Whatever happened to all the heroes?

Keith Lowe

Writer and historian, author of *Prisoners of History: What monuments to the Second World War tell us about History and ourselves* (William Collins, 2020).

On 7 April this year, a group of unknown vandals entered the Soviet War Memorial at Treptower Park in East Berlin, and began spraying graffiti on the statues and memorial stones. Their protest was deliberately provocative. The park is not only the site of several large monuments, it also serves as a cemetery for 7,000 Soviet soldiers who died in 1945 during the battle for Berlin. The graffiti consisted of red paint reminiscent of blood, and slogans that ranged from "Putin = Stalin" and "Death to all Russians", to more direct references to the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It would be easy to dismiss this as a one-off attack on Russian culture sparked by current events, but actually it demonstrates a series of shifts in popular memory that have taken place over the last 20 or 30 years.

In the first place it shows a conflation between Soviet and Russian history in the popular imagination. Treptower Park was built to commemorate a Soviet victory in 1945, in which Ukrainians and Russians fought side by side as part of the same army; and Stalin, their wartime leader, was not Russian but Georgian. Such subtleties have been lost today: the Red Army is now often remembered exclusively as a Russian army.

1. Panorama of the Soviet War Memorial at Treptow (Treptower Park). (Wikimedia Commons)

Secondly, it reveals how comprehensively the meaning of a memorial can change over time. During the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 we saw this in action: monuments that were put up in the 18th or 19th centuries to symbolise virtue and heroism had, by the 21st century, come to represent a completely different set of values: slavery, racism and oppression. A similar thing has occurred to monuments from the Communist era, including monuments to the Second World War. Soviet soldiers were once considered the greatest heroes of the war; but now, because of revelations in the 1990s about how they behaved during the liberation, particularly in Berlin, they are considered amongst the war's worst perpetrators.

Thirdly, this event shows how the memory of the Second World War has been weaponised in the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly drawn on Russian memories of the war in order to galvanise his country. He routinely refers to Ukrainians, and indeed their supporters in the West, as "Nazis". The attack on Treptower Park was partly a reaction to that: in the battle for hearts and minds, our memories about the Second World War have become the central battleground.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it demonstrates a wider shift in society which prioritises the memory of victimhood over that of heroism. Putin paints his country as a victim of the EU, America and NATO. Ukraine, a little more plausibly, portrays itself as a victim of Russian aggression. The population of Europe have also become the "victims" of food and fuel shortages, and higher inflation caused by


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2. Oradour-sur-Glane. South entrance to the village in ruins, seen from the esplanade of the church on the left. The main street then goes up on the left. On the right, the Limoges tramway track. Dna-Dennis (Wikimedia Commons)

3. RAF Bomber Command Memorial, Green Park, London (interior). Beata May (Wikimedia Commons)

the current conflict. Everyone claims victimhood status for themselves. Meanwhile, the German press universally lamented the vandalism of Treptower Park: a memorial site once dedicated to the heroes of the war had itself become a victim.

The death of the hero

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the cult of the hero and the cult of the martyr were two strands of memorialisation that grew up together. In the celebratory atmosphere of VE Day in May 1945, everyone wanted to be a hero. Allied soldiers found themselves being bought drinks and kissed by girls everywhere they went: the Dutch historian Ian Buruma has described it as a kind of "Beatlemania". Military parades in London, Paris and Moscow were cheered by vast crowds. This was also the era when the myth of the Resistance was born in France, Italy and the Netherlands. One of the first monuments to the Holocaust after the war was the 1948 Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw: Jews, like everyone else, did not want to view themselves as victims but as heroic resisters.

The Soviets, especially, liked to commemorate their heroism in bronze and stone. They built monuments to their soldiers all over eastern and central Europe, proclaiming themselves the liberators who saved humanity from Nazi tyranny. The main monument at Treptower Park is a perfect example: it features a 12-metre tall bronze statue on

top of a man-made hill. In one hand he carries a rescued child, while in the other he holds a sword that is cleaving through a swastika at his feet.

The Soviets knew exactly what they were doing with such monuments. Each was built to symbolise the friendship between nations, or triumph over tyranny; but the sheer scale of some of them is also a rather unsubtle demonstration of Soviet power and invincibility. The vast monument complex at Treptower Park is not unique in this respect. The Slavìn Memorial in Bratislava sits on a hill above the city, and includes a 12.5 metre statue of a Soviet soldier standing on a 42 metre-high obelisk: from wherever you stand in the city, it dominates the skyline. Similarly huge war memorials were built in Sofia, Budapest, Vienna and many, many other cities.

