

# ПЕРВАЯ МИРОВАЯ ВОЙНА В РОССИИ: МЕСТА ПАМЯТИ И ГДЕ ИХ ИСКАТЬ

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## **Аннотация**

Французский историк Пьер Нора известен благодаря своей масштабной работе «Места памяти», в которой он собрал статьи многих известных французских исследователей. «Местом памяти» он назвал нечто символическое, имеющее большое значение для людей конкретной национальности — это не только места, как мы их понимаем, но и песни, люди, символы, здания, памятники. У Первой мировой войны в России практически нет своего собственного образа. Однако, несмотря на это, можно говорить о ряде «мест памяти», которые можно рассматривать в рамках термина Нора. В этой статье мы рассмотрели три потенциальных «места памяти» Первой мировой войны в России: «Атаку мертвецов» 1915 г., генерала Алексея Брусилова и музей «Россия в Великой войне».

# *World War I in Russia: Its “Sites of Memory” and Where to Find Them*

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## ***Abstract***

French historian Pierre Nora is known for his masterpiece *Les Lieux de Mémoire (Sites of Memory)* where he collected articles of many famous French researchers. Nora defined the term *sites of memory* as a symbolic phenomenon that has a great importance for the people of a particular ethnicity. It can be not only places but also songs, people, symbols, buildings, monuments. World War I has almost no image in Russia. However, we can talk about several *sites of memory* that can match the Pierre Nora's term. In this article we examined three potential WWI's *sites of memory* in Russia: Attack of the Dead Men in 1915, General Alexei Brusilov and the Museum *Russia in the Great War*.

French historian Pierre Nora became famous thanks to his monumental work *Les Lieux de Mémoire (Sites of Memory)* (Nora et al. 1986–1993). This project started with the seminar at the School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences in 1977. After that seminar Pierre Nora was able to persuade almost a hundred famous French historians to write articles about historical memory (which was not a relevant field of research at that time).

Initially, the four-volume project *Sites of Memory* included four main topics: regional, religious, social, and political. The result of many years of work included 7 volumes and 128 chapters, which were divided into parts: the Republic (“crystallization points” of the memory of the French Republic (Safronova 2019, 64)), the Nation (intangible, material, ideal), France (“mandatory stories” (Safronova 2019, 66)).

*Sites of Memory* is a very important project that has been translated into many languages. The most detailed is an English translation in 3 volumes. Only selected articles were translated into Russian, but Pierre Nora wrote the preface to this book by himself (Safronova 2019, 75).

Nevertheless, it is impossible to find a single definition of what *sites of memory* are. In the first volume Pierre Nora defined *sites of memory* as some kind of remains. Although Pierre Nora gave more specific instructions in the later volumes, it seems that a *site of memory* can be everything, even a symbol or a person. However, *sites of memory* should not be confused, for example, with thematic parks (Tai 2001). In the preface to the last book, Nora admitted that a *site of memory* initially was just something intuitive, so he could not give any clear definition. We may say that *sites of memory* are located at the intersection of history and memory and are generated by the desire to remember.

For Pierre Nora any *site of memory* includes three aspects: material, symbolic, functional.

In the third volume of his work Pierre Nora, finally, defined what a *site of memory* is: “Any significant unity, material or ideal order, which the will of people or the work of time has turned into a symbolic element of the heritage of a certain community” (Nora 1999, 79).

In 2002, over almost 10 years after the *Sites of Memory* project had been completed, Pierre Nora's article “Worldwide Triumph of Memory” was published in the *Transit Magazine*. In this work he supplemented his views on the problem of the relationship between memory and history as well as a historical reconstruction. Pierre Nora wrote that the process of the past restoration had been observed for the last 20–25 years: a number of memorial events had been held, thematic museums had been opened and France was the first to enter the era of “remembrance” (Nora 2005).

In 2014–2018 the whole world commemorated World War I. It was a great opportunity for Russia to use the example of France and enter

the era of “remembrance”, at least to revive the memory of World War I in the public discourse.

In Russia the attitude towards World War I differs considerably from its perception in the majority of other participating countries, including former members of the Entente. The peculiarity of Russia lies in the fact that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century World War I was fully incorporated into the national historical narrative, while there were no significant places of memory in the country at all. That is why the centenary of WWI was held under the slogan of reviving the memory of the *forgotten war*.

