

**DEATH AND FUNERAL MEATS, MOSCOW STYLE
(AN INVESTIGATION INTO
THE SOVIET WAY OF DEATH)**

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Except for the pomp and ceremony of official state funerals, death was not a prominent feature of public or official Soviet reality. General Secretaries of the Communist Party and members of the Politburo lay in state in the Hall of Columns on Marx Prospect; their interments in the Revolutionary Necropolis on Red Square were nationally televised; their obituaries appeared on the front page of every Soviet newspaper; they were officially mourned for a designated period.¹ Their death was important because it signaled change in the relationships of power. The death of leading writers, artists, or actors often attracted many mourners to their funerals, but the event was not advertised or televised. Otherwise, there was little visible evidence to indicate that death was a fact of Soviet life. No elegant but discreet funeral homes were to be seen in Moscow or its suburbs; no funeral services were advertised; no obituary columns appeared in the daily papers; no black hearses led parades of cars to the cemetery. Cemeteries were hidden behind tall, non-committal brick walls or at the end of small access roads beyond the city limits. Only in the villages, where old traditions die hard, did one occasionally see a small *cortege* of old people, following a black wooden coffin down the main road to the village cemetery.

¹ The one exception is Nikita Khrushchev, who did not die in office. He was removed from the post of General Secretary in 1964 and died a natural death in 1971. Khrushchev is buried in the new section of Novodevich'e Cemetery.

THE CEMETERIES OF MOSCOW

In Old Moscow, almost each of the city's many churches and monasteries had their own attached cemeteries; there were even cemeteries inside the Kremlin and on Red Square. Not until 1657 was burial forbidden within the Kremlin walls. Foreigners residing in Moscow were buried originally in Mar'ina Roshcha (now part of the city's far north side), and later in Lefortovo (eastern Moscow, where Vvedenskoe Cemetery is today).

An epidemic of plague in the 1770s resulted in several new cemeteries being laid out beyond the Moscow city limits; these were Vagan'kovskoe, Danilovskoe, Kalitnikovskoe, Miusskoe, Piatnitskoe, Semenovskoe, and two cemeteries for Old Believers: Preobrazhenskoe and Rogozhskoe (all except Semenovskoe still exist). Over the course of the next few years were added the Armianskoe (opposite Vagan'kovskoe), Evreiskoe, Karaimskoe, and Tatarskoe (Musel'manskoe; near Danilovskoe) Cemeteries. These were the major places of burial for Muscovites of various faiths over the course of the nineteenth century.²

During the First World War another cemetery was opened in the village of Vsekhsviatskoe outside Moscow to hold war dead; this common-grave cemetery (*bratskoe kladbishche*) has not been preserved. After the 1917 Revolution, Red Guards, Heroes of the Revolution and Civil War, important Party members, leading cultural figures, cosmonauts, and international revolutionary activists have been interred in the Revolutionary Necropolis (*Revoliutsionnyi nekropol'*), located in and along the Kremlin wall on Red Square.³ At the center of the Necropolis is the Lenin Mausoleum (erected in 1924) with the preserved remains of Vladimir Lenin; behind the Mausoleum are the graves and funerary busts of Iakov Sverdlov, Mikhail Frunze, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, Mikhail Kalinin, Andrei Zhdanov, Iosif Stalin, Marshal Kliment

² At the turn of the century V.I. Saitov and B.L. Modzalevskii compiled information on some 30,000 Moscow burials of the 14th through 19th centuries, publishing their information in the three-volume reference work *Moskovskii nekropol'* (St. Petersburg: 1907-8).

³ The American journalist John Reed (1887-1920) is buried there. See: A. Abramov, *U Kremlevskoi steny*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: 1978). The Revolutionary Necropolis was not open to casual visitors. One was allowed to pass through it only after one has stood in line to visit the Lenin Mausoleum, a monument that celebrates the Soviet victory over physical death (see Nina Tumarkin's book, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult In Russia* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983]).

