

SACRED SPACES OF MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA.

Introduction

Olga Rusinova, Tatiana Voronina

Olga Rusinova, Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences, University of Campinas (Unicamp), Brazil. rusinova@unicamp.br.

Tatiana Voronina, independent historian, Switzerland. voronina1977@gmail.com.

It might seem that the question of the sacred, in its broad academic and philosophical sense, had ceased to interest scholars back in the last century, becoming confined to more specialized fields, primarily religious studies. Yet the inquiry is now acquiring ever-new dimensions: Scholars are examining the meanings that the concept carries, the historical genealogy of the sacred, and its material, spatial, and virtual (digital) forms.

The most intense debates concern whether the sacred is, or is not, bound up with religiosity. They mark a gradual return of the question from religious studies to a broader academic discussion, one that now engages scholars across disciplines. Existing approaches are being rethought to examine the sacred first through its general characteristics, apart from religion. In this view, the sacred is not a property of objects or spaces. Rather, society as a whole or particular groups ascribe it to certain phenomena, even if they do so through different mechanisms (Lynch 2012; Taves 2009). A boundary sets it apart from the “profane,” and both the sacred and that boundary are held to be inviolable, beyond discussion, dispute, or criticism (Anttonen 2005; Dufour and Boutaud 2013). Finally, already filled with prescriptions and ringed by prohibitions, the sacred acts on us and is felt in a literally physical way, as another, otherworldly reality. It reaches what is prerational in us: sight, the body, affect, memory (Schaefer 2015). Here, memory plays a critical role. In Pierre Nora’s (1989) words, whatever one makes of his other claims, memory immerses us in the holy, or the sacred.

The set of general, nonreligious characteristics outlined above makes it possible to bring interdisciplinary perspectives to bear on the various manifestations of the sacred, including in the Russian case. The idea for this thematic cluster of articles took shape in discussions at several panels of a conference organized by the Academic Bridges Laboratory in February 2024. The panels brought together historians, art historians, and anthropologists who study secular and religious practices of commemorating the past in contemporary Russia, drawing on disciplines outside religious studies. The participants’ disciplinary differences, and the varied understandings of the sacred refracted through them, proved not the obstacle one might have expected but an asset in addressing the most pressing questions.

At the same time, interdisciplinarity in itself constructs its object as composite: This opens new possibilities but also sets the frame of inquiry. Talal Asad's work was probably one of the factors behind this disciplinary shift and a prelude to the renewed engagement of the social sciences and humanities with the study of the sacred (e.g., Bogumił and Yurchuk 2022; Niedźwiedź 2024). In his account, the sacred, understood in anthropology as a "single domain," must be returned to its historical context and give up its claim to universality (Asad 1993, 2003). The debate that followed exposed the limits of this approach, which does not explain why the force of a supposedly constructed sacred is nonetheless felt and works as an organizing power (Alexander 2003). Asad's scheme, moreover, rests on Western histories of secularization and so does not fully apply to other regions and forms of statehood, such as the (post-)Soviet. Even so, his genealogical approach fragmented the unified "sacred" into historically specific practices and spurred research across several disciplines.

The opposite direction was set, at almost the same time, by an interdisciplinary current that took shape among French-speaking scholars: Stéphane Dufour, Jean-Jacques Boutaud, Bernard Lahire, and others. Their work openly argued not for fragmenting the sacred but for expanding its domain and, crucially, for separating it from religion (Dufour and Boutaud 2013; Lahire 2015). In their understanding, the sacred, with all its characteristics and effects, belongs to the sphere of communication and can take in sport, consumerism, music, the visual arts, and so on. Proponents of this hypothesis, however, leave open the question of what allows a given object to be recognized as sacred, since the concept thereby loses its power to differentiate. The model describes an expansion from below, through the market and seduction, and sets aside cases in which the sacred is produced by other, nonmarket institutional forces.

These French authors liken the sacred to a composite, "eternally youthful" sphinx or chimera (Debray 2011). In the post-Soviet, and especially the Russian, material, the composite nature of the sacred takes literal shape, and in several registers at once. The sculptor Dashi Namdakov fuses state iconography, Orthodox symbolism, Buryat shamanic and Buddhist mythologies, and images from a shared cultural and mystical imaginary; the elements of his compositions are thus drawn from different traditions. Their composite, eclectic character is heightened by the fact that they appear in settings normally held apart: among collectors of the sensual and the mystical, but also in public space, in the design of the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces¹ and the bronze monument beside it. A uniform style ties these different settings together. Here religious form is presented alongside the other recognizable elements of the sacred, and, as Alexander Agadjanian notes, "mixtures of this kind constitute the norm, and are not the exception" (2026:407). Marlene Laruelle (2025) describes this same compositeness as a general structural principle: Ideology in contemporary Russia is assembled from heterogeneous and at times contradictory elements, to which the everyday experience of ordinary people responds.

