Russia's Iconoclasms

R E N A T E   L A C H M A N N

University of Konstanz, Germany. Email: renate.lachmann@uni-konstanz.de

Two iconoclasms took place in twentieth-century Russian history: the iconoclasm after the October revolution, and the iconoclasm after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. These two (ideologically opposite) phases of iconoclastic actions (dismantling, destruction) were incited by programmes concerning the abolition of tsarist monuments of 1918 and met by controversial reactions to the removal of the statues of the former Soviet politicians in the 1990s. The revolutionary demolition of the symbols of the imperial past was executed in accordance with a clear-cut plan and included the erection of new monuments for outstanding communist activists. The official aim of the post-soviet removal of these monuments, to delete traces of a problematic past, was confronted with a revitalized communist ideology on the one hand and with the reaction of the Human Rights Organization Memorial on the other, which criticized the insufficient demolition of soviet symbols. This multifaceted situation is complicated by the reconstruction of destroyed pre-revolutionary monuments of Russian (predominantly religious) history.

The crucial hermeneutical question here is: why do monuments provoke affective reactions? The essential qualities of a statue – its physical presence, its palpability, its demand to occupy a certain space (a privileged spot on prominent places in a town, etc.) – arouse aggressive actions against it when its prototype has fallen into disgrace. The physical obstacle allows physical acts: the sculptural body can be touched, spat at, mutilated, decapitated or totally destroyed. Yet, the affective reactions to monuments differ according to their type or genre; for example, monuments in honour of historical persons, war memorials, cenotaphs, or monuments celebrating abstract ideals (victory, liberty). They differ according to the strength of the affect they provoke: eruption of anger, outrage (against a statue claimed to 'represent' racism or antisemitism), on the one hand; and motives such as mourning (war victims) or veneration (prominent figures of a given society), on the other. Here again one has to differentiate between spontaneous or premeditated regular actions (according to certain ritualized habits of the community).

Seen from a functional perspective (in the Jakobsonian sense) one could consider a statue as a participant in communication. In this respect, it seems to realize all functions: it denotes the political context, highlighting its novelty and conveying an ideological message; it is self-referential, insofar as it is the incorporation of the message itself. The emotive or expressive/affective function correlates with the conative: these two functions refer to the sender–receiver contact. The statue's appeal is provocative, imperative, calls for a response. Such phatic function maintains a communicative link between the statue and the citizens who are free to pay attention to it or ignore it. The monument does not describe or discuss itself, but there is a commonly accepted meta-level of the monument code, which conveys the criteria for its estimation.

If we interpret iconoclastic actions as cultural techniques, we might also ask whether or not these actions are historically defined and whether or not they are carried out by applying different strategies of destruction, led by different motivations.[a] Can we define different types or styles of iconoclastic events? Is there a tradition of a certain type or model, or are there changes, new paradigms? Greek history tells of cases when statues of heroes, or statesmen, were removed from a prominent spot (the agora) to an inferior one, were thrown from their pedestals, dismantled, or totally destroyed. These actions were carried out as punishments of the respective prototypes.

The Byzantine type of iconoclasm is essentially based on theological arguments, encompassing two interconnected moments: one referring to the representation of the holy (the inaccessible) as such, which is deemed as an act of *hubris*, the other referring to a certain type of veneration of the images, which involves the assumption that the representation is identified with the represented, the sign with the signified. Seen from this perspective, the veneration has to be denounced as idolatry. The representation of the holy and its veneration as identical with the represented are different but closely connected aspects of the same condemnation of a religious 'custom'.

On the one hand, the repudiation of image-making recalls the mosaic commandment; on the other hand, the assumption of an identification of the prototype with the material image (the Christ-icon as painting, mosaic) seems to recall a non-Judaic, Egyptian tradition, which resonates in the story of the golden calf adored as an idol. In other words, the icon functions as the 'golden calf', consequently its veneration is idolatry. The breaking of images symbolically repeats Moses' furious destruction of the idol. The subtle, but essential, difference between veneration and adoration, which Johannes Damascenus (c. 675–749) claimed when confronting the accusation of fostering idolatrous actions, was not convincing. Neither in Byzantium, nor in Geneva. Christ the Saviour in any shape whatsoever, crucified, sculptured, painted, was tantamount to the golden calf.[b] The complexity of arguments concerning the relationship between image and prototype remains a topic for theological debates. The identification of prototype and image seems to lie at the bottom of a certain type of iconoclastic acts in the course of both the French and the Russian revolutions.

