of elites who financed the sanitary trains or organised hospitals in their own houses. The exhibition 'The Era of Charity' in one of the buildings of the Park of Culture in Saint Petersburg showed the personal engagement of the Tsar's wife and daughters in charitable activities; the museum-apartment of poet Aleksander Blok exposed the playbills of charitable performances and concerts; while the Russian Museum attracted attention to the agitation posters and lithographies (*lubok*) created in the beginning of the war by avant-gardist artists and poets to be sold in order to collect money for the army. The rise in patriotic feelings during the first war years was well documented by all museums, whereas the disappointment and nihilism of the

later years were mostly ignored.³¹ Exhibitions contributed to the goal of glorifying the Russian Empire, the Army, the Tsar, and the Church. The museum halls reminded visitors of the famous motto of the Romanovs' army and the monarchists 'For faith, the Tsar and the fatherland'.

Double meanings and obscure presentiments: Museums' indirect dialogue with visitors

The exhibition 'The First World War: 1914–1918' at the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg presented the works of art of the Russian painters during the war years. A great number of patriotic visuals were on display: paintings, caricatures of the enemy, and popular prints dominated the space visually. The curators paid tribute to the sacred memory regime. Expressions like "sacred war" or "sacred death" were quite often used in the audio-guide, both in the quotations of the war contemporaries, and in the curators' own discourse. Visitors to the exhibition quickly got a patriotic message. But those who looked carefully at all the paintings and listened to the audio-guide got a more nuanced interpretation. Many painters in Russia presented an apocalyptic or terrifying vision of the war, for example as in the paintings of Pavel Filonov, Natalia Goncharova, and Marc Chagall. A closer look at the exhibition gives the impression that the war is a tragedy rather than a necessary martyrdom for the good of the nation, especially in the last hall where representations of war invalids by Israel Lizak and by Yuri Pimenov were displayed. Interestingly, the Golden book of the exhibition became a tribune for expression of opinions about the 2014 military conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Out of 240 entries in the book, fifteen percent of the comments expressed fear of the new war. Along with pacifist and anti-war statements, there were pro-communist and nationalist ones.

The presence of poetry in the exhibitions also served as a counterpoint to the textual and visual illustrations of patriotic unity. Poetry immersed visitors in the atmosphere of foreboding about the war. Lines from the work of Anna Akhmatova, Aleksander Blok, and Nikolai Gumilev were used as titles in the exhibition and were also written on the walls or broadcast in the halls. The poetic word integrated the experience of the "forgotten" War in the context of Russian twentieth-century culture, reminding visitors that in the cultural memory it was always present. But these poetic references were meaningful only for those more highly educated visitors who could decode them and recall the whole poem beyond one strophe or line.

The everyday objects used by the soldiers at the front (utensils, clothes) also had contradictory meanings. These material witnesses of the armed conflict were at odds with the curators' statements about the proximity and emotional importance of that war. They obviously belonged to a remote epoch and stimulated curiosity about something exotic that is far away from today's way of life. But some soldiers' personal belongings triggered visitors' emotions, as they were relatively familiar objects. According to Alexei Aranovich who curated the exhibition 'The Great War' in one of the halls of the Museum of Sculpture at Saint Petersburg, the visitors were

31 As far as I know, only one small exhibition has been devoted to left criticism of the war and the pacifist movement: 'Russian socialists in the First World War: In search for solutions of problems of war and peace' in the Russian National Library in Saint Petersburg.

most impressed and touched by the icon pendants and crosses worn next to the skin that had belonged to fallen soldiers and which were found by archaeologists on battlefields. The small icons for personal use moved the visitors because they bore witness to the soldiers' deaths, but also because there was some connection with people's family memorabilia: this was something very familiar to most Russian citizens even today.³² Museums also revealed the feelings of the 'ordinary' people, both at the fronts and on the home front. The exhibition 'Today God tests us with a hardship' at the State Historical Archives (RGIA) included letters sent by civilians to the front and seized by the censors. These messages revealed the extreme difficulties of everyday life for the peasant families and stimulated the compassion of the readers. As for the photographs of the contemporaries, these were the most popular exhibits, and they interested all types of visitors. The exhibition 'The war that ended peace' at the Multimedia Art Museum Moscow showed foreign collections, whereas the exhibition '100 photographs' organised by the Museum of Artillery in Saint Petersburg showed photographs from the Russian fronts.

The Museum of Artillery attracts all types of visitors, including some with a lower level of education. My audience research conducted in August 2014 enabled me to study their perception of the exhibits. When I asked visitors what the general message of the exhibition '100 photographs' was, they usually replied that they were proud of Russia and the powerful Russian army. But when asked to show the most impressive photographs, the answers revealed that they were particularly impressed by difficult life conditions on the frontline because the war is "a harrowing experience for a human being", according to one visitor. So, a contradiction could be observed between the non-critical reproduction of the official patriotic discourse and the personal apprehension of war experience as unbearable.

Conclusion

The use of the language of emotions that include references to religious and secular sacred symbols during the centenary celebrations can be explained first by the intention of all of the actors during the centenary to include the First World War in the pantheon of Russian military glory. Proponents of the new interpretation of that war insist that its conclusion should not be considered as a defeat but as a 'stolen victory', and the main hero of the centenary was thus the Imperial Army. Along with the heroic warriors, the wise and peaceful emperor and the courageous priests were commemorated and glorified, while the revolutions were condemned. The appeal to religion and secular sacred in all its forms helped to highlight the moral importance of the centenary.

