

**Between Memory and Memorial.**  
**Contemporary Russian Memorial Culture and Spatiality.**  
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## Introduction.

Throughout the world people have been dealing with memories publicly for centuries. These memories often take the shape of monuments and memorials. Different from religious statues, these structures serve to commemorate victories in wars and to reflect on national trauma. Russia is not alien to this practice, with Moscow and surrounding cities featuring multitudes of these memories manifest. There are differences between these memorials when it comes to their place in the collective memories of Russia's citizens. This paper will focus on this difference through the focal point of a recent memorial; In what way does the *Wall of Grief* memorial represent the cultural memory of present day Russia with regard to their own Soviet past?

This question doesn't come from any random place. There has been an increase in discussions surrounding memorials around the world. Ukraine has recently adopted a law to get rid of all Soviet-era statues, a law which was put into effect with great prejudice. In the United States there has been a discussion surrounding flags and statues commemorating the rebellious Confederacy. This has led to the removal of said flags from city halls, and the removal of statues from streets and squares. Street names and statues do survive, however, and are still subject to discussion. The rise of protests have led to counter-protests. US citizens are split on the way we should deal with problematic memory, with the pro-statue side arguing removal would lead to a rewriting of history.

The increased discussions surrounding memory and monuments led me to look for more problematic areas. President Vladimir Putin has recently unveiled a new monument in honour of the victims of totalitarian regimes. It is however a stark contrast with statues that have been erected in other places near Moscow. Near the memorial itself a large obelisk looms over Moscow, memorialising those who fell in Russian wars. In nearby Volgograd, previously Stalingrad, a large memorial was erected in the 1960's in order to memorialise a large sacrificial battle against the German invaders. What these memorials have in common is the theme of war, sacrifice, and victory.

There seems to be a split in Russian society on how to deal with their Soviet past. This split is exacerbated by the way the government handled the one-hundred year anniversary of the Revolution. Instead of remembering or celebrating it a parade mimicking a World War Two era parade was held in order to remember the Great Patriotic War. There is an oscillation present between Russian Nationalism and the Soviet past, which I believe is worth exploring.

According to Michael Rothberg the theoretical framework surrounding memory is constantly growing. The field is becoming large enough to be the subject of research itself. Pierre Nora stated that we have never been more obsessed with creating archives, leading to an impressive collection of memories.<sup>1</sup> Rothberg has recently been adding to this theoretical body by redefining the ways in which

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1 Nora (1989): 9, 10.

memories compete with each other by challenging the very notion of this competition.<sup>2</sup> Influence of these theories can be found within the works of Jan and Aleida Assmann, the latter who's work on European Holocaust-remembrance reflects this Rothbergian way of thinking. Both Rothberg and Aleida Assmann function as the theoretical framework for my first chapter concerning the history of memory in Europe and Russia.

The second chapter is a visual comparison of multiple memorials with the *Wall of Grief* as a focal point. Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* offers the proper language in order to deal with visual meaning, and every time *signifiers*, *signified*, and *signs* are used in this paper they should be read in a Barthesian sense. The visual language of the main memorial statue will be compared to other statues about whose place more theory is available in order to pinpoint conclusions about this on a grander scale.

Elizaveta Polukhina and Alexandrina Vanke wrote a comparative analysis of the two memorials mentioned earlier in this introduction. They use Aleida Assmann and Nora in order to look at the place of these works in Russian society, creating a framework to measure their societal function. Their work is the theoretical work around which my second chapter will be based. The *Wall of Grief* will thus be compared to the works discussed by Polukhina and Vanke, and other memorials that feature the same subject matter as the Wall itself. This chapter will function as a logical combination of the earlier chapters in this paper, their essay essentially being a combination of visual and spatial analysis.

