TEMENOS
Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion
Temenos Vol. 59 No. 1 (2023), 9–28
DOI: 10.33356/temenos.127280

Temenos Lecture 2022

Imagine There is no Death… Soviet Funeral Reforming en Marche

ANNA SOKOLOVA
University of Helsinki

Abstract

The idea of human mortality and its derived funerary practices seem to be among the most enduring aspects of culture. What if we stated that death meant nothing but pure organic decomposing, leaving nothing behind but the chemical constituents? What if such an approach became the basis of an active reformatory policy of a state? Soviet practices of death and attitudes towards dead bodies can be mentioned among the most significant changes that have taken place in Russian society over the past 150 years. While Soviet leaders have been given lavish state funerals, the death of an 'average' person has become less and less visible. Although the state made considerable efforts to reform the funeral sphere, this did not lead to the development and enhancement of brand new funeral rituals. Rather, this policy gradually diminished the social value of funerals and facilitated a transition to DIY funerals. Following Robert Hertz and Arnold van Gennep, I consider funerary practices as a social phenomenon and a social mechanism that allows society and its members to adapt to mortality, experience loss, and restore their integrity. In this Temenos lecture I will show how a new understanding of human nature and human mortality transformed the social fabric of Soviet society. The lecture is based on my recently published book *A New Death for a New Man? Funeral Culture of Early USSR*.

Keywords*: funeral culture, Russia, Soviet Union, atheism, cremation*

On 3 January 1921 the famous children's writer and literary critic Korney Chukovsky visited one of the first crematoriums in Soviet Russia. Boris Kaplun, cremation movement enthusiast and an organizer of the crematorium in Petrograd (Leningrad), conceived his creature as a luxurious

crematorium-temple, which 'by its very appearance, should help in every way to create the necessary spiritual mood in the masses, which alone will make the idea of corpse-burning acceptable to the public' (TsGA SPb 1919). However, during the three-year construction period the project underwent numerous changes. The result was that instead of a specially built gorgeous temple, the public baths on the outskirts of Petrograd were converted for the needs of the crematorium. Chukovsky described his visit in a diary note:

> We are laughing with no respect. No kind of solemnity. Everything is bare and straightforward. Neither religion nor poetry, not even simple politeness, brightens up the place of burning. The Revolution took away the old rites and decorum and gave none of its own. Everyone is wearing hats, smoking, and talking about corpses as if they were dogs. Indeed: what ceremonies! Who cares about the name of that useless carrion going to the furnace? It would have burned sooner, that's all. But, as bad luck would have it, the carrion did not burn. The furnace was Soviet, the engineers were Soviet, the deceased were Soviet – all in disarray, somehow, barely (Chukovsky 2012, 313).

Twenty-two years later, in 1944, the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR conducted a series of audits of the funeral services in the largest cities of the Union, which gave the impression that the staff of funeral trusts across the country not only did not work well but did not expect anyone to apply to them for help in the organization of a funeral:

> The undertaker has no stores for selling coffins and funeral paraphernalia. There is no signboard for manufacturing coffins. There is no entrance door, and customers enter the workshop through the window. The workshop is not equipped and is full of garbage. On the inspection day, the workshop did not have any ready-made coffins. From January 1 to September 1, 1944, there were 126 coffins made in the workshop, and the cemetery workers dug out 1145 graves during the same period. By comparing these figures, we can see that the population's demand for coffins was satisfied by 9% only. (GA RF 1944)

Another 35 years later, in 1978, a resident of the Sumy Region of Ukraine wrote a letter to the Central Commission for the Study and Implementation of New Civil Festivals and Rites under the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR in which she drew attention to the complete absence of any funeral institutions in the entire region where she lived:

> Everyone knows how they organized funerals in pre-revolutionary times: all the equipment was in the local church. One could borrow a long strap (not a rope), and there were special stretchers to carry the deceased. Nowadays, we carry the deceased on a truck. A man dies, and relatives are running around looking for a chauffeur with a car. And, sometimes, the car came out from under the manure. As soon as they dumped the manure, they put the dead person on it. Sometimes some manure is still left on the car, and the car smells. Then they search for something to put the coffin into the grave (Smolkin-Rotrock 2012, 457).

These quotations, reflecting feelings and personal stories from different years and places in the Soviet Union, represent the typical experience of the encounter with death and the mortal practices of Soviet man. Finding a burial place, forging documents and bribes, seeking someone to make the coffin from something and a vehicle to transport the deceased to the cemetery, and finding someone who could dig a grave or stuff to make a fence from so that it would simultaneously protect the tomb from grazing cattle and could not be stolen for firewood – all were questions the family of each person who died in the USSR had to solve in the shortest possible time. How did it happen that throughout the Soviet period, against the background of the lush funerals of Soviet leaders, a completely different reality unfolded, in which, de facto, no institutions were responsible for the funeral of the average person so that for many years funerals became DIY affairs, with the relatives of the dead carrying out every stage of the funeral without the involvement of any funeral professionals? How was the funeral transformed from an elaborate transition ritual into a kind of quest with a traumatic and unpredictable scenario? How did funerals and death turn from a natural, regular, and proper end of any life into something shameful, silent, and hidden? These are the questions I will address in this lecture.

