

Visual Essay

## Cult of war: The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces

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The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Kubinka near Moscow by the architect Dmitry Smirnov is dedicated to the resurrection of Christ and was officially completed on 9 of May 2020, less than two years after start of planning in September 2018. The cathedral is a quintessential example of the post-Soviet populist ideology, representing a mixture of ostensibly religious values with multiple secular cult objects. Also dedicated to the victory in what Russians call the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), it addresses the myth of a glorious history of the Russian Empire and its ancestors, and the unity of the people and power in the former Soviet Union with its mighty and wise national leaders.<sup>1</sup>

The present Russia appeals to the power strategy of security- and law enforcement authorities of the bygone Soviet Empire. Today's leaders implement this strategy by combining the re-emerged cult of war with the new-nationalistically tinged traditional values. However, commerce and consumption along with entertainment within the cathedral area are supposed to ensure the 'Great Victory' and 'Great Power' populist narratives.

This populism looks back to a long history in Russia. In the *narodniki* movement, which arose in the 1860s, the intelligentsia, a young intellectual elite, tried to come closer to the 'common people' to promote social ideas against the Tsarist regime. Today, although the current political system uses populist rhetoric to mimic its social engagement, its populism shouldn't be understood as an exclusively 'top-down' phenomenon. After a century and a half, the concept of populism in Russia can still be 'characterized by a particular form of political relationship between political leaders and a social basis', produced and articulated 'through "low" appeals which resonate and receive positive reception within particular sectors of society for social-cultural historical reasons'.<sup>2</sup>

### **Soviet meta-narrative and post-Soviet ideological creativity**

The cathedral is located in the Patriot Park, a hybrid of a military trade fair and amusement park for re-enactment events and the admiration of war machinery. The cathedral and its grounds are the park's main attraction, and act as an immense 'decorated shed' visible from the nearby Minsk highway. The strictly symmetrical plan, with an esplanade leading from the car park, puts the cathedral in the centre and the Memory Lane museum-complex along the edges, with a small park between them.

In contrast to the hero-rhetoric of the socialist era, the new Russian historical policy also embraces distinctive elements borrowed from the Russian Orthodox Church and its history, which have been modified to better suit the new patriotic culture. Its visual vocabulary can be identified not only in propaganda movies and mass culture images, but also finds its expression in architecture, in which some appropriated religious symbols are merged with elements of the 'Great Victory' quasi-religion to form a specific iconography of contemporary state populism.

However, the post-Soviet ideological creativity regarding this re-emerged cult of history – and, in particular, the cult of war – is not a complete novelty. Along with the conservative turn in the time of Brezhnev (the Soviet leader from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s), the so called cult of peace came into effect: the meta-narrative of the 'Great Patriotic War' and the cult of the war heroes took the place of Stalin's personality cult.<sup>3</sup>

Bird's-eye view of the construction site of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces (August 2019). Source: mil.ru, via Wikimedia Commons.

Ceremony of consecration of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces (June 2020). Source: Ministry of Defence (photo: Vladislav Timofeev, Alexey Ereshko, Andrey Rusov), via Wikimedia Commons.



**Simplified symbolism**

The design of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces is a revamped Byzantine and Russian revival architecture close in meaning to those historicist styles under the last Russian Emperors, which expressed the ideas of a strong nationalistic state, successor to Byzantium and Old Rus'. The lower church of the saint 'equal to the apostles', prince Vladimir the Great, who baptized Rus' in 988, is located in the plinth of the cathedral. It is essentially a baptistery with a large immersion font that could be used for adults converted to Orthodox Christianity. The main Church of the Resurrection of Christ, that is, the cathedral itself, is placed above it.