All the main works used in this paper feature comparative analysis as the main, or one of the main, methods for reaching conclusion. Polukhina and Vanke literally mention it in their introduction. They state that "it is impossible to study monuments and memorials in isolation from the surrounding communities and publics which form and are formed by the changing configurations of interactions, meanings and emotions that surround them."<sup>3</sup> In order to get a sense of the place the *Wall of Grief* has in Russian society we have to take the history of memory into account, together with Russia's current memorial climate and the visual representation of the artwork itself. By comparing the Russian situation with the development of memorial culture in Europe during the last century differences in development become clear that shed light on the Russian situation. By comparing different memorials in Russia a contemporary tradition and status quo are revealed. By comparing visual features of these memorials the difference between these memorial and the *Wall of Grief* become clear. As such comparative analysis is my method of research.

The work by Assmann used in the first chapter is essentially a comparative analysis of Holocaust-remembrance versus Gulag-remembrance. In the second chapter the work by Polukhina and

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2 Rothberg (2009): 3.

3 Polukhina (2015): 116.

Vanke takes the forefront in analysing the Russian situation in general through spatial research. In the third chapter, at the end of the narrative, the *Wall of Grief* itself is actually discussed. Although it might be unorthodox to discuss the details of the main object of this thesis in the final chapter, I believe it will benefit from information gathered ahead of this.

In short, the increasing public awareness around the world concerning monuments and memorials have led to increased thinking about the way memory functions culturally. Russian memorials seem to be problematic, creating an opportunity to analyse the way this functions in Russian society. Through the use theories on memory and spatiality answers should begin to surface.

### **The History of Russian and European Memory.**

What is memory? When looking at the history of monuments and memorials it becomes important to answer this question as both of them operate as physical representations of memory. Michael Rothberg, borrowing from Richard Terdiman, dealt with this question thus: “Memory is the past made present.”<sup>4</sup> He asserts that this short definition leads to a number of logical conclusions concerning the way memory can be characterized. Firstly, memory functions as a contemporary object dealing with the past. The past is brought to the present by using memory. Secondly, memory is labour. It is an act; something is being worked through.<sup>5</sup> With this definition in hand cultural memory and the use of memorials in society can be put into perspective. Memorials become reflective means that have to be actively utilized.

This definition, however, does not state *who* does the reflecting, and *why* certain topics become memorialised. Different works of art are constantly placed in different contexts, and these contexts are themselves temporal entities. Through the discussions on, for instance, Confederate statues in the United States it has become clear that monuments that were once venerated can change into monuments that are now despised. This seems to happen when their context does not adapt to the times we live in. The *Wall of Grief* has been built recently and exists in the same context of its conception. How this came to be and how it holds up to other memorials in Russian society has a history that takes us back to the traumas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Europe and Russia share traumatic memory considering the Second World War, but dealt with this differently. Both suffered the Holocaust, and both sacrificed much during the fighting itself. Pre-dating the war, and continuing during, is the traumatic memory of Stalinist terror, defined by the gulag.

Alaida Assmann states that Stalinist terror, and the European memory of it, is problematic because of the general idea that we cannot memorialise Stalinist Terror without harming the memory

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4 Rothberg (2009): 3.

5 Rothberg (2009): 4.

of the Holocaust.. The fear is that Stalinist Terror could end up weakening the gravity of what the Holocaust stands for. “The memory of Stalinist Terror must not be allowed to *relativize* the memory of the Holocaust.”<sup>6</sup> There has, however, been a movement towards reconciling the two memories, which Assmann explains through her second point; “The memory of the Holocaust must not be allowed to *trivialize* the memory of Stalinist Terror.”<sup>7</sup> She argues that in this scenario, both points combined, Europe can memorialise both the Holocaust *and* Stalinist Terror, since it has been turned from an 'either-or memory' memory into a 'both-and' memory.<sup>8</sup>

As a reason for this focus on the Holocaust, Assmann discerned that the Holocaust was part of the European creation myth. The Holocaust as a sign is important for the continued existence of Europe, whose member states have been increasingly nationalist and populist in their rhetoric. Anti-Union sentiments are countered with the greatest victory of said Union: The successful end to infighting and a long-lasting relatively clean human rights record. At the crux of this myth is the Holocaust, which has become a sign for the most destructive side of humanity. The memory of the Holocaust has been carried across spatial and temporal borders in an effort to unite the European Union under a single foundation myth.<sup>9</sup>