Soviet project and social significance of death

The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 is well known for its anti-religious and atheist attitudes and the effort to create a new social order and even a new man. These approaches led to the creation of new social relations and the destruction of old ones. However, I will not address the destructive power of the militant atheist movement or the projects to create a new way of life. Instead, I will focus on how discursive practices based on a new atheist understanding of man transformed rituals of transition in Soviet society – notably, how they changed death-related rituals.

The interpretation of human nature, its relationship with the phenomenon of mortality, and its derived funerary practices are among the most enduring aspects of culture. However, the Bolsheviks questioned this fundamental cultural constant by declaring the creation of a new society and a new man based on a materialistic and scientific view of the world. Such a view eventually created what might be called a two-layered system of Soviet funerals. The funerals of Soviet leaders and notorious Soviet citizens took place on such a scale that they are etched in memories even today, many decades later. In contrast, the funerals of ordinary Soviet people became increasingly invisible over the years, dropping out of the social fabric.

Undoubtedly, the displacement of funerary practices from the public space is not a unique feature of Russian society. Philippe Ariès believed that displacing death, or making it invisible, was a crucial feature of modernity. 'Except the death of statesman, society has banished death. In the towns, there is no way of knowing that something has happened […] Society no longer observes a pause; the disappearance of an individual no longer affects its community. Everything in the town goes as if nobody died anymore' – he notes (Ariès 1983, 560). However, I think the situation we are dealing with in the Soviet period is significantly different. It is not simply a question of pushing death out of the public sphere but of forcing it out of a broader range of social practices and institutions, creating a situation where society lives as if death does not exist.

I argue that this feature is a product of the basic concepts underlying the Soviet project, whose foundations were related less to the socialist ideology of the new regime than to the fundamentally new anthropological constants underlying the new worldview confessed by the Bolsheviks. This utopian project of building a new society implied the formation of a novel and perfect human being, free from the imperfections of the old world. The idea of this person, who will have to live in the beautiful world of communism, gave rise to a new interpretation of man around which society was being 'reassembled'. It is no exaggeration to say that a significant part of this interpretation was an original view of human mortality. The deliberately atheistic worldview of Bolshevism's supporters presupposed a fundamentally alternative sense of human nature's finiteness. The old categories, based on the Christian notion of the immortality of the soul and the subsequent resurrection from the dead, were unacceptable to the Bolshevik regime, which created the need to redefine the entire set of ideas about human existence, even if only a minority of the population shared the new ones.

The alternative conception of human existence and mortality was by no means a peripheral feature of the social order the Bolsheviks created. In any case, no matter how utopian the reformers' concepts were, it was impossible to ignore not only the fact of the physical finiteness of each person's earthly life but also the numerous deaths resulting from the Civil War and the accompanying epidemics that were a constant reminder of this fact.

Far more important, however, was the social role of death in a newly emerging society. Considering death and the practices of dealing with the dead body as a social phenomenon, I suggest that death is not only a physical act of the end of life but forms a set of essential practices that determine and structure collective behaviour. Following Robert Hertz and Arnold van Gennep, I suggest that the transitive nature of funeral rituals should be a focus of this study. Along with other transitional rites, those dealing with the dead body are intended not only to ensure the successful transition of the deceased to the other world but even to facilitate a change of status of those left alive. Each member of society taking part in the rites not only contributes to the separation of the deceased from the community of the living but also acquires a new status, first associated with the limitations of the transition period (mourning) and then with successful reintegration into the community of the living (Gennep 1960, 146–165). The death of any member of society creates a rupture in social relations. From Hertz's perspective death destroys not just a person, but a social essence created in a long relationship between people (Hertz 1960, 76–86). Following Hennep and Hertz, Thomas Lacker argues that 'Death in culture takes time because it takes time for the rent in the social fabric to be rewoven and for the dead to do their work in creating, recreating, representing, or disrupting the social order of which they had been a part' (Laqueur 2016, 10).

Indeed, by doubting the significance of individual death and death-related rituals, the Bolsheviks compromised these essential functions of the social importance of death. We shall see the consequences of this in what follows.

Funeral reform

Funeral rites and other practices dealing with dead bodies are the most conservative element of culture. When changes occur, they always have some value, testifying to the internal development of society, the direction in which it is moving, and how its self-consciousness is changing (ibid., 93–94). That said, the rapid changes in the practices of dealing with dead bodies

that occurred in the early Soviet period are crucial for studying the Soviet project and exploring the changes taking place in society at the deepest level.