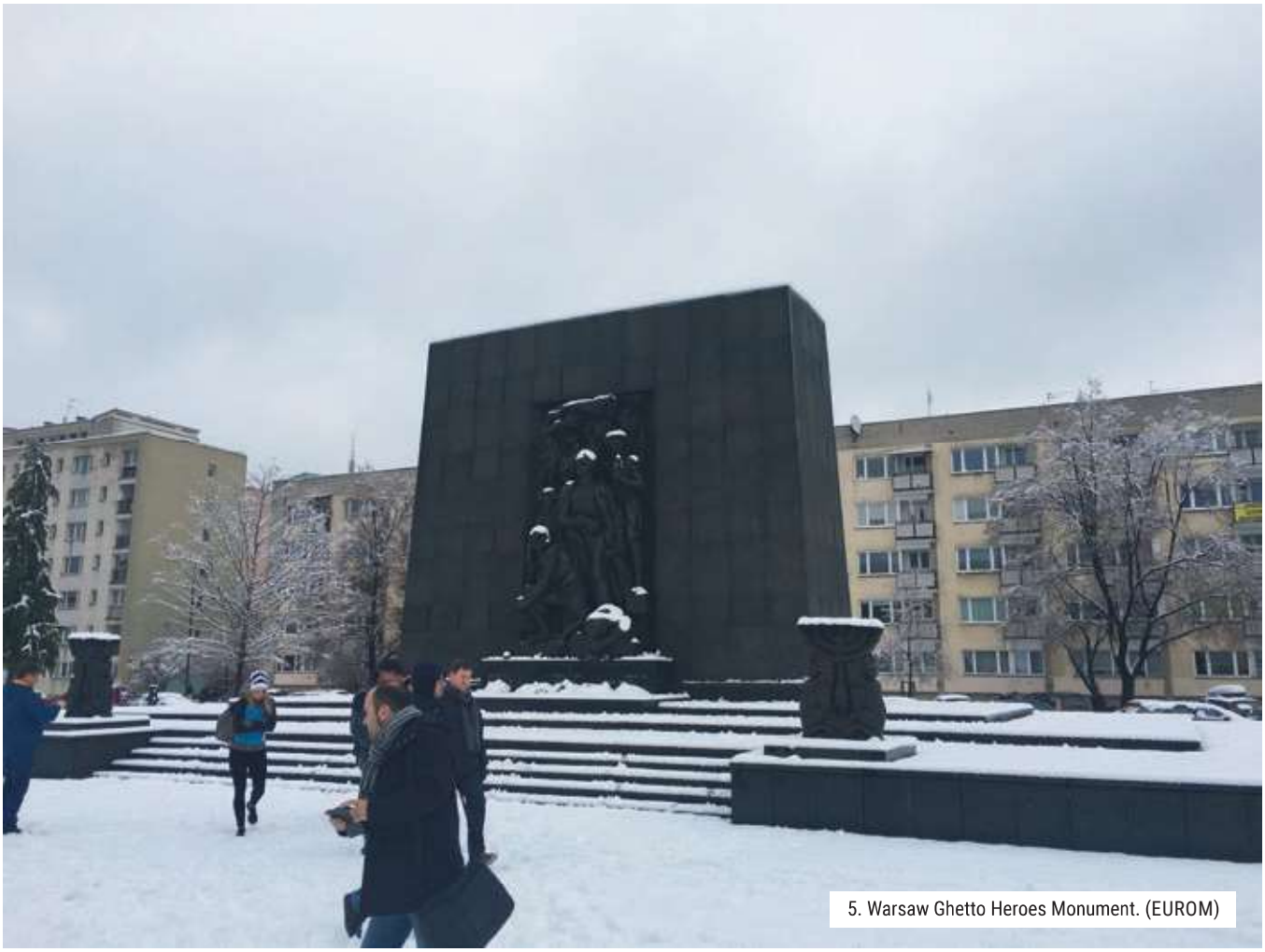
Unfortunately, with the collapse of European communism in 1989, many people in Eastern and Central Europe began to see such monuments not as symbols of liberation and shared victory, but as symbols of the Soviet oppression that came afterwards, during the Cold War. In 1997, the Victory Monument in Riga was bombed by a far-right Latvian nationalist group, and since then veterans of the Second World War have repeatedly called for it to be taken down. In Estonia, in 2007, the Bronze Soldier memorial to the "liberators of Tallinn" was removed from the city centre and relocated in the military cemetery a few kilometres away, sparking two days of protest by Tallinn's ethnic Russian minority. In Vienna, the Monument to the Heroes of the Red Army is regularly vandalised. The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia has repeatedly been daubed with paint –sometimes in jest, but more often in protest over recent actions by the Russian government. It was vandalised again this year, around the same time as the monument in Treptower Park.

4. Auschwitz Memorial Museum, Main entrance of the former extermination camp. (EUROM)

Perhaps the greatest protest against Soviet war memorials has occurred in Poland. The first casualty in this battle of memory was the Monument to Brotherhood in Arms in Warsaw –a memorial that was erected in the suburb of Praga in 1945 to symbolise a shared Polish-Soviet victory. It featured statues of Polish and Soviet soldiers standing side-by-side, and an inscription on the plinth that read: "Glory to the heroes of the Soviet Army, comrades in arms, who gave their lives for the freedom and independence of the Polish nation."