¹ The Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, or the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, is located in Patriot Park in Moscow Oblast.

It is this composite sacred, in which the religious sits alongside the secular, that this cluster of articles examines, through other examples and in different disciplinary fields. Our focus falls on the questions raised at that conference two years ago, which have lost none of their urgency. What counts as sacred in contemporary Russia? By what means, and through whose efforts, is sacralization set in motion? And what does it tell us about the relations among society, the state, and religion?

In the secular Russian state, the law gives equal protection to particular versions of wartime memory and to religious sanctities. The 2014 law punishment for the rehabilitation of Nazism introduced penalties for disseminating knowingly false information about the USSR's wartime conduct and for the public desecration of symbols of military glory;² since 2021 desecrating the memory of the fatherland's defenders has likewise become a punishable offense.³ As Maria Falina shows, the term "desecration" was carried over from the 2013 law on offending the feelings of religious believers, enacted in the wake of the performance of a "punk prayer" directed against President Vladimir Putin by the feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (2026:279). She also cites the legend of the 28 Panfilov Guardsmen, members of an antitank platoon under the command of General Panfilov who allegedly sacrificed themselves during the defense of Moscow in November 1941—a fabrication, proven as early as 1948. This legend, which the Russian Minister of Culture calls "a sacred legend that simply must not be touched,"⁴ is protected on a par with established historical fact, and a bas-relief of the Panfilov Guardsmen is set into the wall of the Cathedral of the Armed Forces in Patriot Park (Falina 2026:282–286). Challenging this version of the past is equally impermissible and is treated as an act of desecration.

Researchers attribute this intense sacralization to a confluence of circumstances: the vacuum of meaning left by the dismantling of Soviet ideology, the strengthening of the Russian Orthodox Church's (ROC) institutional standing, and, finally, the conservative turn of the 2010s (Budraitskis 2020; Köllner 2019; Suslov and Uzlaner 2019). The mounting deficit of the authorities' legitimacy over the past four years is pushing both state and society to form their identities anew (Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher 2026).

The state and the church jointly build a memorial infrastructure. One example is the Russia—My History network of historical parks, which Agadjanian (2026) describes as a joint church-state effort to construct a useful past. Zuzanna Bogumił

² "Federal'nyi zakon o vvedenii otvetstvennosti za reabilitatsiiu natsizma," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, May 6, 2014, <https://rg.ru/documents/2014/05/07/reabilitacia-dok.html>.

³ Ivan Petrov, "Oskorblenie veteranov mozhet dovesti do tiur'my," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, April 8, 2021, <https://rg.ru/2021/04/08/oskorblenie-veteranov-mozhet-dovesti-do-tiurmy.html>; Tat'iana Zamakhina, "Gosduma vvela ugolovnuu otvetstvennost' za oskvernenie voinskiikh zakhronenii," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, July 15, 2025, <https://rg.ru/2025/07/15/gosduma-vvela-ugolovnuu-otvetstvennost-za-oskvernenie-voinskiikh-zahoronenij.html>.

⁴ "Medinskii spravil 28 panfilovtsev s 300 spartantsami," *Interfaks*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/531112>.

and Tatiana Voronina (2023) describe another, grassroots source of sacralization, showing that the churching of the memory of the dead proceeded from below, through the efforts of relatives and local custodians, and that it began before the ROC turned its attention to the politics of memory. Researchers of the Immortal Regiment marches, civic processions during Victory Day in which participants carry portraits of relatives who fought in World War II, note the same grassroots character: Participants convey their emotions in the language of the church, likening them to confession and communion, and they leave Saint George ribbons at the graves of locally venerated saints as tokens of “the holy protector of our Fatherland” (Arkhipova et al. 2017:109).

When it comes to sacralization in Russia, it turns first of all to the memory of the war. The forms in which this memory is entrenched are heterogeneous and drawn from dissimilar traditions. The memory of the Great Patriotic War, institutionalized back in the Soviet period and transmitted through various channels of socialization, fits into a broad set of cultural frames and is not called into question, which makes the symbol of the war a central pillar of Russian identity (Malinova 2013). The politics of history, in turn, builds the Soviet legacy into a continuous national history, where it loses its ideological autonomy and becomes a resource for patriotic mobilization (Kalinin 2011), in such a way that Soviet, imperial, and Orthodox content merge without displacing one another.

The core elements of this inviolable national past go back to the Soviet period. Spaces of leaders, the revolution, and heroic death acquired sacred status as early as the first decades after 1917 (Smolkin 2018; Tumarkin 1994). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, they were neither discarded nor replaced by Orthodox ones; instead they entered hybrid constructions in which Soviet content sits alongside the religious (Bogumił and Voronina 2023). The ROC takes the initiative in this area, already closed to revision, more often lending Orthodox meaning to Soviet heritage than instituting the sacred anew (Kormina and Tocheva 2024).