Voroshilov, and Marshal Semen Budennyi.⁴ Crematoria and columbaria (repositories for urns) were built in Moscow only at the very end of the 1920s.⁵

City reconstruction in the 1930s led to the destruction of many old Moscow cemeteries, especially those around churches. Famous remains from these cemeteries were transferred to Old Novodevich'e Cemetery, founded in the 16th century on the territory of Novodevich'i Convent, southwest of the city center. Novodevich'e Cemetery was expanded considerably after the Second World War. It is Moscow's most interesting necropolis, the cemetery of choice for gentry, clergy, intelligentsia, and merchant classes. The cemetery's residents include the writers Sergei Aksakov, Anton Chekhov, Valerii Briusov, Andrei Belyi, Vladimir Maiakovskii, A.N. Tolstoi, Aleksandr Tvardovskii, Vasilii Shukshin, Nikolai Gogol' (moved here from Danilovskii Monastery), the composers Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitrii Shostakovich, the opera singer Fedor Chaliapin (whose remains were transferred here from Paris), the directors Evgenii Vakhtangov, Konstantin Stanislavskii, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stalin's wife, Nadezhda Allilueva, plus many, many other famous figures from cultural, scientific, military, and government spheres.⁶ Many of the grave monuments are the work of prominent Russian sculptors. Today Novodevich'e is really a museum-cemetery.

After Novodevich'e, the second most interesting and popular cemetery is Vagan'kovskoe, in the Krasnaia Presnia area of Moscow. Famous burials here include several Decembrists, author and dictionary compiler Vladimir Dal', the artists Vasilii Surikov, Aleksei Savrasov, and Vasilii Tropinin, the scientist Kliment Timiriazev, the writers Sergei Esenin, Iurii Tynianov,

⁴ Stalin's embalmed body was placed in the Mausoleum shortly after his death on 5 March 1953; it was removed and reburied on 1 November 1961, the day after the end of the XXII Party Congress.

⁵ Russian Orthodoxy and Judaism both forbid cremation, and even today cremation is not popular in the Soviet Union. Moscow and Leningrad have more cremations than other cities because burial space is at a premium within reasonable distance of town. In the countryside and the provinces, however, inhumation is the preferred form of interment. Many Muscovites who choose cremation for logistic reasons prefer to bury the urns rather than place them in columbaria (thus achieving a "sort" of inhumation). They might bury the urn in family plots where there is no room for a coffin (once a coffin burial has occurred, the family must usually wait 15 years before another burial in the same plot is allowed) or in tiny plots designed specifically for urn burial. Burial plots in Moscow cemeteries, serving an entire family, tend to be less than two meters square.

⁶ For many years Novodevich'e Cemetery was closed to all but immediate relatives of those buried on its territory. Only on Victory Day (*Den' Pobedy*, May 9) or on other special days was it open to the public, and then it was mobbed. One could receive special permission from the administration to enter the grounds if the reasons for doing so were accepted.

Iurii Trifonov, Aleksei Arbutov, Vladimir Vysotskii, and others. Vagan'kovskoe also contains the graves of the victims of the Khodynskoe Pole disaster that occurred during the coronation ceremonies of Tsar Nicholas II (1896) and the casualties of the December 1905 uprising. Like many other Moscow cemeteries, it has a common grave (*bratskaia mogila*) and monument for soldiers from the Second World War.⁷

When Moscow city limits were expanded in 1960, several major suburban cemeteries became incorporated (Vostriakovskoe, Golovinskoe, and others). Still, burial space was insufficient for Moscow's population and several new cemeteries had to be created. In the 1960s the major cemetery serving Moscow became the large Nikolo-Arkhangel'skoe Cemetery (crematorium added in 1973), northwest of the city limits. Khovanskoe was added in the 1970s, and then Mitinskoe, an enormous, rigidly-planned new cemetery and crematorium complex near the village of Mitino, south-east of Moscow. Altogether more than 50 cemeteries comprising over 2,000 acres serve Moscow. Cemeteries within the city limits are closed to new burials, though most will accept urns. Over 700 graves in Moscow cemeteries are on the government register of historical, artistic, and cultural monuments.