Everything in the cathedral is made to amaze and to amuse: from the rather naïve cipher of important dates that amount to the building's dimensions to the first ever use of a glass ceiling in a traditional Russian Orthodox church. Analogous to the symbolic use of colour, the cathedral's geometry and its proportions are based on numbers that symbolise 'significant figures and dates from Russian history'.<sup>4</sup> Numerology defines its proportions and dimensions: the fifteen-metre piles of the building's foundation refer to the banner of the Great Victory that belonged to the Red Army's 150th rifle division and was raised above Berlin's Reichstag building on 30 April 1945. The height of the belfry, seventy-five metres, commemorates the seventy-five years that have passed since 1945 in 2020. The iconostasis of forty-eight icons is intended to awaken a memory of the duration of the Great Patriotic War and Soviet-Japanese War: exactly forty-eight months.



**Military motifs**

The cathedrals' main reference to recent military history is, in particular, its surface design. The pervasive khaki colour of the facades and interior walls clad with glass-fibre concrete is intended to give the impression that the cathedral is built from melted down armour. Indeed, thanks Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Defence and mastermind of this project, the cathedral's metal steps and floor-plates are made from an alloy of the continuous track of real tanks and other weaponry from Nazi Germany, so that everyone entering the cathedral 'treads on the defeated enemy's arms'.<sup>5</sup> The same dark green hue also covers the facade of the Memory Lane museum-complex which encircles the cathedral, as well as all fences, lamps, and benches with its quasi-Old Russian ornamental motifs that densely populate the adjoining area.



### **Realistic images of a thousand years of Russian history**

Three ornamented portals lead into the Resurrection Church. The main, western entry is decorated with images of eleventh-century Russian martyrs, princes Boris and Gleb, whose swords serve as door handles. But since these saints, who died with a Christian humility, appears not to be heroic enough, as Vladimir Putin once said, this remains their only representation.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, such efficient military leaders and strong-willed rulers as St Alexander Nevsky and St Dmitry Donskoy are repeatedly depicted within and outside the cathedral, as well as Vladimir the Great, who could also be regarded as the first conqueror of the Crimea region.

The visual programme of the Resurrection Church focuses on the role played by Russian Orthodoxy, its clergy, faithful rulers and military commanders, and by miraculous icons, in the course of a thousand years in various conflicts on Russian soil and beyond, with the main theme dedicated to the Great Patriotic War. The mosaics appear strictly realistic when compared with the Byzantine stylization of the lower church.

Non-traditional religious and even wholly secular scenes have the most prominent role in the cathedral's decoration system. The juxtaposition of the pre-World War 2 events and battles from the Great Patriotic War echoes the clerical tradition of comparing episodes from the Old and New Testaments, in which the former foreshadows the latter. The lower tier of mosaics, closest to the visitor, represents heroic soldiers from the Great Patriotic War with the main battles listed below. The last scene in this series depicts a group portrait of so-called warrior-internationalists, with a long list of post-Second World War military conflicts, from China and Korea to Hungary and Czechoslovakia to both Chechen wars, Georgia, Crimea and, finally, Syria.

Ceremony of consecration of the Main Cathedral, bird's-eye view (June 2020). Source: Ministry of Defence (photo: Vladislav Timofeev, Alexey Ereshko, Andrey Rusov), via Wikimedia Commons.

Western portal. Photo: Nina Frolova.





**The Motherland is calling!**

The cathedral's chief iconographic peculiarity lies in an almost complete overhaul of the decoration system of the Eastern Christian traditional church. The only episodes from the New Testament to be depicted are the entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem (which could be seen as a metaphor of the storming of a city by a general) and the Annunciation: both mosaics are rather small semi-circular images above the northern and southern doors. The western wall, usually reserved for a large-scale portrayal of Judgement Day, is used here for a monumental figure of the Mother of God with the Child. She strongly resembles the woman in the famous wartime poster 'The Motherland is Calling!' by Irakli Toidze. The Christ Child holds a scroll with a quote: 'And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die' (John 11:26), so that the Christian idea of divine retribution is literally replaced here with the univocal promise of eternal life, as if soldiers, the cathedral's main congregation, are exempt from God's judgement.