A comparison between the iconoclastic acts during and after the October revolution and the removal of communist monuments after the breakdown of the Soviet Union reveals the difference between the respective ideological goals. The revolutionaries of 1918 adopted the French model, i.e. the abolition of a political system including its religious orientation (Noyes 2013: 23–58).[c] The post-soviet removal of monuments appears to be an attempt to cover a negative period of Russian history and to recover an anterior period, oblivion (crossing out a traumatizing segment of that history) being the leading motive.

The decree concerning monuments released by Lenin, Lunacharsky and Stalin in 1918 is part of a major project called *Monumental'naya propaganda* ('*Propaganda with monuments*') encompassing both the *demontage* of a number of selected imperialistic monuments and the montage of new ones, according to a schedule instructing to whom monuments should be devoted. The raising and deletion of sculptures and monuments were interrelated procedures.

The removal of monuments was restricted in cases where their aesthetic and historical value called for preservation. The division between worthy and worthless monuments advocated the idea of a national cultural heritage, a concept which Lenin had developed years before the revolution, referring to similar ideas of 'conservative' French revolutionaries (Sax 1990: 1143).[d] The worthless were what he called 'idols': hideous, disgusting and monstrous images of tsarism which were aesthetically unacceptable. The first monument that belonged to that group represented the imperial as well as the religious world: a cross with tsarist emblems. It was dedicated to the Grand Duke Sergeï Aleksandrovich Romanov (1857–1905).[f] On the very spot where the Grand Duke was shot by the social-revolutionary Ivan Kalyayev (1877–1905), this double symbolic cross-bearing memorial had been erected in accordance with the wish of the widow: a monument 'on the blood'. After its removal, Lenin decreed that a monument in honour of the assassin was to be erected on the same spot (it broke within a week). It seems that the extinction of the memorial was not the final aim, since the erection of a new monument on the same spot meant keeping its memory alive using the same soil. The erection of a monument for the perpetrator connected a revolutionary prehistory (the assassination) with the ongoing revolutionary events of 1918. This spectacular action engenders a complete narrative: assassination – monument – deletion – new monument – collapse and (in 2017) the ceremonial return of the reconstructed cross memorial conducted by the Archbishop in the presence of President Vladimir Putin.

The theatrical effect of these actions that changed the public space, visually and symbolically, ensued in some cases from the performance as such: people seem to have been watching the slow and accurate dismantling of the monuments with interest, but agitated neither by pity nor by enthusiasm. I am referring to two Russian cases: The removal of the Monuments to Alexander II (the liberator tsar) and to Alexander III.

Spectators were attracted, in the first case, because of the enormous complex in which Alexander II's statue was enshrined. The memorial consisted of a life-size bronze sculpture of the emperor set on a square pedestal monument, surrounded

by a gallery with arches and openwork. Its demolition lasted from the summer of 1918 until the end of the 1920s. James Noyes comments on actions of this kind: 'The image of carrying, shifting, and resting depicts the manual realities of "attacking" large constructs of stone. It implies a level of effort and organisation which resists the common notion of the vandalistic mob' (Noyes 2013: 40).

But still, the mob is active in streets and buildings, and is acting in both film and art. In Eisenstein's *Oktjabr*, Vertov's *Donbasss Symphonia* and in Ivan Vladimirov's paintings we are confronted with a *mise en scène* of frenzy, fury, greed, a destructive fanaticism, directed against tsarist symbols and emblems, against icons and valuable objects in churches. Vladimirov's representative pictures belong to what could be called the iconography of iconoclasm.

The aim of *Monumental'naya propaganda* was the visual agitation of the masses, As we learn from Anatoli Lunacharsky (1875–1933), Lenin in this respect was influenced by his readings of Tommaso Campanella's *Civitas solis* (1604/1623). Campanella's idea was to adorn the walls of his utopian city with frescoes containing lessons about history and natural sciences in order to train new generations. Lenin knew about the impossibility of frescoes, but the idea of using walls for political propaganda, Marxist maxims, instructions, etc., was welcomed.

The decree encompassed both the *demontage* of a number of selected monuments and the montage of new ones in their stead, according to a schedule instructing to whom monuments should be devoted. Historical figures representing revolutionary ideas, such as Tiberius Gracchus, Spartacus, Robespierre, philosophers, politicians, belonged to this list, which documented historical knowledge and the endeavour to inscribe Russia in a tradition and to create a tradition. The raising and deletion of sculptures and monuments were interrelated procedures. The raising of new statues had to cope with inferior material (plaster), and the new act in the revolutionary drama often ended in collapses. A Robespierre statue was erected, but soon broke. There were, however, spectacular cases where the erection was successful: a number of known artists were involved in creating one of the earliest monuments that appeared on the streets and squares of Moscow and Petrograd in time for the first anniversary of the October Revolution, on 7 November 1918: the obelisk dedicated to the First Soviet Constitution (several months later the obelisk was completed with a 'Statue of Liberty'; it was taken down in 1941).