Cemeteries had a small but specifically defined role in official Soviet life. On Victory Day (*Den' Pobedy*, May 9), on revolutionary holidays, and on the anniversaries of the death of famous revolutionaries and public figures, the cemeteries were frequently the scene of official

⁷ At Vagan'kovskoe Cemetery the author had three lessons in memory in 1986. Entering the cemetery by the main gate, the first thing one saw was the grave of Vladimir Vysotskii, the popular singer, actor, and poet who died in 1980. Its monument is an unusual funerary sculpture by the well-known artist Ernst Neizvestnyi, and a tremendously long line of young people, including brides and grooms, played Vysotskii's songs on guitars or on tape recorders as they waited in line to lay flowers at the grave of the man who became an underground cult figure despite official disapproval. The admirers exude the same sense of vibrant, raucous, youthful aggression that characterizes Vysotskii's songs.

Further in lies the common grave of World War II dead. At that large gravesite the author saw a series of multiple graves inside a hedge. On one grave there was an enormous heap of flowers (the others were bare); a middle-aged woman was tending that grave, but not the others. The author looked at the gravestone, but of the many names there, none was famous. Was the woman's son or husband buried there? No, she answered; underneath the common grave were older burials, and the very spot where the flowers were heaped had once been the grave of Father Valentin Amfiteatrov, a Moscow healer who had died on the eve of the First World War and who was still revered for his saintliness. While the author stood speaking with the woman, other pilgrims also came to honor the grave that "was not there."

Over to the left, the poet Sergei Esenin's grave also attracted many people. On each of the four occasions the author visited *Vagan'kovskoe kladbishche*, there was always a group of fans around Esenin's grave, laying flowers or other offerings and reciting his poetry.

commemorative ceremonies. Cemeteries of the war dead had their own place in the Soviet “mythology” of the Second World War. Unofficially, however, Moscow’s cemeteries constituted a separate subculture that preserved the average Russian’s sense of continuity and history. On birthdays, anniversaries of death, and other private and public holidays, winter and summer, many people go the cemetery to walk, lay flowers, recite poetry, have a drink at the grave sides of comrades-at-arms, relatives, friends, and favorite writers, musicians, actors. It was not unusual to encounter an individual sitting at a grave site, chatting with or asking advice from the deceased (an odd remnant for a culture with a tradition of ancestor worship).

DYING IN SOVIET MOSCOW

When the average Soviet citizen died, he did not shuffle off bureaucratic hassle with the mortal coil. His death was very much like his life: the deceased had to have his passport ready, he could expect a great deal of paperwork and rubber stamps, his relatives would need to resort to bribery somewhere in the process, and he would have to wait in line to be buried.

If a Soviet Muscovite died in the hospital, a doctor performed an obligatory autopsy to determine specific cause of death before issuing the death certificate. If he died at home, a special doctor from the regional polyclinic would come to the apartment to examine the deceased and to issue a death certificate. No autopsy would be performed after a natural home death unless there were extraordinary circumstances.⁸ The deceased's passport and the death certificate (*spravka o smerti*) were next turned over to ZAGS (*Otdel Zapisi aktov grazhdanskogo sostoianiia*) to be officially registered. ZAGS in turn issues the certificate granting right of burial (*svidetel'stvo o smerti*) and 20 rubles for burial expenses.⁹

Once this very important piece of paper with three separate stamps had been received, the relatives of the deceased were told to contact the Office of Ritual Services (*Kombinat ritual'nogo*

⁸ Soviet citizens interviewed by the author almost unanimously preferred death at home. They considered the disadvantages of dying in the hospital to be the following (aside from inadequate health care that speeds the demise): relatives would have to bribe the doctor *not* to perform an unnecessary autopsy; if an autopsy was performed, relatives would have to bribe the morgue attendant to make the body presentable for the funeral. Either way, they considered it an indignity. The disadvantages of dying at home included the not uncommon delay of a day or even two in obtaining a doctor to certify the deceased.