According to Asad, embedding the past within a continuous history shows how a sacred past takes shape, yet his theory does not explain why the past comes to operate as something unconditionally given. The articles in the cluster examine cases in which the sacred is oriented primarily toward reception, toward that which acts before reason: visually, materially, and bodily. The cluster’s editors and the authors of the articles attend to the phenomenal dimension of the sacred not for the sake of asking about the nature of such anthropological experience (Eliade 2000; Otto [1917] 1923) but to trace how, and to what extent, the sacred image and ritual are perceived as pointing to an eternal order and to “ultimate values” (*letzte Werte*, in Max Weber’s terms). This image is perhaps not the sacred itself but a “witness to the sacred” (Lahire 2015). From this standpoint, the authors trace how specific places, buildings, and rituals become incontestable.

Vladimir Kalashnikov reads the Church of the New Martyrs and Confessors of the Russian Church at Lubyanka in Moscow⁵ as a statement about political repression in the USSR in visible form. Here the sacred is set through an architecture and iconography that sustain an image of glory and triumph. In its wholeness, the building is not subject to the viewer's rational assessment and stands in no dialogue; it shows not a process but a result. Every element of the architecture stresses verticality and builds distance, and the structure majestically manifests itself to the beholder. The interior has no hagiographic border scenes depicting violence: The figures are taken up into sacred history, and the particular victim dissolves into the image of a martyr already triumphant and crowned with glory. Gathered around a generalized sacrifice, the memory of repression ceases to split society over the question of guilt and closes itself to other readings. A comparison with the Church of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia in Butovo in southern Moscow, where the composition is more open to the viewer and compassionate, mournful motifs unfold in movement, shows how much form itself decides. Church-building thus appears as a form of the politics of memory, in which state and ecclesiastical legitimation reinforce one another.

Tatiana Voronina examines how visitors to Patriot Park gain a sensory experience of internalizing, or "recognizing," history.⁶ Combining entertainment and memorial functions, the space of the park proves at the same time a place where sacred meanings are produced. Using the concept of authenticity as an analytical tool, the author shows that turning war into a tourist product alters the very mechanism by which power is legitimized through historical memory. Whereas in the Soviet period the authenticity of the past was guaranteed by censorship and ideological conviction, today the sense of the war's authenticity arises from the visitor's own bodily engagement, even as the state continues to control the tools and forms through which that authenticity is constructed. It is no coincidence that the article discusses two types of artifacts offered to visitors: antique weapons and modern replicas. In place of a traditional analysis of the actions of the project's creators, this criterion shifts the focus to how the interaction with visitors is built, and ultimately makes it possible to demonstrate the incontestability of bodily experience and the material environment as sources of the sense of authenticity.

Ilya Utekhin turns to the Immortal Regiment, combining a micro-analysis of video footage from the marches with ethnographic observation and a digital ethnography of a corpus of roughly one million Instagram posts. He presents this public ritual of memory as a bodily and spatial act in which the order of the column materializes hierarchy, the soundscape sustains collective emotion, and the carrying of por-

⁵ The New Martyrs are the clergy and laity of the Russian Orthodox Church who died for their faith under Soviet persecution and were canonized, primarily, after 2000. Their canonization and the controversy surrounding it have been studied as a case of invented tradition and a means of moral legitimization of a repressive past (Bogumil 2018; Christensen 2017; Fomina 2018).

⁶ A similar logic of producing an incontestable past has previously been examined in the case of the Russia—My History multimedia parks, where history is presented as a single narrative with no alternative readings (Falina 2026; Klimenko 2023; Zabalueva 2022).

traits keeps the dead present among the living. The Immortal Regiment began as a grassroots initiative addressed to the individual fate, but in its state performance this address to the single life is recast as a canonized rite of unity. Images on social media reveal another side of this process, in which the participation on view turns out, for the most part, to be a form of bureaucratic reporting by institutional actors.

It must be acknowledged that many actors, interested institutions and groups, whether state, civic, or religious, are involved in sacralization (Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher 2026; Kormina and Tocheva 2024). The Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation is the principal commissioning body for Patriot Park as a whole, while individual sites within the park are tied to military, youth, and battlefield search groups. In the Immortal Regiment project, schools and other institutions embedded in systems of bureaucratic reporting are drawn into the march, while the Church of the New Martyrs at Lubyanka is being built through the joint efforts of the church and the state. The cluster's editors and contributors set out not simply to examine the interactions among these actors but to shed light on their consequences. Since a number of different actors are engaged in sacralization at once, each with its own aims and resources, this realm of eternal values, composite in character, expands and shows a growing number of zones in which dissent is described and judged to be "desecration."

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