It is no wonder then that the memory of Stalinist Terror has been a difficult issue to deal with outside of Russian borders. One of the arguments used in the past to stop memorialising the Holocaust the way we do has been an argument of relativity. Since there have been other atrocities during the Second World War people have felt like this focus on the Holocaust has become incongruous with these other events. The World Holocaust Remembrance Center describes how Stalinist era policy-makers did not allow Jewish survivors to found memorials to their murdered relatives. When victims in Ukraine petitioned for one such monument, part of the tell-tale response echoed the official party line: “Here it deserves special emphasis that Jews were not the only Soviet citizens murdered; there were also Ukrainians, Russians, and others. Accordingly, the construction of a monument [for the victims] is the concern of the entire population of Kremen'chug.”<sup>10</sup>

In a sense the reasoning of Soviet authorities at the time was not far off with recent European musings. In order to keep the myth of the sacrifices made during the Great Patriotic War alive, there could not be a competition of suffering. If the Holocaust was given the memorials it deserved, it would have been able to syphon away the powerful messages that later monuments like the *Mamayev Kurgan* were supposed to convey to the general populace. Just like the Holocaust was used by the European as a binding myth for all its nations, so too was the suffering and sacrifice of the combined Soviet peoples.

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6 Assmann (2013): 33.

7 Assmann (2013): 33.

8 Assmann (2013): 33.

9 Assmann (2013): 28

10 Altshuler (2002): 286.

Nationhood has a history of using monuments and memorials to create the idea of a heroic past. There has, however, in the light of historical misdeeds been a shift in the way that we portray this past. The introduction of negative memory has changed the narrative concerning past exploitation. This negative memory effectively criminalized the past. Germany and some Eastern European nations have used it in order to work through misdeeds of the last century. Previously imperialist nations have been using it to review their colonialist past. By no means is negative memory a way to judge present times, it is meant to highlight a transition to a world where human rights have gained a more prominent position. Negative memory in the case of Germany highlights the transition between Nazi-Germany and Germany in its present state. It creates difference and distance between the two entities.<sup>11</sup>

Different, however, is the case of Russia. Where the word *transition* was the key word in the path of other nations, Russia has undergone a *transformation*. Soviet-era greatness was simply exchanged with an imperialist narrative. The country went into the future, during the 1990's, reclaiming signs and symbols from its imperial past. There has not been room in Russian discourse for what is commonly signified through use of the word gulag. The gulag has a prominent place in many Eastern-European countries, effectively nationalizing the memory of the gulag as part of their countries' negative memory.<sup>12</sup> Adding to this, countries like Ukraine have coated their memory of Soviet-era dominance in an anti-Russian layer. In 2015 a law was passed to remove all Soviet-era monuments from Ukraine, as well as renaming streets and squares.<sup>13</sup> This was done while the Crimea conflict was in full swing, making it difficult not to see a link between that conflict and the sudden implementation of the anti-Soviet initiative. Remembering the Soviet-past becomes a thing of nationalism for neighbouring countries, furthering the problems Russia would have in remembering its own criminal past.

Previously mentioned problems with Holocaust-remembrance come together with a different path towards remembering the past. This created a climate which contributed to the way present-day Russia reviews its history. The national narrative is dominated by a narrative of great sacrifice in the face of enemy forces. This was seen as a narrative which included all Russian peoples, to which specific memorials were antithetic. Since the narrative was a nationalist one, and not a communist one *per se* it could easily be transformed into a nationalist Russian narrative when the USSR fell. Russia thus inherited a nationalist, through imperial symbolism, way of reviewing monuments and memorials already in place without having the 'both-and memory' in place as described by Assmann.

Central to the way both Europe and the USSR treated memory in society is the idea that memories live in competition. Rothberg, in the introduction to his book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, argues that this notion can be questioned.

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11 Assmann (2013): 34.