According to Wood (2011), the sanctification of the war hinders critique. Indeed, the solemn inscription of the First World War into a long history of Russian Empire's exploits and victories makes the war irreproachable. The cultural events of the centenary developed the Orthodox Church's postulate that any war is a highly spiritual moment of history, a period during which Russia is the most loved by God. This idea was spread by the mass-media and by the cultural institutions using secular expressions.

32 Interview with Alexei Aranovich, 2 September 2014.

All actors of the centenary concentrated their efforts on the remembrance of the dead: fallen soldiers, military commandants who emigrated and were buried abroad, veterans executed under Stalin, and the murdered tsar. Fallen soldiers were mourned by the Church and honoured by the museums; the tombs of the officers were repaired by memory activists; the first commandant of the army and the uncle of the Tsar, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich Romanov was reburied in Moscow. Drawing on Katherine Verdery's argument on the political lives of dead bodies (1999), the attention to the dead and their remains, and the tombs, can be analysed as an emotional animation of the "forgotten" war and the reconfiguration of its political meaning in the construction of Russian nationalism.

The contribution of the Russian museums to the sanctification of the war consisted of translating the postulates of the cultural politics into the language and symbols acceptable for museum audiences. The abundant use of religious symbols in museums could deter some visitors who are quite often atheist or even anticlerical. The museums tried to integrate some elements of the sacred memory regime promoted by the Russian authorities and memory actors, but they often used secular language and highlighted secular sacred objects related to death. By strongly emphasising the debt of remembrance, they left little room for critical historical discussion. According to one of the definitions of *memory*, it is an emotional attitude to the past, different from *history*, which implies a more professional, distant, analytical attitude (Joutard 2013). This basic distinction between history and memory is useful to apprehend the museum's contributions to the centenary. Museums proposed emotionally touching interpretations, but the exhibitions were not in dialogue with the new historiographical turns, and even the most committed museum curators completely ignored international publications on the subject.

As for the emotionalisation of Russian museums and the absence of historical debate from them, it is necessary to contextualise such observations in the light of critical museum studies. In fact, many specialists in Europe have pointed out that professional (critical) history has less and less place in museums. For instance, one French historian, Sophie Wahnich, claims that the museums are "institutionalising the unifying symbols", and "they are musealising not so much a historical knowledge, but rather symbolic systems". Museum spaces serve to show "relics, objects that convey a truth, and have a special aura". Wahnich concludes that "with the help of scenography, museums are creating contemporary liturgies" (Wahnich 2012: 19). It is true that the "emotional turn" has affected historical museums worldwide. So, the emotional presentation of the First World War in Russia can be seen as an illustration of this general tendency.

The emotional presentation of the war does not confine museums to the limits of the state's historical politics. The messages of the exhibitions depend on many factors: the size of the museum and its funding, its location, the origins of the collection, as well as the standpoint of the museum team. I agree with the conclusions made by Egle Rindzevičiūtė (2015, 2018) based on her research in Lithuania: a state's cultural politics is only one of the factors that influence a museum's work. Usually, the museum exhibitions take a certain distance from official memory politics. Without criticising it, they do not completely reproduce it. As I have shown elsewhere, many

museums in Russia since the Soviet period had seen their mission as elaborating a consensus between the authorities and the cultivated public whose ideological orientations quite often diverge (Tchouikina 2015 [2005]). During the centenary, museums also acted in that way. They alluded to some ideas of state memory politics, but at the same time, they presented a variety of other themes and ideas that went beyond the politics and could satisfy a more expert audience.

My research suggests that the war museums in Russia can be considered as a special case. Since the Church is cooperating with the army, it also patronises some of the military museums whenever possible. The latter become “sacred spaces” and contribute to glorifying war as a highly spiritual moment in the life of the nation. Another recent development is the “musealisation” of military churches. In 2020, the new Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, usually called the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, was inaugurated in the Muscovite Patriot Park in Kubinka. In this cathedral there are some elements of a museum, including a multimedia gallery and exhibitions on the battles.³³ According to journalists, these museal elements help to attract visitors to this church.

Jay Winter argues in an interview (Absher & Phillips 2007) that the memory of war can have a de-modernising effect on society. He developed this argument in dialogue with the famous book by Paul Fussell (1975), who argued that the First World War was a great catalyst for cultural modernity. In the light of that discussion, the use of religious language and symbols in Russian public space can be understood as part of a de-modernising trajectory. Or, on the contrary, following the recent scholarship (Bogumil & Yurchuk 2022), it can be considered as a kind of a post-secular modernity, a step forward in the development of post-Soviet societies where secular institutions influence the religions ones and *vice versa*, and where religion becomes a usual part of a memory landscape. Considering the tragic geopolitical events of the year 2022, the first explanation now seems to have more explicative potential, but it does not disaffirm the fact that the use of religious and secular sacred language in the memory of a war can have various origins, forms, goals, and explanations.

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33 For information about the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Kubinka, Moscow, please refer to: <<https://tinyurl.com/cathedram>>

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