⁹ In 1986 the ruble was officially worth about \$1.40 US; its black market value was about 20¢. A bus driver might

obsluzhivaniia). This interesting office came under the jurisdiction of the innocuously named Organization of the Administration of Community Services for the Moscow City Executive Committee (*Trest Upravleniia kommunal'nogo obsluzhivaniia naseleniia Mosgorispolkoma*). Information about the Office and the Organization, although available, was not easily accessible unless a death in the family forced ZAGS to divulge the necessary information.¹⁰

The Office of Ritual Services had five dispatch points to serve the entire city of Moscow (registered population about nine million in 1986). Officially these points were branches of ZAGS. The relatives of the deceased contacted that branch that served their region. The dispatch points of the Office of Ritual Services were small and discreetly located on quiet, out-of-the-way, residential streets. Very few people visited them and the points actively discouraged visitors. They preferred to send an agent to the home of the bereaved to make funeral arrangements privately.

Relatives of the deceased then faced an enormous task. The complicated, slow-moving wheels of the funerary bureaucracy, balanced against the need for speedy burial, of necessity forced delegation of responsibilities to various family members.¹¹ The Soviet funeral was a group effort involving not only the entire family, but frequently also the friends of the deceased.

The first major decision was where to inter the remains. Most Moscow cemeteries conveniently located within the city limits have no new plots available. If the deceased was the husband, wife, son or daughter of someone already buried in one of the most popular

earn 150-200 rubles a month, a school teacher perhaps a bit less.

¹⁰ Calling the Moscow telephone information service, for instance, yielded no numbers or addresses. Information booths on the street would not reveal this information casually. This information was given only to those who had a documented need to know (thus the ubiquitous presence of death was not publicly acknowledged). Once one was able to identify the official titles of the departments involved, the phone numbers and addresses of the dispatch points turned out to be available in the abbreviated Moscow telephone directory (*Kniga abonentov*, which was readily available). But one had to know exactly what one was looking for before one could find it, and the words "death" or "funeral" did not appear in the office titles to make searching easier. Informants interviewed by the author were initially appalled by her questions, and were then appalled a second time by their own inability to obtain basic information about funeral procedures.

¹¹ While chemical injections were given to retard decay, extensive embalming was rarely done. Funerals had to take place within five days of death, sooner if possible. It was almost impossible for one person to take care of all funeral arrangements. Very little could be accomplished on the telephone; almost everything had to be handled in person.

cemeteries (Vagan'kovskoe, Vostriakovskoe, Vvedenskoe, and, for the lucky few, Novodevich'e), if the last coffin interment was at least 15 years ago (or if the new interment was to be an urn burial), and if a headstone was already in place on the plot, there was little difficulty. If the family has no plot, but made the decision to cremate and place the urn in a columbarium, this also was not difficult to arrange. Many Muscovites chose cremation for no other reason than to keep the remains of their loved ones in town, where relatives could visit. If the relatives or the deceased decided on coffin burial, however, the choice became problematical.

With high-level "connections" and considerable sums of money, the family could make arrangements at almost any cemetery. Those who were sufficiently determined and willing to pay were usually able to convince the cemetery director to turn over an abandoned, untended plot, or to allow burial in the plot of an aunt, uncle, or other indirect relative. These arrangements were rarely legal, of course, but the cemetery administration was notorious for being one of the most corrupt bureaucracies in the Soviet Union.¹² If there was no money, the deceased would have to be buried at distant Mitinskoe, a bleak, assembly-line cemetery, presided over by a cement box crematorium, with few trees and tightly-packed, concrete-framed plots.¹³

Once the plot or niche had been acquired, arrangements had to be made to have the grave dug. While the official cost of digging a grave was set at approximately six rubles, the grave diggers (graves were still dug by hand, not by machine) had to be paid closer to one hundred rubles if the grave was to be deep enough and ready in time for interment. The cost increased in winter.¹⁴

Next, the relatives had to acquire a coffin, regardless of whether they planned to bury or

¹² On this point all informants agreed. Cemetery workers were anecdotally considered to be the richest people in Moscow. It was not unusual for cemetery personnel to work for a few years and "retire," before they were arrested. The cost of "acquiring" a plot in a closed cemetery within the city limits was several thousand rubles.

¹³ The victims of Chernobyl' are buried at Mitinskoe.