### **Valhalla-like mythology**

The southern and northern apses combine images of patron saints of various military corps, such as St Barbara for missile forces and artillery, St Elias for the parachute corps, and various saint warriors like St Alexander Nevsky or St. George, with portrayals of secular military leaders from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries; an unusual juxtaposition, since traditionally, non-canonized persons could only be depicted in the role of donor, humbly kneeling beside saints if they were represented at all.

Another central Christian idea, that of redemption through the sacrifice of Christ, is downplayed by the exemplary location of the Crucifixion in the north-western corner. Its modest appearance is overshadowed by the omnipresent mosaics with their gold backgrounds. This simplistic take on Christianity brings to mind a pagan idea of a God as mighty and severe, without any nuances. The afterlife of warriors seems borrowed from the Valhalla-myth, where the winners are never judged, only celebrated. Christ is not a sacrificial Lamb of God but a gigantic golden statue in the central apse, where it seems to soar against the azure mosaic background and host of the seraphim.

Inner view. Photo: Nina Frolova.

A fragment from the mural depicting Putin, Shoigu, and other politicians on the occasion of the Crimean annexation.

Photo: Arts Council for the Cathedral construction.



### **Great symbols of newer Russian syncretism**

The 'bloodless' annexation of Crimea in 2014 is depicted side by side with its counterpart from 1783. A much-discussed mosaic celebrating an event from the 2014 campaign, with Vladimir Putin and his entourage presented among Crimean people, has been put in the choir gallery, closed to the general public. In the aftermath of the media scandal, the portraits of the Russian president and other politicians have been replaced with a group of clergy carrying an icon.<sup>7</sup>

The cathedral's main icon, Christ appearing on the Image of Edessa, is supposedly painted on wood from the gun carriage dating back to the time of Peter the Great and found in the Neva River. The importance of first Russian Emperor today is due rather to the strong connection of the current Russian powers to St. Petersburg (founded by Peter in 1703), and has hardly any connection to his aspiration for a progressive Western influence. Moreover, this icon's 'imperial' planks are held together by the hand-guard of the Soviet Tokarev self-loading rifle, one of the main weapon types used by the Red Army during the Second World War, and since then a great symbol of the recent syncretism that marks state populism in Russia.

The cathedral, created by the military authorities and opened in June 2020, not only employs populist rhetoric, but it also serves as an attraction in the surrounding Patriot Park, a 'military Disneyland' opened in 2015 that includes such attractions as the Partisan Village, the Multifunctional Firing Centre, the Military-Tactical Games Centre, and an exhibition dedicated to the current conflict in Syria which 'will stun you with the realistic panorama of the ruined Palmyra and the effect of presence in the area,' as the park homepage promises.<sup>8</sup>

Sculpture depicting Christ Almighty. Ceremony of consecration of the Main Cathedral of Russia's Armed Forces (June 2020). Source: Ministry of Defence (photographed by Vladislav Timofeev, Alexey Ereshko, Andrey Rusov), via Wikimedia Commons.

When the 'Syrian Breakthrough' campaign came to an end, the agit-train with the terrorists' trophy weapons arrived at Patriot Park near Moscow, the final destination of its route. Source: Ministry of Defence, via Wikimedia Commons.