For almost a hundred years the historical memory of World War I in Russia has been formed in a very specific way. The memory of the war was replaced by events more significant for the Soviet state: the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War. The Soviet policy of memory called World War I an “imperialist war” and an “alien war”. It led to the fact that World War I is usually called the forgotten war in the modern Russian historiography.

By 2014 (a century after the outbreak of the war) various memorial projects had begun to appear in Russia. They were caused not only by the desire of the nation to restore its past but also because of the government decree. This was primarily due to the so-called “patriotic turn” and attempts to change the image of Russia in the sphere of a foreign policy (Nagornaya *n.d.*). A very representative quote concerning this matter is one of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, that was later cited many times in various articles:

“It is the result of the betrayal of the government. It is obvious that they were afraid of it and did not want to talk, so they kept silent (...) The silence was because of other reasons. Our country lost, in fact, to the losing side. On the part of the new Bolshevik government it was an act of national betrayal, and the government was afraid to admit the fact it was for the sake of the party interests” (Putin Obvinil... 2012) (trans. mine).

Preparations for the centenary commemoration of World War I began in 2012. It was very important to create the image of the so-called “stolen victory”, meaning the loss of Russia to the later defeated Germany.

At the anniversary years it became clear that it was no longer possible to call the war completely “forgotten” (Gorskij 2015). For the last hundred years solid historiography has been formed and many articles, books, monographs have been published. It can be argued that the definition “forgotten” indicates a gap between the significance of the war for the history of Russia and its little reflection in social and cultural memory. Polls conducted in 2014–2018 confirm this hypothesis (Obraz Pervoj Mirovoj 2014; 100-letie Okonchaniya Pervoj... 2018). The point is not that people do not actually know about this war (although awareness of the war is very

little), but that it does not have its own “face”, remaining absorbed by the October Revolution and the Civil War.

In 2012 the work on preparations for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary started at the state level. Official events and their discursive reflection were largely based on borrowing previous practices and approaches. The peculiarity of the official symbolic policy was that the authorities reproduced the existing discourses and symbolic actions by incorporating them in the official state model of the patriotism formation. The main idea was the affirmation of the “heroic” theme.

According to the official state model, there is a certain objective history of WWI which was once forgotten but must be revived now and become a property of all the Russians. The call to remember the heroes turns into a glorification of public figures and officials. Therefore, the “true” history of Russian participation in World War I appears to be a pure history of heroism.

Perhaps the historical memory of WWI is still too weak and unstable as well as heavily dependent on government decrees. Thus it makes the emergence and, most importantly, fixation of memorial places connected with World War I more complicated in Russia. However, in this work we will try to examine several most notable narratives, personalities, and events, as well as determine whether they can be *sites of memory* according to the ideas of Pierre Nora (material, symbolic, functional).

Furthermore, we would like to point at three significant symbols that have the strongest connection with World War I in public opinion of Russians. First is the heroic narrative of the Attack of the Dead Men (here comes the reference to II 3. La Nation, vol. III: La Gloire. Les Mots, section Glory from Pierre Nora's book), then goes General Alexei Brusilov (III 3 Les France, vol. III: De L'archive à L'emblème, section Identifications) and the last one is the Museum *Russia in the Great War* (II. 2. La Nation, vol. II: Le Territoire. L'état. Le Patrimoine, section Heritage).

It is also important to note that the symbols related to WWI are more controversial in Russia than in France. All the symbols listed in Pierre Nora's *Sites of Memory* are recognized as significant for the history of France and for the French nation. While WWI's *sites of memory* discussed in the article (like the other *sites of memory* that have not been studied) are not generally recognized by Russians as significant symbols. The further study of the historical memory of World War I and its entry into the field of public history might make these *sites of memory* truly significant for Russians.

First and foremost, we want to explore the heroic narrative of the Attack of the Dead Men. The Attack of the Dead Men is a name given for

the counterattack led by the 13<sup>th</sup> company of the 226<sup>th</sup> Zemlyansky regiment on July 24, 1915, while repelling a German gas attack. It happened during the defense of the Osowiec fortress (present-day Poland) on the Eastern Front during World War I. The German army used toxic substances (chlorine, bromine), but could not continue the attack as dying Russian soldiers opposed them.