12 Assmann (2013): 34, 35.

13 Willford (2017).

“Does collective memory really work like real-estate development?”<sup>14</sup> His arguments in this instance are based on holocaust-remembrance in the United States versus that of slavery-remembrance. Academics and the general populace have been, according to Rothberg, using a faulty framework to address memory. Instead of viewing two memories as conflicting and fighting for limited available space in collective memory he views them as *multidirectional memories*. Their competition is not based on exclusion; it is rather a discussion based on cross-referencing and negotiation.<sup>15</sup>

Rothberg agrees with the notion that the perceived uniqueness of the Holocaust was a necessity during the first few post-war decades.<sup>16</sup> Ostensibly this means that the earlier ways Europe dealt with memory was warranted by the specificity of the Holocaust. As a reaction against this specificity, intellectuals have risen that have begun to investigate other (minority) histories of extreme violence and genocide. Perhaps this post-colonial way of looking at history, which has opened the way beyond competitive memory, holds one of the answers to the difference in Russian thinking. Russia's history last century has either been one of war with European countries or one of civil war and revolution. Europe's reflections on past imperialist transgressions have forced different memorial narratives to be allowed unto the stage.

Using the Holocaust as an example once more I'd like to look at the uniqueness principle that has been used as a foundation for competitive memory. Rigid thinking on a political level has come into existence because of the assertion that the Holocaust is unique.<sup>17</sup> Israel for instance uses the Holocaust and a rigid way of thinking about it in order to either hide or justify continued human rights abuses in Gaza. Competitive memory becomes a political tool, not an empirical or historical one. Rothberg argues that in spite of this political way of using competitive memory, what really takes place is multidirectional memory. In an example he shows that precisely because the Holocaust has become a signifier for unique and political violence it has been co-opted by others who want to make that precise point. In order to talk about slavery, the term *Black Holocaust* has come into existence.

Even when a state wishes to control the narrative, it is still possible for that very narrative to be taken into directions they could never have seen coming. In order to see how the narrative surrounding memorials functions in Russia, it is prudent to take a look at significant memorials already in place in the country, preferably connected to the state in some way. In order to fully understand the implications of this chapter it becomes prudent to actually look at multiple monuments and memorials as they exist in Russia today. Moscow itself is home to a vast array of monuments, soviet-era and present-day, and has some monuments in place remembering its criminal past. Two memorials that stand out are *Mamayev Kurgan* and *Poklonnaya Gora*. The next chapter will connect these to current Russian

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14 Rothberg (2009): 2.

15 Rothberg (2009): 3.

16 Rothberg (2009): 8.

17 Rothberg (2009): 11.

memorial culture and the *Wall of Grief*.

### **The Spatiality of Russian Memorials.**

In order to look at contemporary Russian cultural memory with regard to memorials it is of vital importance to look at the general way they function within society. Of importance are those statues that stem from or relate to the Soviet era but still have a clear societal function in contemporary times. Polukhina and Vanke wrote in their essay *Social Practices of using War Memorials in Russia* about the public place of *Mamayev Kurgan* and *Poklonnaya Gora*. *Poklonnaya Gora* is the name of a hill which houses a large and imposing victory monument surrounded by columns. Like *The Wall of Grief* it is situated in Moscow, yet there is a large difference in location. The war monument is positioned upon the highest point in Moscow, the memorial to victims of totalitarian regimes has been placed on a busy intersection within the city.<sup>18</sup>

Both *Mamayev Kurgan* and *Poklonnaya Gora* offer the audience a place of remembrance and reflection. They are both enormous and imposing, signifying the stalwartness of Mother Russia in the face of a relentless German onslaught. They dominate the areas where they have been built in Volgograd and Moscow respectively, *Mamayev Kurgan* towering at eighty-five metres. The obelisk at *Poklonnaya Gora* is over a hundred-and-forty-one metres tall. These memorials dominate the landscape. The *Wall of Grief* is a dark wall, thirty metres long and six metres in height. Its subjects are faceless and the wall is shaped like a scythe. Instead of towering over the city it blends in. The surrounding buildings and roads almost act as camouflage; the monument only becomes the centre of attention when passing it by or going to visit with purpose.