Shifts in practices dealing with dead bodies occurred gradually and unevenly throughout the Soviet period. However, whatever these changes were, they all had a common starting point: the funeral reform of 1917–1918, which included several decrees. All these decrees in one way or another were aimed less at changing funeral rituals than at secularizing family life.

Like other life cycle rites in Russia before the Revolution, funeral rites were entirely under the control of religious organizations. Religion was one of the most critical social characteristics in the Russian Empire and was more substantial than ethnicity (Baiburin 2017, 55–56, 216–219).

When handling the deceased, everyone had to obey the strict rules of the confession to which they were formally assigned. The influence of religious communities concerned not only the burial itself and its regulation but also the administration of funerals, the management of cemeteries, and, of course, the revenues from burials. In addition to burying and cemetery supervision, the church was responsible for registering deaths. It was thus impossible to bury a person (or register a new birth or marriage) without the involvement of a religious institution. In this sense, being a 'practising' atheist, a literal 'non-religious' person in pre-revolutionary Russia was formally impossible.

According to Tony Walter the specific form that funeral culture takes in a given country is determined precisely by the architecture of funeral management (or by those who control and dispose of dead bodies) (Walter 2005; 2012). In pre-revolutionary Russia dead bodies, in this sense, belonged entirely to the church. This fact dictated the entire structure of funeral culture and a specific set of practices for handling dead bodies. The atheist invasion of a newly emerging state related to funerals intended to overcome this 'priests' dictate' (Bonch-Bruevich 1968, 13).

The first decree concerning the practice of dealing with dead bodies was the decree 'On civil marriage, on children, and on the keeping of registers' of 12 December 1917, which proclaimed the creation of a new system of registration of 'civil status acts' – that is, marriages, births, and deaths. The decree did not simply create the possibility for family ceremonies outside any religious organization but made their secular form, the registration, the only legal one. Naturally, this made the question of the deceased's confessional affiliation meaningless. Neither a church funeral service nor the formal adherence to a particular denomination or parish mattered any longer (Dekret SNK 1957, 249).

The most significant part of the funeral reform was the Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR 'On cemeteries and funerals' of 7 December 1918. The decree abolished the categories of burial places, transferred all cemeteries, crematoria (which, incidentally, did not exist in Soviet Russia at that time), and morgues, as well as the organization of the funeral itself to the local Soviets, abolished payment for places in cemeteries, and established the same funeral for all citizens. It also allowed the performance of religious rites at the request of the relatives at their own expense. No less important was that from the publication of the decree all private funeral businesses with all their staff submitted to the local Councils of Deputies without stopping their activities. Thus, the entire funeral industry in the country underwent municipalization. Finally, the decree introduced funerals to the social insurance system, transferring workers' burial costs to the state through funeral benefits (Dekret SNK 1968).

The funeral reform thus had several goals at once. First, it implied alienation from the church and other 'bourgeois' institutions of the legal and actual control of dead bodies. The established system of civil registry offices transferred the registration of deaths to local councils. The municipalization of undertakers, cemeteries, morgues, and other infrastructure in turn transferred control of the practical aspects of burial to the latter. In addition to creating a legal possibility for non-religious funerals, this decision significantly redistributed financial flows, excluding the church from an essential source of income: the undertaking of burial services. Second, the reform intended to create funerals that were uniform and accessible to everyone, as it eliminated the division into funeral ranks according to social estate and introduced funeral allowances. With other social services such as jobs, housing, and medicine funerals were among the 'default benefits' for all workers in the country (Papernyi 1996, 116). A third goal was the legalization and introduction of cremation, a project that the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church had systematically blocked before the Revolution (Beliakova 2013, 537). In other words, if the dead bodies belonged to the church before the Revolution, after 1918 they were completely taken over by the state.

Consequences of the reforms

Regarding funeral services, neither the methods of the Bolsheviks' reforms nor their specific content was unique. The basic ideas of the 1918 reform already occurred in the draft of the 'Regulation on the arrangement of

cemeteries and crematoriums', dated 1913. They were in line with the transformation of funeral culture in every European country during the nineteenth century. However, if the methods and ideas of the Bolsheviks were unexceptional, the results were truly unprecedented. Although the funeral system in Russian cities in the autumn of 1917 was not flawless, by the spring of 1918 the funeral business and cemetery administration in the country's main cities had fallen into complete disrepair and neglect. Mortuaries and hospitals were overflowing with corpses, unburied bodies lay in cemeteries, gravediggers sabotaged work, people and livestock settled in cemeteries, and it was challenging to obtain burial documents.