**Populist narrative**

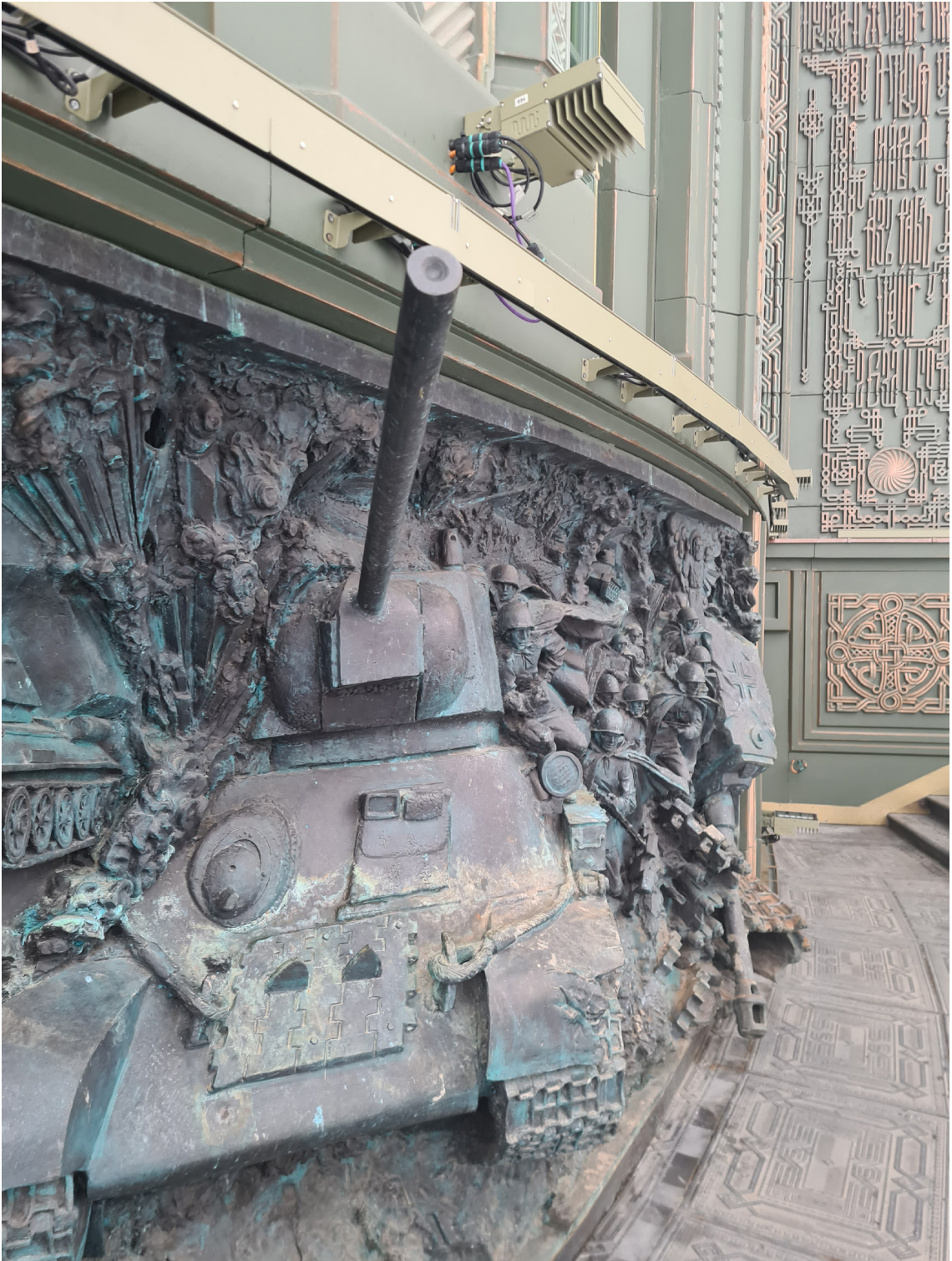
Numerous festivals have complemented the populist approach of the Main Cathedral and the Patriot park complex after its opening in 2020. For example, the Spasskaya Tower Festival, which took place in September 2020, in which the Russian Frontier Guard Band and other military ensembles performed songs dedicated to the festival theme: 'Seventy-five years: the end of the war'. In November 2020, the Field of Victory open-air museum near the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces hosted a reconstruction of the Battle of Moscow (1941), which involved a detailed recreation of people's militia division movements and the use of historical armoured vehicles. The New Year's festival in the Patriot Park, with a slide and skating rink on the Cathedral Square attracted about two hundred thousand people, according to the official statistics.