According to Polukhina and Vanke there are two ways in which we can look at the spatial location of memorials and monuments, using the sociological metaphor of 'site'. One is the 'site of memory', as defined by Pierre Nora. A site of memory can be any object or place that has become symbolic to people. Collective memory has the ability to instil symbolic meaning unto places, objects and memorials. Nora describes this as “[...] a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn-but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory.”<sup>19</sup> Sites of memory have the ability to create union. When these perceived memories, where real memories have ceased to exist, are shaped into a narrative they can be used to homogenize different locations across a country. Nora sees this as the democratization of mass culture;

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18 Polukhina (2015): 120.

19 Nora (1989): 7.

instead of having different individual memories tied to decentralised locations the memories of a wider region become institutionalised.<sup>20</sup> This way of approaching memory is in line with the way different memorials in Russia function. The *Wall of Grief* diverges from the memorial narrative created.

While the places and objects can be sites of memory, the act of imbuing them with memory and maintaining the symbolism is defined by Jan Assmann as cultural memory. Key to understanding a site of memory is the fact that things do not have a memory of their own. Memory is created through the interpreter, in the case of memorials the general populace. Cultural memory has to be maintained. “In order to be able to be reembodyed in the sequence of generations, cultural memory, unlike communicative memory, exists also in disembodied form and requires institutions of preservation and reembodyment.”<sup>21</sup>

The second way to look at spatiality lies in the site of remembrance, as defined by Assmann. Instead of simply being a site of memory, imbued with memory by the people, a site of remembrance is a place where human emotion plays a more significant role. It is a place that has already undergone activities instead of this simply being institutionalised. “An example is Mamayev Kurgan, commemorating the Battle of Stalingrad, where real combat operations took place, with the recollections of eyewitnesses differing from the views of those who have learned about those events from other sources.”<sup>22</sup> Sites of remembrance rely on personal experience and memory, and are individual. Sites of memory exist because of a group effort, as meaning is imbued through ritual and institutionalization.

The *Wall of Grief* has been built upon the antithesis of this site of remembrance since the location of the intersection is completely devoid of actual individual history. This is best explained through a different, and older, memorial dedicated to victims of totalitarianism in the form of the *Solovetsky Stone*. This particular monument was built in front of the infamous Lubyanka, better known as the former headquarters of the KGB. People have actually suffered the atrocities that are being remembered by the memorial on or near the site. This is also true of the Volgograd based *Mamayev Kurgan*, built upon soil that was an actual site of battle during the second world war.<sup>23</sup> The *Wall of Grief* has been built with the idea in mind that totalitarianism can spring from any place and could happen anywhere, by definition creating a site of memory. The human emotional and personal factor needed to create a site of remembrance is taken away from the memorial through location. The site is in a sense stripped of the ability to shape the individual experiences needed to form a site of remembrance.

The main difference between the public usage when it comes to different sites, according to

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20 Nora (1989): 7.

21 Assmann (2008): 111.

22 Polukhina (2015): 116.

23 Polukhina (2015): 116.

Polukhina and Vanke, is the multi- or mono-use of a memorial. Places that are sites of remembrance are mono-use, in that they function to remember a specific event in history, in this case the history of the second world war. A site of memory opens itself up to multiple uses, often on a public scale. While both the *Mamayev Kurgan* and *Poklonnaya Gora* have the same general message, of a victorious Russia, their public usage is defined by what kind of site they are. They are similar in scope and scale, but are used differently by the public. Polukhina and Vanke have come up with different public ways of interacting with these memorials. “With the help of comparative analysis we have created a classification of types of social activities. These include commemorative, political, leisure, religious and infrastructure related practises that differ from each other in different contexts, viewed through the prisms of such binary oppositions as capital city/regional, universal/local, and official/public.”<sup>24</sup>

Using the classification created by Polukhina and Vanke based on Nora and Assmann, I can begin to define the socio-spatial position of the *Wall of Grief*. It has been commissioned by the government, unveiled by President Vladimir Putin. The public function at the time of unveiling was certainly commemorative while undeniably political, as will be discussed on the final chapter.