The collapse affected every sphere that had been the object of utopian reforms in 1917–1918 – housing maintenance, education, medicine, and so on. Funeral services were no exception, but one of the most striking examples of the rapid degradation of the municipal sphere. However, the transition to a new economic policy in the first half of the twenties made it possible to restore many segments of the municipal domain in an old-fashioned way. At the same time, the attempt to restore the old order in cemetery management, reproducing the modernized pre-revolutionary schemes in the new conditions, undertaken in 1923, did not significantly improve the situation. As a result, cemeteries continued to decline – there were no coffins, spades, or gravediggers in cities across the country.

There is no straightforward answer to the question of why the attempt to reform the funeral administration in the 1920s in a practical way led to the dysfunctionality of this essential sphere of life. By focusing the entire reform on removing the church from funeral services, the Bolsheviks ignored the internal logic of that institution and the infrastructural role the church played in it. The reform ideologists believed funeral services were only an instrument of enrichment for the church, which manipulated the relatives of the dead for enormous profits. Thus, the Bolsheviks viewed the relationship between the church and the relatives of the deceased as one of faith and ritual.

They believed the church was an obsolete parasitic element in this framework, without which the workings of the whole mechanism would stay intact. In doing so, they ignored the essential role the church played. In the multi-actor configuration that emerged in the funeral business by the turn of the century, the part the church played was by no means exclusively related to rituals or religious faith. It was much more important that the work of the funeral industry as an integrated social institution was looped precisely into the church. The economic foundations of the funeral industry were in

the sphere of its management, which allowed it to function. The division of funerals into funeral ranks according to the social estate was seen by the Bolsheviks as a manifestation of social inequality inherent in the class society of the Russian Empire. This system made places near the church more valuable than places on the periphery of the cemetery. However, at the same time, these funeral ranks aimed to serve cheaper and free-of-charge burials, using the revenues from more expensive ones and creating a fund for the cemeteries' improvement and sanitary maintenance. The funeral business in this system functioned as a fully-fledged social institution, subject to an institutional logic based on the concept of the common good, to which all families who became unitarian members of the cemetery had access. By entering into this relationship, they entered into a contract with the church, represented by the cemetery parish. Thus, the reforms destroyed the funeral industry as an institution by mechanically removing the church from this system. Once the foundations of the funeral industry were destroyed, it is unsurprising that the entire cemetery economy fell into disrepair with lightning speed.

In my opinion this perspective of the reform and its consequences explains quite convincingly the decline and degradation that followed the municipalization of the funeral business. Yet although the general sense of the reforms and their basic idea – the transfer of control of the cemeteries and funeral infrastructure from the church to the city authorities – followed the vector outlined long before 1917, this does not explain why the dismal condition of the funeral services continued until the end of the Soviet period and largely into the post-Soviet era.

The reason for this ongoing abandonment and dysfunctionality is that after the mid-1930s funeral enterprises fell out of the system of state provision and regulation. Cemeteries were resubordinated to the local authorities, and all surveillance and funding for them ceased. At the same time the work of undertakers and the production of funeral accessories almost stopped. The whole industry, which until recently, even after the reform of 1918, had been a fully functioning institution, passed to the level of grassroots management, disintegrating into individual actors, each doing its work only part-time alongside another occupation.

A world with no place for death

The transformation of funeral services into a set of self-supporting practices that occurred everywhere from the second half of the 1930s can be better

understood if we examine it from the perspective of urban planning and the place the innovative practice of cremation held within it. This shift in optics shows that the problems occurred not because there were hidden defects in the alternative principles of funeral administration but because there was no place for death and the deceased in the world that emerged after the Revolution. Utopia, populated by healthy people ignoring the diseases conquered by a proper healthcare system, and who satisfied hunger with food synthesized directly in factories, was fated not only to evict death but to ignore it in every possible way. Unsurprisingly, in the projects of Soviet cities designed for the new world there was simply no space for cemeteries. A purifying cremation that turned an irrelevant corpse into two kilograms of sterile white powder became the novel practice for dealing with dead bodies. 'The old', 'the dying', and 'the sick' were characteristic epithets of a past – a defeated world. Its remnants must be eliminated. The new world and the new man in Soviet rhetoric were consistently associated with aliases of health, youth, and vitality. The famous parades of athletes on Red Square could be a perfect demonstration of the vigorous nature of the newly emerging men who had come to the capital from all over the Soviet Union to march in orderly rows, acting with their healthy young bodies (Petrone 2000, 23–46).

In a utopia that displaced death cemeteries as enormous and incomprehensible domains of death seemed highly inappropriate. In the symbolic space of the new Soviet city the cemetery had no place at all. In old cities historic cemeteries were closing, while in rising cities they were completely absent from construction projects. In the future world a factory-like crematorium, set in an optimistic production landscape, should replace the old-fashioned cemetery. However, despite the active promotion of cremation and the positive attitude expressed by state leaders towards this innovative form of burial, throughout the pre-war period there was only one constantly working crematorium – the Donskoi Crematorium in Moscow – which opened in 1927. Meanwhile, people continued to die and bury the deceased in cemeteries that had long been closed and overcrowded.

