Modern Russia has straddled three states—the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and Russian Federation—over the last two centuries. Analyzing the public culture of any one of these regimes poses a formidable enough challenge; introducing a coherent framework for the study of all three is a different undertaking entirely. Yet that is precisely the task taken up by Aaron J. Cohen in his ambitious survey of 110 years of Russian war monuments.

The first chapter, “Honors and Insults: War Monuments in Late Imperial Russia, 1905-1914,” covers tsarist memorial culture from the Russo-Japanese War through the start of World War I. One of the central contributions is a case study of the statue of General Mikhail Skobelev in Moscow. The statue, which was imposed on Moscow over the resistance of local officials and elites as part of the military's effort to salvage its popular image, offers a window into the complex relationship between the state and local institutions and underlines the extent to which Russian imperial memorial culture was dictated by the dynasty's short-to medium-term political goals. Cohen outlines a tension between the Romanov dynasty's preoccupation with war monuments and a growing prerevolutionary “civic” memorial culture that rejected the official approach as vulgar, bereft of higher meaning, and detached from the experiences of the common person (p. 46).

Chapter 2, “Victims and Heroes: The Rise and Fall of Patriotic War Memorials, 1914-1922,” follows the transition of memorial culture from prerevolutionary Russia to Bolshevik rule. Leninist “political ideology” rejected offhand the patriotic themes and commemoration of war experiences that played a prominent role in tsarist memorial culture, yet early efforts to replace it centered less on a distinctly Bolshevik program than on a "prerevolutionary radical intelligentsia tradition" that sought to depict great Russian and European scientists, intellectuals, and cultural figures (pp. 52, 55).

The book is organized chronologically except for chapters 3 and 4, which tell the overlapping stories of Russian memorial culture in the Soviet Union and abroad. Chapter 3, “The Absence of Presence: War Monuments and Bolshevik Memorial Culture, 1922-1955,” describes the emergence of a Bolshevik memorial culture in the years following the end of the Russian Civil War. Cohen draws on a robust dataset to show that "monument-mindedness," or the degree of press attention paid to monuments as measured by the frequency with
which the word "monument" and related terms were used in selected periodicals, remained low in the Soviet Union until the mid to late 1930s (p. 81). The accompanying lull in monument construction, fueled by bureaucratic dysfunction, lack of sustained funding, and Joseph Stalin's "general disinterest," continued well into the postwar period (p. 100).

Chapter 4, “Hope along the Marne: War Memorials in Russia Abroad, 1922-1941,” looks at the memorial cultures of Russian émigré communities. Cohen introduces a framework for yielding novel comparative insights that would be lost when focusing solely on Soviet public culture. The author compellingly paints the portrait of a “non-Soviet Russian memorial culture” that developed at the intersection of statelessness, Russian Orthodoxy, and opposition to Bolshevism (p. 126).

Chapter 5, “Soviet War Memorials: People, State, and the Great Patriotic War, 1955-1985,” covers the transformation of Soviet memorial culture in the decades following Stalin’s death. The government took steps to remove structural and bureaucratic impediments to monument construction, establishing a streamlined process aimed at avoiding production bottlenecks and ensuring optimal allocation of resources. Monument production and monument-mindedness soared by 1965, propelled in large part by local and even grassroots efforts. The 1965 monument boom was—unsurprisingly, given the Great Patriotic War’s seminal importance as a tool of postwar Soviet state building—led by sites of World War II commemoration.

Chapter 6, “The Return of the Public: Civic Reconciliation, Politics, and War Monuments, 1986-2015,” turns to public culture in the late USSR and contemporary Russia. The cult of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 reemerged as a pillar of Russian memorial culture in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse in large part because it provides the least divisive venue of commemoration as compared to the alternatives. “The triumphalist narrative has emerged triumphant,” Cohen writes (p. 196). The fixture of a “triumphant and patriotic victory” by the Soviet hero-people, freed from the prior constraints of “Soviet aesthetics and ideology,” flourished in contemporary Russia with massive popular support (pp. 192, 193). The 1995 victory monument and memorial complex by sculptor Zurab Tsereteli exemplifies the emergence of a new, more eclectic approach to wartime commemoration that draws on Christian and even pagan symbols.

Cohen has marshaled an impressive source base, drawing on a potent mix of well-known and more obscure monuments, materials relating to the detailed composition and placement of these sites across Russia, and useful macro-data regarding key trends in monument construction over time. But there are a handful of topics, especially in the treatment of contemporary Russia, that could have benefited from additional exposition. For example, Cohen aptly notes in chapter 6 that war commemoration in Russia “is not Soviet, for modern Russian culture is structurally different than its Soviet predecessor” (p. 196). This is an essential observation that could have been strengthened by further exploring how the contemporary cult of the Great Patriotic War diverges from its Soviet predecessor, particularly in its weaponized remembrance of Nazi collaborationism on Soviet territory and its starkly revisionist approach to the wartime role played by the Western allies. Yet one writing a longue durée study has never complained of too much material, and there is little question that these minor gaps are vastly overshadowed by what the book has accomplished.

Cohen's well-researched and carefully argued observations would be compelling enough in isolation, but they are particularly valuable as a step on the road to synthesizing Russia’s three distinct periods into one integrated public culture narrative.
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