The location in the capital city, and as previously described not as a site of remembrance, is of some importance here. Moscow already has a plethora of monuments and memorials that serve official functions. The multi-purpose *Poklonnaya Gora*, also a site of memory, is used during a multitude of annual celebrations. A nearby site of remembrance in the form of the *Solovetsky Stone* has a more prominent location and functions as a more precise focal point being situated near an actual site that was part of totalitarian oppression. The *Wall of Grief* is spatially more impressive than the stone, but suffers from relative anonymity due to official use and location. The *Solovetsky Stone* was, unlike the *Wall of Grief*, not commissioned by the state. The *Wall of Grief* is described as the first such memorial.<sup>25</sup>

As such the *Wall of Grief* can spatially be described as a site of memory, physically relatively imposing on its own, but not when compared with both contemporary post-soviet memorials and soviet-era memorials. There are no personal and intimate memories connected to it, failing to make it a site of remembrance. Physically less imposing memorials within the same theme already occupy nearby sites of remembrance. The public function of the statue has been explained through the use of a metaphorical function, effectively meaning it is left to the use of the public without official function. This is in itself not problematic, were it not for the earlier explanation of the spatial situation decreasing the value as a whole in this regard.

Since the *Wall of Grief* functions as a possible site of memory, as a way to create a national narrative surrounding Stalinist terror, the way this narrative shapes is in the hands of the state. They

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24 Polukhina (2015): 125.

25 MacFarquhar (2017).

control, to a certain degree, if there will be annual memorial services held. They control the building of similar memorials across Russia. Conversely they control that these will not be built at all, and that no services shall be held. By viewing the *Wall of Grief* as a site of memory, control of the narrative becomes autocratic. How do these hypothetical viewpoints hold up in Russian society?

### **The Wall of Grief.**

The 'Wall of Grief', also translated as the 'Wall of Sorrow' in some cases, was designed by Georgy Frangulyan. It was commissioned by the Russian state itself and partly funded by the city of Moscow. A fundraiser was organized by *Memorial*, a group dedicated to remembering Russia's tragic past. Moscow paid for most of the six-million dollar cost. Eight-hundred thousand dollar was raised through donations.<sup>26</sup> The fact that it was commissioned by the state has led to opposing camps considering the effectiveness of the work as a memorial.

Proponents of the memorial describe it as an important step towards remembrance. They view the endorsement of the state as a victory concerning the recognition of Stalinist Terror. The New York Times reported on the unveiling of the statue in 2017. "Elena B. Zhemkova, chief operating officer of Memorial, a beleaguered organization founded to establish a record of the repressed, called a state-backed national monument significant."<sup>27</sup> By having the state involved in the creation of the memorial, Zhemkova recognizes a signal from the government. The 'Wall of Grief' becomes, from her point of view, a signal that the state decries terror and the unfair murders of individuals. Zhemkova is not the only person who celebrates the memorial. The Director of the Gulag museum, Roman Romanov, explained the historical weight of the artwork. "The fact that it is taking place by presidential decree and it is supported by ordinary citizens, who gave money for the monument, indicates to me that this is a new point of reckoning."<sup>28</sup> To both Zhemkova and Romanov the statue seems to be a turning point in history; a long overdue official recognition of Stalinist terror.

Opponents of the memorial are far less optimistic about this historical meaning. Instead of viewing the memorial as an act of goodwill from the government they recognize it as a way to cheat the memory of Stalinist terror. A large number of critics, many of them Soviet-era dissidents, have even gone so far as to sign a petition protesting the memorial.<sup>29</sup> They fear the Russian state will simply use the memorial as a way to argue that their obligation to the memory is fulfilled. Instead of truly creating a dialogue surrounding the USSR's repressive history it simply provides a symbolic nod. The opponents also stress that repression is still very much a tool of the Russian state.

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26 MacFarquhar (2017).