The expression “attack of the dead men” appeared in the work of Sergey Khmelkov *The Struggle for Osowiec*, published by Voenizdat in 1939:

“The 13<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> companies, having lost up to 50% of their personnel poisoned, deployed on both sides of the railway and began an attack. The 13<sup>th</sup> company meeting the parts of the 18<sup>th</sup> Landwehr Regiment rushed against bayonets with shouting *hurray*. As witnesses reported the attack of the dead greatly astonished the Germans so that they did not continue fighting and rushed away; many Germans died in the wire traps in front of the second line of trenches from the fire of the fortress artillery” (Khmelkov 1939, 76) (trans. mine).

On the whole, researching and describing specific exploits of the tsarist army in the imperialist war were not welcomed and works beyond the purely technical analysis of strategy and tactics were rare in the USSR.

Then, the expression “attack of the dead men” appeared in an article by journalist Vladimir Voronov. In his article Vladimir Voronov added fictional and journalistic features (such as “spitting out pieces of lungs on bloody soulder’s blouses” (Voronov 2009)), that later became permanent elements of other authors’ descriptions.

It should be noted that the journalist's task was to create a vivid image of a heroic defense to make authorities and society remember a forgotten page of Russian history. The created narrative simultaneously belonged to the media space and the patriotic discourse, whereas the last was focused on finding examples of forgotten heroism. The Osowiec's story is now used for both entertainment and to declare a sense of patriotism. The heroic myth began to live its own life meeting the requirements of both spaces.

At first this narrative attracted historical enthusiasts, then hobby groups and finally ordinary readers by scattering and developing on the Internet (as a communication channel). The myth got its own life: it transformed from the call to remember World War I into becoming a self-sufficient vivid evidence of the true heroism that Russian soldiers possess despite anything.

The event called the Attack of the Dead Men was absolutely real. Although there were many first distorted and later revealed facts the counterattack did take place on July 24, 1915.

Such an event is of a great symbolic significance for both the modern political mythmaking and creating a public image of the heroic past. For example, in 2014 the Attack of the Dead Men was included in the list of funding programs of the Military History section recommended by the advisory council of the Society of Cinematographers.

As noted above, the narrative operates due to the active support of the state. Instead of inventing a new symbol, it is rather about supporting the initiative from below; relying on the events, historical reliability of which is beyond doubt; and using the heroic component proved by reference to the scholarly research. Probably, despite the atmosphere of a growing international tension, the image of Russian soldiers who are ready to defend their emplacement could finally be attractive. At the same time the state does not offer a stable and unified interpretation, limiting to an approval of Osowiec as a heroic symbol.

The next *site of memory* that we would like to mention is General Alexey Brusilov. Brusilov was a Tsarist Russian and Soviet military leader, a Supreme Commander of the Russian army, a chief inspector of the cavalry in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. Here we can talk about the similarity of the image with one in the article about Jeanne d'Arc from the Identifications section of Volume III 3 Les France, vol. III: De L'archive à L'emblème of Pierre Nora's book. Of course, the image of Brusilov does not carry the same significant symbolism for the Russians like the image of Jeanne d'Arc does for the French. However, it is, probably, the most significant (and the most recognizable thanks to the Brusilov Offensive) military image of WWI in Russia.

Brusilov served in the tsarist army during the whole war, but at the time of the February Revolution he supported the dismissal of Nicholas II and empowerment of the Provisional Government. After 1920 Brusilov entered the Red Army (it is believed that the death of his son in captivity of the White Army prompted him to join the Red Army). From May 1920 he headed a Special Meeting under the Commander-in-Chief of all the armed forces in the Soviet Republic. The recommendations for strengthening the Red Army were worked out there. Researchers believe that the images of both the Brusilov Offensive and General Brusilov are preserved in the public consciousness precisely due to the fact that he changed parties and joined the Soviet government (Senyavskaya 2009, 4).