How can a simple human death fit into the Soviet narrative in this context? And what are death and human mortality in the Soviet understanding of human nature?

The change in the dominant discourse from Christian to Marxist radically alters the transcendental foundations underlying ideas about human beings. Friedrich Engels, one of the founders of the new doctrine, defines the essence of human mortality as follows: 'Death is either the dissolution

of the organic body, leaving nothing behind but the chemical constituents that formed its substance, or it leaves behind a vital principle, more or less the soul, that then survives all living organisms, and not only human beings' (Engels 1955, 387–388). But are there many people who are capable of leaving behind 'a principle that outlives all living organisms'? According to Engels the conclusion from this premise is obvious. As such people are few, death for most is merely the decomposition of the physical body into a set of chemical constituent parts, and the funeral rite makes no sense to them. But what does it mean to recognize that a person's death is an absolute end? How do we mourn the dead in such a case? Why do we need funerals as such?

Red funerals

The answer to these questions was complicated, even for the most ideologically minded atheists and Bolsheviks. The writer Vikenty Veresaev devoted a separate work to finding it. Aware of the semantic gap that the denial of the traditional interpretation of the funeral ritual opens for the thinking person, Veresaev expressed himself as directly as possible:

> For us nowadays a living person is only a certain combination of physiological, chemical, and physical processes. When a person dies, this combination disintegrates, and the person as such disappears and turns into nothing. What's left is a carcass of rotting meat. How can this carcass be treated rationally? With the same attitude as to garbage. But we place this decomposing body in a box wrapped in red fabric and place a guard of honour in front of this box, which takes turns every ten minutes. So what about all this mess? What is the point of all this? (Veresaev 1926, 6).

However, the 'work of the dead', that is, the social role of the practices of dealing with dead bodies, is binary. For the dead its meaning consists of the rite of transition from the world of the living to the deceased's society. The Christian ritual about which Veresaev wrote is based on the notion of the soul's immortality, which leaves the dead person's body to continue its eternal life. At the same time funerary practices play an efficient therapeutic role for the living by helping them adapt to loss and, having survived it, return to ordinary life. Veresaev, like other early Soviet propagandists and publicists, acknowledges this binarity. He calls for the abandonment of the first part related to continuing to live beyond death but the preservation of the ritual's therapeutic role by giving it new content.

However, experience has shown that the two functions of funeral practices are closely related, and one does not work without the other. If we abandon the first part, recognizing the dead body as only a 'carcass of rotting meat', the therapeutic component of the funeral would also vanish. The funeral ritual, even performed following the best examples of Soviet culture, does not bring relief and solace.

Although the Bolsheviks' atheist approach assumed it was easy to purge religion from the funeral rite, it proved impossible to remove the semantics associated with the transitive nature of the funeral. It turned out that when the semantics of transition underlying the funeral ritual was abandoned, any sense of dealing with the dead disappeared. At the same time, reducing funeral culture to a set of sanitary measures, which seemed obvious to the most radically minded Bolsheviks, also proved insufficient. Meanwhile, the foundations of the Bolshevik worldview made it impossible to offer any alternative semantics of death other than the abstract 'life in the memory of descendants'. This substitute form of immortality developed significantly in Soviet mass culture, becoming, in particular, an essential foundation of socialist realism in Soviet literature (Clark 1981). However, its symbolic meaning was insufficient to create a workable funeral ritual for the ordinary Soviet individual. The design, symbolism, and procedure of the funeral ritual remained significantly reduced and hollowed out, bearing no adaptive potential associated with the trauma of death.

While it was clear that the old practices of framing death, closely related to Christian doctrine, were inappropriate for convinced communists, new ones were hard to find, and their necessity was not apparent. Should the death of a communist be furnished with some 'communist rituals', or was it better to process a body into a useful raw material – soap or fertilizer – as happens after the death of animals? And if a rite was still necessary, what did it actually symbolize if the end of a person was just the beginning of the decomposition of their body into a multitude of microelements? In seeking a new form for an unclear purpose, the ideologues fell into emptiness.

The most prominent Bolsheviks joined the discussion of the new rituals. Trotsky, in his book *The Culture of the Transitional Period* (1923), devoted a separate section to an apologia for the new red rituals, including the funeral rite. The regional press throughout the 1920s published articles detailing red funerals all over the country. The very discussion of the new funerals in the pages of newspapers and pamphlets, at debates and meetings, and on excursions to the crematorium and mausoleum is evidence of a collective reflection seeking a new form of farewell to dead bodies that would

articulate emerging ideas concerning the individual and social relations. It was also a sign of a growing vacuum and dissatisfaction with the solutions that occurred during the evolution of the Soviet project.