The return of a plurality within the field of architecture after 1991 proceeded from the initial impulse after decades of ideological monopoly in Soviet society. The once predestined and predictable future, 'until it was no more', then gave place to a variety within the post-Soviet political imagination.<sup>9</sup> Yet alongside an intensifying identity crisis, an effort from above could be observed at the beginning of the twenty-first century to reclaim a peculiarly 'correct' past.<sup>10</sup> The identity gained has served, among other things, to justify Russia's aggressive military policy and, on the basis of a selective representation of Russian history and its 'heroic' military past, indicated a renewed turn towards a Soviet-inspired era of 'timelessness'.

The post-Soviet aspiration for new social and political models emerged from the ideological vacuum after the collapse of the regime.<sup>11</sup> But the longing for a lacking normality and stability eventually turned out to be a path towards an authoritarian state and a dysfunctional civil society. Expressed by its invariably primitive symbolism, the visual language of the cathedral architecture is emblematic of contemporary Russia, where popular cultural motifs are integrated into the narrative of populist authoritarian state policy.

The tank from the depiction of the Battle of Prokhorovka at the apse's exterior. One of the largest tank battles in history, it was fought by the Red Army and the German forces on 12 July 1943. Photo: Nina Frolova.





## Notes

1. World War II is rarely discussed outside the academia in Russia; all public celebrations, commemorations and discussions are centred around the so-called Great Patriotic War, started on 22 June 1941, the day when the Soviet Union was first attacked by Nazi Germany, and officially ended on 9 May 1945.
2. Pierre Ostiguy, 'Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach', in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 104.
3. 9 May, a 'Victory Day', was not a public holiday in the Soviet Union before 1965. Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 199–202.
4. Official homepage of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, <https://hram-mil.ru/>.
5. 'The steps of the main temple of the Russian Armed Forces will be made of German tank tracks', *RIA Novosti*, 13 March 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200313/1568579576.html>. Our translation.
6. Arseniy Zamoscianov, 'Boris and Gleb: "Lay down and waited to be killed"? If Sviatopolk acted at the instigation of the evil one, what was the deed of the saints who did not resist?' *Pravmir*, 6 August 2018, <https://www.pravmir.ru/boris-i-gleb-legli-i-zhdali/>. Our translation.
7. 'When it was reported to him, he smiled and said: "Someday grateful descendants will appreciate our merits, but right now it's too early to do so", Peskov relayed the head of state's words.' *TASS*, 26 April 2020, <https://tass.ru/politika/8338855>. Our translation.
8. Patriot park homepage: <https://patriotp.ru/obekty/vystavochnaya-ekspozitsiya-posvyashchennaya-lokalnomu-konfliktu-v-sirii/>; Shaun Walker, 'Vladimir Putin opens Russian 'Military Disneyland' Patriot Park', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/vladimir-putin-opens-russian-military-disneyland-patriot-park>.
9. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005); Aleksander

Etkind and Mikhail Minakov, 'Post-Soviet Ideological Creativity', in *Ideology After Union: Political Doctrines, Discourses, and Debates in Post-Soviet Societies*, ed. Aleksander Etkind and Mikhail Minakov (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2020), 9–18.

10. Egor Isaev, 'The Militarization of the Past in Russian Popular Historical Films', in Etkind and Minakov, *Ideology after union*, 237.
11. Luke March, 'Populism in the Post-Soviet States', in Kaltwasser et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 214–31.

## Biography

Nina Frolova studied art history at the Moscow State University. Having started her career as a research fellow at the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture (2003–2008), she is now head of the Architecture and Fine Arts Department at the Great Russian Encyclopedia publishing house and managing editor at Archi.ru – Russia's leading architectural publication.

Elena Markus (b. Kossovskaja) studied architecture at the UdK, Berlin University of the Arts. Since 2014, Elena has been teaching at the TUM Technical University of Munich. In her PhD entitled (*Dirty Realism: Analogue Architecture 1983–1987*), she investigated the social and political significance of an architecture production of images with regard to the 'realism', as well as to the 'dirty realism' discourse in the architecture of the 1980s, and by the work example of Swiss architecture group Analogue Architecture.