What was at stake was a shared national heritage, which turned out to be multifaceted according to decisions and interpretation from 1918 to nowadays. The division between worthy and worthless monuments in Lenin's and Lunacharsky's decree advocates the idea of a national cultural heritage, which is intangible.[g]

The initiative of the Soviet art historian Igor Grabar (1871–1960) to preserve and to save valuable objects as art objects and to transfer them into museums, as fortresses of national culture, implied radical measures in order to stop looting and destruction and fostered the concept of national heritage, of aesthetic value. Grabar was issuing passionate appeals to collect, save, and protect 'cultural values' as Irina Sandomirskaia (2015) put it.[h] Neither the Horseman statue of Peter I on its

enormous boulder was touched, nor the Alexander column with the Alexander-like angel on top in front of the Winter Palace.

In order to elaborate the mnemonic aspect in the Russian case, one could differentiate between two strategies: the destruction of existing monuments followed by the erection of new ones, and the removal of the latter followed by the reconstruction of the former. In the first case, the spot from which the object was removed is used for the building of a new one; in the second, the spot of the removal is used for the rebuilding of the removed. These actions are intertwined in so far as they are events, or rather historical stages within the same culture, the later stage referring to the earlier. A prominent case of mnemonic issue, connecting the pre-soviet with the soviet and the soviet with the post-soviet periods, is the case of the *Christ-Saviour Cathedral* in Moscow. This cathedral was erected in 1883 after the removal of *the Alekseevsky ženskij monastyr'* ('Alekseeiev Women Monastery'). After the removal (explosion) of the cathedral in 1931, the construction of a mega-building with an enormous Lenin-statue on top of it was planned, but failed to materialize. Instead, a public swimming pool was installed. In 1992, the swimming pool was removed and in 2000 a perfect replica of the 1883 Cathedral was opened to the public. These palimpsest-like procedures produce a narrative structure which remains open for new elements. The newest and most spectacular was, in 2012, the dance of the *Pussy-Riot* women in front of the cathedral main altar singing an Anti-Putin prayer.

Whereas the iconoclastic actions of 1918 seem to have relied upon the dictatorship of a new, definite memory, the situation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is anything but clear, the statues being the very triggers of controversial interests concerning history and the present time. Contemporary Russian society has to cope with different intertwined mnemonic layers, entangled memories, with their demand to come to terms with heritage. Heritage does matter on a 'national' level, since the communist era left a split heritage: the Human Rights organization *Memorial*'s demand for a complete removal of all communist monuments was confronted by the claim for their reinstallation by the 'Old-New' communists.

A compromise between these two demands consisted of both removal and preservation. Statues that suffered minimal damage were taken into museums. In Moscow, a large number of them were carted off and dumped on the south bank of the Moscow River, in the centre of the city, where they formed a sculpture park, called 'Statue Park of the Central House of Artists', where the fallen monuments shared the same rights with art works. They were stripped of their former meaning and their translocation meant the loss of the 'aura' of their primary exhibition spot. Now they can be viewed as aesthetic or odd objects, as remnants of a past period in Russian history, as nostalgic fetishes (with a renewed aura) or as potentially requiring their re-erection on their former spot. The statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky (one of the initiators of the *gulag* system, founder of the CK) can be visited in this Museum Park, after it was torn down from Lubyanka Square, in front of the Moscow KGB building, in 1991. The demand of some radical representatives of

the Old Communists to reinstall his statue on the former place has not been granted; yet their claim seems to be urgent.