Despite the active support of prominent Bolsheviks, the red funeral project predictably failed. The most conservative estimates suggest the Soviet people buried no more than eight per cent of the deceased according to the novel ritual. The lack of demand for the red funeral as a new universal funeral rite shows that the reflection proposed by the ideologists was unproductive, provided no prescriptions, and generated no imperatives. The red funerals did not offer any 'organized, fixed forms for the expression of feeling' (Veresaev 1926, 18). They did not lead to 'ready-made, artistically fixed channels for the expression of the sentiments crowding the soul' (ibid., 30), as Trotsky and Veresaev had expected. They confounded and provoked 'the thought of the pettiness of the new funeral rite' (ibid., 9). People for whom the 'old rites' were a backward thing of the past, that is, ideological atheists and communists, found themselves in an unsolvable paradox. On the one hand the nature of Soviet utopia ultimately ruled out the endowing of death with positive or any meaning. On the other, in a utopian frame where death had lost all its meaning, a mechanism for adapting to it that implied a collectively experienced semantics of death could not be formed. First within highly ideologized communities and then throughout Soviet society, funerals as an adaptive mechanism of reassembling collectivity ceased to work. Ordinary Soviet funerals became an increasingly dysfunctional act. Death in the new paradigm turns out to be an endless void.

Life in the memory of descendants

Robert J. Lifton suggests using the concept of symbolic immortality to describe how people adapt to human mortality (Vigilant and Williamson 2003, 173–175). This mechanism of living in the memory of descendants becomes a Soviet variant of symbolic immortality – the primary mode of adapting to the fact of death in Soviet society. Life in the memory of descendants becomes a normative version of Soviet symbolic immortality. Thus, in the writings of socialist realism, the individual end continually underwent a procedure of symbolic formalization ('died on duty', 'died in the name of ideals', 'died in the struggle', and so on) and was incorporated into the mechanisms of memory.

The new mortal frame, creating symbolic immortality and overcoming death through life in the deeds and memory of descendants, worked to a

certain extent as an adaptive mechanism. However, it entirely left aside the materiality of death itself, its factuality – the presence of a corpse and the need to perform specific and painful actions over it, as well as to assume the obligations of taking care of the material objects associated with the dead (cemeteries, tombs, monuments). The paradigm of 'deeds living in the memory of descendants' smoothed out the social trauma of the desemanticization of death, but only partially. The physical and symbolic components of death – cemeteries, ritual, and funeral infrastructure – remained outside. Moreover, they became even more meaningless, as they were unnecessary for affairs living in the memory of descendants (the only valuable thing the dead left behind). The exceptions were socially significant memorials such as Lenin's mausoleum, the necropolis at the Kremlin wall, and so on, which functioned as an assemblage point for the Soviet super-collective.

Displacing death

Although the transformation of the funeral culture of the early Soviet period started in 1917 with the new state's close attention and great interest, it continued later with waning interest and withdrawal from any regulation. The new understanding of the individual and society led to a loss of the meaning of death not only as a personal but also as a collective experience, and the attempts to find new sense (such as 'life in the memory of descendants') were only partly successful.

The only way to adaptively experience death in early Soviet society was its denial. The emerging mortal frame gradually negated the question of what should be 'good' practices for dealing with dead bodies, a question that had so concerned the minds of Soviet ideologues in the early 1920s. However, by the end of the 1930s it was becoming clear that the main effort concerning ordinary death should be directed not towards the creation of helping institutions and infrastructures or even new rites reflecting a new understanding of the human being, but towards making ordinary death as little visible as possible.

In 1937 the People's Commissariat for Communal Services prepared a draft of the 'Decree of the SNK of the USSR on Burial' that fully reflects this situation. It directly legitimizes the established double principle of Soviet funerals. According to this text special 'solemn funeral processions for outstanding figures of public or political significance' had certain advantages over the funerals of ordinary citizens. Such processions could be present in the public space of Soviet cities. At the same time, the project declared

the presence of standard funerals in public areas to be undesirable. The latter continued to pose a problem and should take place beyond the public sphere. Public processions of ordinary funerals, which:

> …disturb the regular traffic flow and produce a negative impression in passers-by and especially those who live on highways leading to cemeteries, in cities (more than 50,000 people) must end [...] [C]itizens should transport the dead in the dark to temporary storage, where, according to the wishes of the families or institutions, they should perform funeral rites at specified hours (GA RF 1936).

Thus, the funerals of ordinary people, being obscure and confusing and unfitting for the realities of the socialist city, should be eliminated from public spaces – literally pushed out into the invisible (ibid.).