27 MacFarquhar (2017).

28 MacFarquhar (2017).

29 MacFarquhar (2017).

The location of the statue is telling. “The monument was built on an old parking lot on a prominent crossroads in the center of Moscow, but it is distant from pedestrian traffic.”<sup>30</sup> The schism surrounding the statue seems apparent in its very location. The crossroads are prominent traffic wise and the street itself is named after a human rights defender, yet pedestrians are not likely to cross it en-masse. Off note is the fact that this memorial is the first that has been ordered by the state, opening itself up to comparison other such memorials. According to Nina Tumarkin Russia has a rich history of funerary memorials, memorialising the many wars Russia has been a part of. These memorials have in the past been scattered around the country, sometimes using places like Volgograd as a focal point.

This type of memorial is generally organized, especially since 1945.<sup>31</sup> In the early nineties the government started focusing this type of memory back unto Moscow. An important tactical and symbolic location in Moscow was chosen for this goal. “The victory monument on Poklonnaya Hill was from the start envisaged as the central symbol of the Soviet experience in the war.”<sup>32</sup> Ritualized memory was brought back to Moscow by building a towering war memorial. Both were commissioned by the Russian government in order to reflect on the memory of the previous century, 'Poklonnaya Hill' functioning mostly as a memorial for the Great Patriotic War. Comparing these memorials is where the location becomes telling, as mentioned earlier. While the 'Wall of Grief' is not necessarily hidden, it is built in a location that does not quite lend itself to memorial services in the same way a prominent hill in Moscow or Volgograd might do. Considering the fact that Russia has a genuine history with funerary memorial celebrations this is an important part of the memorials that should not be overlooked. It lends credence to the reading of the opponents that the statue is merely a symbolic gesture and not a genuine effort on the government's side to review Stalinist Terror.

There is a large visual difference between the memorials dedicated to the war and the 'Wall of Grief'. The mentioned memorials in Moscow and Volgograd feature great height and heroism as part of their visual symbolism. The 'Wall of Grief', instead of this, is recognizable by its width. The curving statue is thirty metres wide and six metres high. Effectively the memorial turns into a curved wall facing the intersection it is placed at. It is made out of bronze. The wall features a large number of human figures. None of the figures have clear faces; they are rendered unrecognisable. According to the artist the unrecognisable figures are meant to represent the way countless anonymous victims disappeared during Stalinist terror.<sup>33</sup>

Using Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* we can discern the meaning behind the memorial. The curve in the wall shapes like a scythe reaping the faceless people portrayed on the surface. The faceless bodies on the wall are plenty; a large number of them are present under the shadow of the scythe. The

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30 MacFarquhar (2017).

31 Tumarkin (1993): 125, 126.

32 Tumarkin (1993): 126.

33 MacFarquhar (2017).

signifiers here are the scythe and the people underneath it. They signify the death of multitudes by totalitarianism. As discussed by the artist the facelessness of the figures signify anonymity. The sign created by these signifiers and signifieds becomes the anonymous deaths of millions under the Stalinist regime.<sup>34</sup>

The 'Wall of Grief', however, can't simply be seen through the work of art alone. The sign becomes a new signifier in the larger scheme of Russian memorial history as discussed in both this and the previous chapter. The key, and returning theme, in this Barthesian myth becomes the anonymity. The work of art itself becomes anonymous in the face of the other memorials in Moscow. Stunted by both the location and the literal physical presence the work loses significance in Russia's memory landscape. A message arises from the visual meaning of the work combined with the way it was treated and where it was built. The myth created here is a narrative surrounding victims of Stalinist terror. This narrative is commissioned and placed in Moscow by the state itself: While admitting the toll on Russia's people the memorial suggests that it is a faceless thing of the past. It is not supposed to take central stage within the Russian tradition of memory as there is no victorious sacrifice to be remembered.