¹⁴ For a fascinating description of *byt* among the *mogil'shchiki* (grave diggers) of a Moscow cemetery, really a separate subculture, see Sergei Kaledin's story, "Smirennoe kladbishche," in *Novyi mir* 1987, No. 5, 39-81. For many years the subject of cemeteries and the physical side of death was taboo in Soviet literature and art. Even in the early period of *glasnost'*, *Novyi mir's* editors considered Kaledin's story, which breaks the taboo with a vengeance, shocking enough to merit an explanatory afterword by Igor' Vinogradov (81-85).

cremate. This they did through the agent from the Office of Ritual Services. All coffins were specially ordered; there were no ready made ones. The coffins were made of wood to size specifications and covered with black, white, red, and pink artificial silk fabric. There was a limited choice of upholstery. The average official price of a coffin was 50 - 100 rubles, but if an additional bribe was not paid to the coffin maker, the coffin would not be ready on time.

The relatives of the deceased could select from some 30 rubles' worth of options in connection with the funeral: upholstery options, pillows for the coffin, slippers for the deceased, hair styling and cosmetics, additional embalming, wreaths, etc. They could choose to hire an orchestra or band for an extra fee. In some cases the Office of Ritual Services also assisted with the difficult issue of transportation.¹⁵ Small, unmarked busses (the same kind used by factories, food concerns, and other businesses) were used as hearses in Moscow: the coffin was loaded into the cargo area under the bus body, while mourners and wreaths went inside. The man on the street who would watch as Moscow's many busses drive by was completely unaware of seeing a the funeral cortege unless the wreaths were piled higher than the window sills. The bus picked up the coffin at the morgue and delivered it and the funeral party to the cemetery. If the relatives wanted the driver to wait and take them back to the wake (or at least back to town), this entailed another bribe.

If the deceased was an Orthodox Christian, the funeral service (*otpevanie*) might take place at a church and cost the family as much as 500 rubles. Jewish rituals cost in the neighborhood of 150-200 rubles. Alternatively, a civil ceremony (*traurnyi miting* for Party *nomenklatura*, or *grazhdanskii obriad* for the average citizen; even in death, rank and status of the deceased were preserved) may be held in the Halls of Ritual (*ritual'nye zaly: bol'shye, srednie, малыe*) at the crematoria. Each funeral party would reserve a time slot and was allotted 15-20 minutes. Some Halls of Ritual were luxuriously appointed with marble floors, copper wreaths, stylized

¹⁵ More commonly, the family made an arrangement with the deceased's or other family member's place of employment for a bus, since the Office of Ritual Services was always short of available buses. Except for transportation, all other funeral services were provided exclusively through the Office. Large funeral wreaths, for instance, were not available anywhere else (small ones were sold by entrepreneurial little old pensioners outside cemetery gates). Members of the Communist Party had additional options. The Armed Forces made their own arrangements: military funerals, even for lower-ranking officers, almost always had a small band and a rifle salute.

candlesticks, and sculpture. Others looked like any other Soviet institution: the same benches, the same doors, and the same acoustic tiles on the ceiling. They were staffed by "ritual employees" (*ritual'nye rabotniki*) who made certain that things were done properly and in a timely manner.¹⁶ For every "dear departed" being eulogized in the Hall of Ritual to the dolorous strains of individually-selected funeral music, three or more parties (and their coffins) were waiting their turn in the hallway outside.¹⁷

If the deceased was being cremated, his coffin was mechanically lowered into the crematorium and the mourners simply left. In the crematorium the coffin was numbered; after about a month the relatives could claim a capsule with the deceased's ashes. For 50-70 rubles they could purchase a niche in the columbarium (there are indoor and outdoor columbaria); if they preferred, they could bury the capsule, or purchase an urn and take the ashes home.

If the deceased was being interred, there was usually a grave-side eulogy and, more rarely (for instance, if the widow was very old or provincial), a lament over the coffin.¹⁸ Then the deceased was lowered into the grave. The mourners threw a handful of dirt on the coffin; sometimes they also threw copper coins. The grave diggers filled in the grave, then piled all the wreaths and flowers into a pyramid over the mound. The ceremony concluded with a final toast with wine, cognac, or vodka in which the grave diggers were frequently invited to join. Sometimes the glasses were left on the trees and bushes around the grave and it was not unusual to see empty bottles behind gravestones.