The first calls to tear this statue down came in the 1990s, but were seen off by local people, including one of the original Polish sculptors of the monument, who pointed out that tearing it down would be an insult to the Polish soldiers who were also commemorated here. Despite this, however, the monument was taken down 'temporarily' in 2011 while improvements were made to the city square where it stood; and in 2015, under considerable pressure from a new, right-wing populist government, the city council announced that the removal would be permanent.

In the following years, dozens of other statues followed all across Poland. The government, which since 2015 has been dominated by the populist Law and Justice Party, embarked on an official program to remove *all* Communist symbols from the country, including Soviet war memorials. (This is the same government that sacked the director of the brand new World War II Museum in Gdansk on the grounds that the exhibition he had produced was "not Polish enough"; and which passed a law in 2018 making it all-but-illegal for historians to write about Polish complicity in the Holocaust.) The very idea of Soviet heroism during the Second World War barely exists any longer in Poland.



5. Warsaw Ghetto Heroes Monument. (EUROM)

6. Marzabotto. Remains of the San Martino di Monte Sole Cathedral. NicFer, (Wikimedia Commons)

The rise of the martyr

Alongside the cult of the hero in 1945, there also grew up a parallel cult of the martyr. The celebrations of VE Day were often overshadowed by the memory of the countless millions who had been killed during the war. Many of the largest Soviet memorials, including Treptower Park, also mark the burial sites of thousands upon thousands of people. The most visited memorial to American soldiers in Europe is the cemetery in Normandy, where US presidents regularly come to commemorate American sacrifices on the anniversary of D-Day. The most sacred war monument in Britain is the Cenotaph in London, where politicians gather on Remembrance Day each year to honour "the glorious dead".

Amongst the most moving of monuments to the dead are those to the martyred villages where whole populations were massacred by the Nazis during the war. There are countless examples: Lidice in the Czech Republic, Distomo in Greece, Marzabotto in Italy –the list goes on. In central France, not far from the city of Limoges, lies the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, where 642 men, women and children were massacred by the Waffen-SS in 1944, before the whole village was put to the torch. In the immediate aftermath of the war the remains of the village were declared a national monument, and the ruins preserved exactly as they had been on the day of the massacre. One can still walk through it today and see the pathetic relics of that tragic day: the abandoned car of the local doctor, the skeleton of a baby-carriage in the ruins of the local church, the old bicycles, and sewing-machines, and pots and pans –all the machinery of everyday life that was snuffed out in an instant.

Easily the most common monuments to martyrdom, however, are those to the murdered Jews of Europe. Once rare, they are now ubiquitous. They

range from the tiny Stolpersteine that can be seen in more than 500 towns and cities across Europe –simple brass cobbles set in the street outside houses where Jews once lived; to the gigantic monuments and museums in Berlin, and vast memorial sites like Auschwitz and Dachau, which attract millions of visitors every year.

Unlike monuments to the heroes of the war, monuments to its martyrs have rarely been attacked by protesters or by governments. When they are –for example, when the famous wrought-iron gate of Auschwitz concentration camp were stolen by a far-right collector in 2010– the attacks are greeted with universal, international outrage.

If you wish to create a monument that will stand the test of time, it is clearly much safer now to build a statue devoted to a martyr than one devoted to a hero. While real-life heroes can never live up to the ideal values we ascribe to them, martyrs do not need to: it is their suffering that is being commemorated, not their moral virtue.

Monument builders appear to have taken note. Even in the nations that traditionally consider themselves the heroes of the war, the idea of victimhood has become a much more central motif. In Britain, for example, the change has been dramatic. In 1992 the British were still commemorating heroes like Sir Arthur Harris, the wartime head of Bomber Command who had been responsible for the bombing of hundreds of cities across Europe. Perhaps unsurprisingly, demonstrators turned out in force during the inauguration of the statue. Twenty years later, however, a separate Bomber Command Memorial was erected in central London. This monument was dedicated to the 55,000 men of Bomber Command who lost their lives (almost no mention was made of the 600,000 who had also died beneath Allied bombs). Furthermore, it was inaugurated after a campaign by several British newspapers claiming that the veterans of Bomber Command had been treated unfairly for decades. The message was clear –this was a memorial to victims, not heroes.

The Russians have also learned their lesson. The brand new Memorial to the Soviet Soldier, unveiled by Vladimir Putin in 2020 at Rzhev, looks a little like an old school Soviet monument. The main statue. which stands 25 metres tall, is a square-jawed hero whose face looks like an image from a 1950s Soviet poster. But his body is made up of a flock of flying cranes –symbols of the souls of those who died in battle. The rest of the site is dominated by broken walls inscribed with the names of the dead. This is Russia reimagining its past: if it can no longer be the greatest hero of the Second World War, it must stake a claim to being the war's greatest victim.

Herein lies the reason why monuments like those at Treptower Park should be protected now more than ever. Not only are they reminders of the greatest European war in history; they are also a reminder of a time when we still allowed ourselves to believe in heroes. That time, like the wartime generation itself, is slowly slipping away.