For the Soviet Union the funeral of Brusilov in 1926 was a very unusual event. After the official secular funeral ceremony (Kak Pohoronili Generala Brusilova 1926), Brusilov was buried according to the Orthodox traditions: in an open grave on the territory of the monastery. The veterans of World War I who had fought under the command of General Brusilov

threw not only soil but also their St. George crosses into the grave. Next to the funerary wreath from the Red Army with a red ribbon there was a wreath from the Cavaliers of St. George with brown and black stripes. Moreover, an Orthodox cross was placed on Brusilov's grave by the knights of St. George participating in the ceremony (Petrone 2011, 60–62).

General Brusilov was a real historical figure. There are memories of him, as well as his grave in the Novodevichy Convent to remember him. A monument to general Brusilov was opened in St. Petersburg. Furthermore, there are streets and squares named after him in St. Petersburg, Voronezh, and Moscow.

General Brusilov possessed a great symbolic importance for the Soviet government as a former tsarist general who had joined the Red Army and had worked to legitimize the new state. Therefore, he was allowed some liberties, for example, a funeral according to the Orthodox tradition (Petrone 2011, 60).

To sum it up, Brusilov was an outstanding military leader and a teacher, a patriot of his homeland but not his country. Consequently, his image began to work as a symbol of a new state.

The place where the museum *Russia in the Great War* is located has an extensive cultural and historical background, although it was reopened as a museum of WWI only in 2014.

*The War Chamber*, where the museum is currently situated, was founded in 1913. Initially, it was planned to locate a museum of the history of the Russian troops there. Its collection contained paintings, icons, weapons, and documents connected with the history of the Russian wars.

However, after the outbreak of the war with Germany in 1914, it was decided to create a museum of the current war, exhibiting the portraits of St. George's cavaliers and the trophies delivered from the battlefields. In 1916 the most valuable trophies of the ongoing war were transferred from *the Artillery Historical Museum* to *the War Chamber*. They were put in the courtyard. A downed German plane Albatross was displayed near the museum. In 1917 the museum received a new name: *the People's Museum of the 1914–1917 War*. But a year later, it was closed. The exhibits of *the War Chamber* were moved to other museums and storages or destroyed.

*The War Chamber* had not been used for its intended purpose before 2009. It had housed a literature club, hostels, and restoration workshops.

In 2010–2011 a project was developed to restore and adapt the building to the museum needs. In 2011–2013 the building of *the War Chamber* was restored (Resstroj 2013). *The Museum-Reserve Tsarskoe Selo* housed *the Museum of the History of World War I in the War Chamber* which was opened on August 4, 2014.



The museum is located near St. Petersburg on the territory of Tsarskoe Selo. In 1914 a museum of the Great War was planned to be opened in this building, so the return of the museum to these walls can be considered a historical justice.

The exposition is based mainly on outstanding weapons and everyday items of the WWI's participants, documents and photographic materials from the collection of *the Museum-Reserve Tsarskoye Selo*. Among the exhibits are the entire line of machine guns of that time, uniforms from different countries, awards, personal belongings of those who fought in the Great War, as well as weapons. The core of the exposition is an exact copy of the *French Nieuport-17*. Among the exhibits is an authentic *Ford* car.

*Museum Russia in the Great War* was and still is the only museum in Russia dedicated to World War I. It has a great symbolic value for both the professionals (historians and cultural workers) and for amateurs as it is a useful educational platform. It can be called one of the most obvious *sites of memory* of World War I in Russia. This particular museum, being opened in 2014, can become the flagship in the process of reviving WWI's memory.

Various events related to World War I are currently being held on the territory of the museum. These are exhibitions, public lectures, presentations, etc. (Man'kov 2019). More than a century has passed after the end of the war and the museum remains the main operating platform for studying the history of WWI.

Thus, although the historical memory and awareness of World War I remain rather weak in Russia even after the centenary, we can talk about the availability of some *sites of memory*. According to the ideas of Pierre Nora they are: battles, places, monuments, and people.

This work is devoted to three *sites of memory* in three aspects: material, symbolic, functional. All the memorial places correspond to these aspects according to various factors. Therefore, we can state that the Attack of the Dead (defense of the Osowiec fortress), General Brusilov, and the *Museum Russia in the Great War* can be considered as *sites of memory* of WWI in Russia.

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