One could therefore ask whether the destruction of a monument is not simultaneously a mnemonic act. In destroying it, its despicable, reprehensible past is remembered and simultaneously banned from memory. The rather slow dismantling and removal of imperial monuments in the Russian case seems to provoke a glance back in history: in deleting the political past, it is once more revoked. Organized *démontage* appears as a mnemonic act. (To produce a new collective memory meant the involuntary inclusion of the former.) But there are cases of iconoclasm which culminate in *damnatio memoriae*: people simply vanishing together with their names. This is the case of the Gulag-victims who lost their names after being arrested, sent into a forced-labour camp, or executed. The loss of their names means that relatives conceal the fact of their disappearance and avoid pronouncing the names of these relatives in public. The return of the names, *vozvrashchenie imyon*, performed as a public ceremony on 29 October (since 2007), is an attempt at a *restitutio memoriae*, initiated by *Memorial*. Silencing the names is one of the iconoclastic acts; the other is the prohibition of investigative work (the registration of mass graves and places of mass executions) after the trial against *Memorial*, its closing down and the repression of its members. The threshold between communism and post-communism is about to be flattened or even abolished. The imperialistic era, the Soviet era and the Putin-era fuse into one picture. This means that essential components of Russian history seem to be banned from cultural memory, yet – according to Yuri Lotman's memory concept (Lotman 2019 [1986]: 139–148) – there is no erasure in cultural memory itself; what is forgotten can be culturally reactivated, latent mnemonic components will be uncovered at a later stage, re-appearing as factors which stir up a given political and intellectual context. The complete extinction of facts seems to be impossible: in the long run, hidden layers always turn up being 'excavated'.

Notes

a. As far as the terminology is concerned we learn from classical philologists that 'iconoclasm' as a term is neither used in ancient Greece nor in Roman times for the destructive actions in question. In the scholarly description of the Roman practice the term *damnatio memoriae* is used, but classical philologists argue that even this term is not ancient, the original term being *memoria damnata* which did not always include the complete abolition of a monument. The icono-terminology used in the Byzantine image struggle seems to have included terms such as iconodulism, iconophobia, or idolatry; yet iconoclasm does not belong to this vocabulary. It is even absent in Calvinist texts. The German most prominent term is *Bildersturm*. The revolutionary actions after the October revolution, are actually called dismantling, removal (*razborka*, *snos*). The career of the term 'iconoclasm' however is remarkable. At present it refers to the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the devastation of Palmyra and the toppling of statues representing persons accused of being colonial trespassers and racists (see Noyes 2013). Irrespective of its origin, iconoclasm is widely used in a metaphorical sense. The scholarly treatment of the Russian avant-garde makes ample use of 'iconoclasm' as a term. Antagonistic alterations of theoretical paradigms in different disciplines are iconoclastic, and, of course: the repression of dissident positions.

b. The theological discussions of the iconophils concerning the problematic relation between the prototype and its iconic representation appears to be twofold: the creation of images echoes the 'incarnation', the

image is not identical with the (once visible) incarnated, but it retains a certain energy from it. There seems to be an energetic flow between the prototype and its counterfeit version.

c. According to James Noyes, the Calvinist breaking of images is marked by the interrelationship of the political and the religious, traces of which he detects in French iconoclasms. He argues that the suspicion of idolatry led to the destruction of the graves of the kings (venerated as holy) at St Denis, which meant that the political cause was entangled with the religious.

d. Lenin followed in this respect the multifaceted concept of the Abbé Grégoire (1750–1831) and Joseph Lakanal (1762–1845), both of them revolutionaries and, simultaneously, eloquent defenders of the national heritage.

e. Lenin's utterly affective response to this monument is documented by the commander of the Kremlin whose notebook was published in 2016.

f. Controversies concerning literary heritage in the 1920s were an essential topic for the 1934 Congress of writers: critical appropriation, assimilation, a takeover of heritage were the leading terms. The problem of monuments, though, was not a topic in these discussions.

g. Neither the aesthetic dimensions of the objects, nor the concept of cultural heritage seem to have played a major role in Byzantium, Geneva and in other image breaking regions.

References

Lotman Y (2019 [1986]) Cultural memory. In Tamm M (ed.), *Culture, Memory and History*, trans. BJ Baer. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 139–148.

Noyes J (2013) *The Politics of Iconoclasm, Religion, Violence and the Culture of Image-Breaking in Christianity and Islam*. London: Tauris.

Sandomirskaia I (2015) Catastrophe, restoration, and Kunstwollen: Igor Grabar, cultural heritage, and soviet re-uses of the past. *Ab Imperio* **2015**(2), 339–362.

Sax JL. (1990) Preservation as a public duty: the Abbé Grégoire and the origins of an idea. *Michigan Law Journal* **88**(5), 1142–1170.

About the Author

Renate Lachmann, Professor Emeritus of General Literary Theory and Slavic Literatures at the University of Konstanz, is a specialist of Russian formalism, of structuralism, intertextuality and fantastic literature. Her publications include: *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); *Erzählte Phantastik: zu Phantasiegeschichte und Semantik phantastischer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002); Renate Lachmann, Riccardo Nicolosi and Susanne Strätling (Eds), *Rhetorik als kulturelle Praxis* (München: W. Fink, 2008); and *Lager und Literatur: Zeugnisse des GULAG* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2019).