The article in the New York Times asked opponents of the memorial the question what the state could do to properly remember victims of totalitarian oppression. Sergei Lebedev, a writer who has written about the legacy of the gulag, had an answer that reacts to this created myth directly: "The first thing you want from them is to make complete lists, to try to understand the full scale, to name all the names. [...] This was never done by the state."<sup>35</sup> There are no walls with names, no registries with the names of all the victims. Historians investigating the actual details of the atrocities are often charged with unrelated charges, ostensibly to silence them.<sup>36</sup> The same state that commissioned a memorial to victims of totalitarian regimes is defending their own narrative by creating new victims. It becomes clear that the myth created by the 'Wall of Grief' is an investment the government likes to protect.

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34 Barthes (1972): 112-114.

35 MacFarquhar (2017).

36 MacFarquhar (2017).

## Conclusion.

Memory has a complex history in western countries and Russia alike. The USSR used similar methods as Europe, using memory as a tool to bind together different peoples and nations. In Europe the Holocaust formed into a foundation myth that is still used today in order to promote the idea of unity and human rights. It is an example of the ways in which a Union of nations can prevent human suffering and atrocities. The Holocaust took central stage and did not allow for different memories to compete with it. Effectively the belief was that there was limited room for memory, and the Holocaust was not allowed to be trivialized by, for instance, the memory of Stalinist terror. On the Soviet side Holocaust-survivors were not allowed to construct memorials dedicated to solely to Jewish victims, since the official line of thought was focussed on the sacrifice of all Soviet peoples. Much like the Holocaust-myth the Soviet Union created a myth of sacrifice.

Firstly, this led to the Russian veneration of military sacrifice and victories. Soviet, and by extension Russian, suffering became the main mode of remembering the atrocities of the second World War. Europe transitioned into a different sort of remembering as time went on. Instead of competing memories a different system came into existence. This different way of thinking about memory is described by Aleida Assmann as 'both-and memory'. Russian memory did not advance in the same way as European memory. Instead, the Soviet institution was replaced with a Nationalist one. Imperial symbolism replaced that of the USSR, but the existing memorial culture could continue in the same way unimpeded. Military memorials are relatively free of ideological signs, making them easy to appropriate into a nationalist narrative.

Secondly, the spatiality of the work is telling. Other, more importantly regarded memorials are situated on previous fields of battle or simply high points in the city. In this way they feature prominently visually and function as yearly places of ritual. Their spatiality allows them to have a central place in Russian society, something the *Wall of Grief* does not have. Once again the relative anonymity of the work hampers it. As such Russian society is dominated by a Nationalist and military memorial tradition that does not allow for competition. It almost seems as though the memorial *Wall of Grief* merely functioned as a show by a government that felt like reflecting on their own problematic past does not really have a place in society, even though in this day and age negative memory has a function in countries close to it.

Lastly, the visual signs present on the *Wall of Grief* are based on anonymity, something which is strengthened by the location of the statue. It functions as a work of art which is difficult to interpret, allowing for a wide range of interpretations. This is in stark contrast to other memorials which are so full of signs that their function is clear and homogeneous. This effectively renders the *Wall of Grief*

impotent, visually so compared by the phallic obelisk nearby which dominates the scene. The artist himself is apologetic towards this, stating that anonymity is about the victims. This, however, can be used by the state as a tool to further ignore dealing with the history of Stalinist terror.

In what way does the *Wall of Grief* memorial represent the cultural memory of present day Russia with regard to their own Soviet past? The Soviet-era way of dealing with memory was carried over into contemporary times. Memorials like the *Wall of Grief* are not in line with the state narrative, so in order to control this narrative it was commissioned by the state itself. As Rothberg states this gives the state control over way people perceive a memorial history. Russia effectively used to *Wall of Grief* to disable the competition to a culture of war memorial-ism. The place of the *Wall of Grief* becomes highly political, and public perception on it is split. In a sense Rothberg does haunt the narrative Russia has tried to create. Like the Holocaust, it is impossible to say what groups might find ways to use the narrative to explain their own points of view. It is too early to tell if this is already happening, as information regarding the *Wall of Grief* is sparse beyond initial media-coverage. What is certain though is that the history of Stalinist terror still seethes under Russia's skin; it might not be possible for the autocratic state to keep denying its public reflection.

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