Decay of funeral culture

The newly emerged funeral culture had two partly opposing doctrines at its core. The welfare state concept was to include funeral services in the general package of social services. Each Soviet family therefore had to get assistance in the dignified burial of a loved one. By including these services in a wide range of social goods – kindergartens, general education, medicine, physical education, access to housing, and so on – the young state placed funeral services among the most necessary elements of communist life. Putting funeral services in line with the other social benefits of communist society was justified by its crucial sanitary significance. However, such an approach conflicted with the novel funeral culture's second but no less critical foundation – a materialistic view and acute rejection of the metaphysical notion of the continuation of life after a person's death. Previously, various funeral expenditures were associated with a set of religious beliefs. It never occurred to anyone to abandon them in favour of a simple 'wooden box covered with a piece of fabric'. The refined materialism of the Bolsheviks made it necessary to explain the necessity of every expenditure, including that of burying the body, instead of deriving some extra benefits for the national economy – for example, by processing one's own body for soap or fertilizer. These approaches clashed in insurmountable contradiction. By including funerals in the list of social guarantees, the state committed itself to spending vast (on a national scale) amounts of money on organizing and performing a ritual without a distinct meaning.

This conflict replaced 'equal burial for everyone' with a bizarre two-level funeral system that emerged in the early years of Soviet power and persisted until the end of the USSR. The demonstrative political funerals of revolutionaries and Civil War heroes gradually formed a unique funeral ceremony for Soviet leaders and the nomenklatura during the 1920s. The most famous such funerals were those of Lenin in 1924 and Stalin in 1953. Although these ceremonies attracted enormous attention from contemporaries, they did not significantly affect funeral culture. A different ritual emerged for other communist leaders of a lower rank, an essential part of which was cremation at the Donskoi Crematorium in Moscow and the burial of the ashes in the necropolis by the Kremlin wall. More minor Soviet leaders who did not have the honour of being buried in the Kremlin wall could also rely on cremation in the Donskoi Crematorium. However, even in these cases their funerals became symbolic mass events involving hundreds of spectators, mourning speeches at the grave, obituaries in the newspapers, lavish decorations in the procession, and so on. In other words, these funerals were social acts, during which the new government reasserted the value of its reference points and heroes. Regular appeals to the memory of the 'righteous' dead structured the present and shaped the image of the future.

Soviet funerals of those of high rank were memorable events, eye-catching spectacles, and rich collective experiences. The overwhelming majority of Soviet funerals, those of ordinary people, were a less vivid social phenomenon. In the context of domestic state policy they migrated increasingly into the realm of simple body disposal, creating a general sense of the marginality of these practices and of 'ordinary' death more broadly. Unable to justify the enormous costs of improving urban cemeteries and maintaining the funeral infrastructure, the state authorities transferred the responsibility for controlling this sphere increasingly far down the bureaucratic ladder, gradually losing all administrative interest.

This duality resulted in the collapse of the institution of ritual specialists in cities. At the beginning of the twentieth century undertakers offering a wide range of services for people of different confessions, estates, and wealth worked efficiently in Russian cities. After their nationalization many funeral enterprises became defunct or reduced their activities. Almost the only thing that was available – though not always – was the sale of a coffin and the digging of a grave. Funeral paraphernalia, funeral arrangements, decorations, the care of graves, and even tombstones were not universally available. Few services that nominally existed were actually available. The old infrastructure – not only cemeteries but also equipment like a hearse,

coverings, canopies, shovels, and pickaxes – was not maintained and fell gradually into disrepair. This led to a severe marginalization and de-professionalization of the funeral domain.

By the beginning of the 1930s there was nothing left to provide funeral services to ordinary Soviet citizens. The Soviet reform of the funeral sphere had failed, and the bulk of grassroots regulations and spontaneously formed practices replaced the state policy. The families of the deceased assumed the primary responsibility for providing funerals for ordinary citizens. Undertakers, united in trade unions, were replaced by part-time custodians, providing individual funeral services for additional earnings.

The farther they were from large cities, the earlier and more quickly relatives started to resolve problems with funerals on their own. Each family had to make a coffin, search for gravediggers, transport the deceased to the cemetery, and make the grave monument. This state of affairs contributed to society forming a circle of people who, in addition to their formal duties, took on some funeral services.

Graves from the Soviet period show an almost complete absence of factory-made, standardized professional monuments. However, they are full of artisan constructions or DIY objects made from improvised materials. In contrast to pre-revolutionary headstones of marble and granite or simple wooden crosses, Soviet gravestones and fences could include a variety of elements, often borrowed from nearby production – waste gears and saw blades, rebars – anything that came to hand, and from which it was possible to create a specific pattern with a welding machine. In cases where such an expert was unavailable, relatives would make fences and monuments from improvised materials on their own. In the late 1940s, when my family finally managed to register an old pre-revolutionary family plot in Moscow's Vagankovskoye cemetery, they had to use the headboards of metal beds to make a fence. Most Russian families could share such memories.

Soviet funeral reforms and a new understanding of human nature led to a dramatic disintegration of the rituals, practices, and infrastructures associated with death. The intrinsic meaning of death as a social process is to reassemble the collective body after losing one of its parts, to create in its members the confidence that the danger has passed, the group is operating well, and that life will continue. There is thus no fundamental difference between a funeral as an individual and as a collective rite. In both cases it is a rite of passage. According to Douglas Davis death destroys the social being associated with a particular individual, creating a 'successful' community of the dead that mirrors that of the living (Davies 2000). In doing

so, society recreates itself. The transformation of the rituals of dealing with dead bodies considered here shows there was a rejection of the old rite of transition as not corresponding to the new understanding of the human being, and that a new one did not appear in Soviet Russia. The consensus on what the death of an ordinary person meant for relatives and society was lost. The lack of agreement concerning death contributed to the endless wars of memory around those who died during the Soviet period – in WWII, in the Gulag, and so on. The absence of a commonly expressed and shared understanding of what death was led not only to difficulties in dealing with people who had already died but also to a shocking ease in dealing with life – not only one's own but also that of others.

Abbreviations

GA RF 1944: Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, f. A-339 (Ministerstvo gosudarstvennogo kontrolia RSFSR), op. 1, d. 1226, l. 20–20ob. (g. 1. Proverka hoziajstvenno-finansovoy deyatel'nosti moskovskogo tresta pokhoronnogo obsluzhivaniia i ego biuro magazinov v Proletarskom i Sovetskom raionakh g. Moskvy za period ianvar'–sentiabr' 1944, g. 2. Proverka vypolneniia postanovleniia SNK RSFSR ot 18.3.43 ob uluchshenii pokhoronnogo dela i ego magazinov g. Kirov i oblasti).

TsGA SPb 1919: Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sankt-Peterburga, f. R-2815 (Komissariat zdravookhraneniia soiuza kommun severnoi oblasti. Petrograd. 1918–1919.), op. 1, d. 320 (Delo po ustroistvu krematoriia v Petrograde (postanovlenie komissariata zdravookhraneniia, sanitarnye pravila)).

***

ANNA SOKOLOVA PhD belongs to the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies and is a Kone Foundation Fellow at the University of Helsinki. Email: anna.sokolova@helsinki.fi

Bibliography

Ariès, Philippe
1983 *The Hour of Our Death.* London: Penguin.

Baiburin, Albert
2017 *Sovetskii pasport: istoriia – struktura – praktiki.* St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo EU SPb.

Beliakova, Elena
2013 Tserkovnyi sud i problemy tserkovnoi zhizni. Moscow: Kul'turnyi tsentr "Dukhovnaia biblioteka".

Bonch-Bruevich, Vladimir
1968 Otdelenie tserkvi ot gosudarstva. – *Deiateli Oktiabria o religii i tserkvi.* Moscow: Mysl'.

Chukovsky, Kornei
2012 *Dnevnik* (Tom 1. 1901–1921). Moscow: Prozaik.

Clark, Katerina
1981 *The Soviet Novel: History As Ritual.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Davies, Douglas J.
2000 Classics Revisited. Robert Hertz: The Social Triumph over Death. – *Mortality* 5 (1), 97–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/713685991
1957 Dekret SNK o grazhdanskom brake, o detiakh i o vedenii knig aktov sostoianiia. – *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti* (Tom 1, 25 oktyabrya 1917 g. – 16 marta 1918 g.), 247–49. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury.
1968 Dekret SNK o kladbishchakh i pokhoronakh. – *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti* (Tom 4, 10 noiabria 1918 g. – 31 marta 1919 g.), 163–64. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury.

Engels, Frederick
1955 *Dialektika prirody.* Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury.

Gennep van, Arnold
1960 *The Rites of Passage.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hertz, Robert
1960 *Death and the Right Hand.* London: Cohen & West.

Laqueur, Thomas W.
2016 *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Papernyi, Vladimir
1996 *Kul'tura dva.* Moscow: NLO.

Petrone, Karen
2000 *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Smolkin-Rotrock, Victoria
2012 Problema "obyknovennoi" sovetskoi smerti: material'noe i dukhovnoe v ateisticheskoi kosmologii. – *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* 30 (3–4), 430–63.

Veresaev, Vikentii
1926 Ob obriadakh starykh i novykh (k khudozhestvennomu oformleniiu byta). Moscow: Novaia Moskva.

Vigilant, Lee Garth & John B. Williamson
2003 Symbolic Immortality and Social Theory: The Relevance of an Underutilized Concept. – Clifton D. Bryant (ed.), *Handbook of Death and Dying* (Vol.1), 173–82. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Walter, Tony
2005 Three Ways to Arrange a Funeral: Mortuary Variation in the Modern West. – *Mortality* 10 (3), 173–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270500178369
2012 Why Different Countries Manage Death Differently: A Comparative Analysis of Modern Urban Societies. – *The British Journal of Sociology* 63 (1), 123–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2011.01396.x