After the grave-side ceremony, the funeral party returned to the home of one of the relatives for a funeral feast (*pominki*). These feasts were a matter of family honor, with the relatives often preparing for days. Obtaining hard-to-find or deficit food products was facilitated by the certificate granting right of burial; by presenting it at their local food store, the relatives of the deceased became eligible for a special ration that may include caviar, smoked

¹⁶ The "ritual workers" were like Soviet employees anywhere. Those observed by the author seemed bored and spoke in loud voices: "Comrades, close the door," or, "Comrades, your time is up. Move along."

¹⁷ Ironically, this was also the case with weddings, which were also overseen by ZAGS. The wedding parties were lined up in the hall, and the next party often entered while the previous one was not yet out the door at the other end of the hall.

¹⁸ The author observed this only once over the course of six years in Moscow; it is an interesting survival. It was more common to encounter a lament in the countryside.

fish, and other deficit delicacies.¹⁹ In addition to the traditional funeral dish *kut'ia* (a porridge made of wheat, rice, or barley, with raisins, honey, and nuts), the funeral feast usually consisted of a dish of every kind of food (meat, fish, vegetable, fruit, grain, root, etc.), *bliny* (a traditional dish associated with death and resurrection), and the deceased's favorite dishes. A place at the table was also set for the deceased. The guests gave traditional toasts and imbibed a great quantity of intoxicating beverages.

The funeral and the funeral feast were not the end of the process. If the burial plot was an established one, the relatives of the deceased had to arrange to have name and dates added to the existing grave marker. A bribe to the carver insured that the job is done fairly promptly; otherwise, the wait in the official line would literally take years. If the burial plot was new, the relatives of the deceased had to completely outfit the grave. This means they went to the Main Office of their cemetery, where they could order a concrete grave marker from several available models. They could also choose to have a marker custom-made from a polished piece of granite, marble, or other stone. Officially there were size limitations on grave markers, especially those using expensive materials; however, a bribe to the cemetery's director solved most problems. There were official regulations also for carving (size of letters, how much gold leaf may be used, etc.); these difficulties, too, are expensive but not insurmountable.

The prices of markers varied considerably. The concrete slabs range from 100 to 150 rubles, while thin marble slabs sell officially for around 200. A good marble slab can be purchased "unofficially" for 300-400 rubles, with an additional 200 for the engraving. It is very popular in Moscow to decorate the grave marker with ceramic photographs of the deceased (available for four to ten rubles, depending on size), carvings of branches and flowers, and poems or dedications.²⁰

¹⁹ The certificate granting right to burial could also be used by close relatives who live in other cities to obtain train and airplane tickets immediately, without reservations and without waiting in line.

²⁰ For example, a husband's monument to his beloved wife consists of a coquettish photograph of the wife embracing a birch tree, accompanied by some homemade verses: "Ty ne vernesh'sia, ne oglianesh'sia, ne budesh' ty sovsem sedoi, ty v moei pamiati ostanesh'sia vseгда krasivoi, molodoi" [You'll not return, you'll not look back, your hair will never fade to gray; in my memory you will remain forever lovely, forever young and gay]; on another marker, beneath a faded old ceramic photograph of a father who died in the Second World War, are the words: "Voioiu otniat ty u nas, Ne naiden put' k mogile, Sviatuiu pamiat' o tebe My--deti sokhranili" [War has taken you from us, the way to your grave is unknown, but we, your children, have kept your memory holy]. As

Grave markers were not always stone or concrete slabs. Believers still had double-barred orthodox crosses in stone, wood, or metal placed over their graves (the metal crosses are the cheapest grave markers); Old Believers' graves had large crosses and icons in glass cases; Muslim grave markers were frequently decorated with crescents on top. Many of the grave markers were much larger and more extravagant than cemetery regulations allowed. People paid as much as 15,000 rubles for a large and imposing monument.

Traditionally each family plot was marked off from those surrounding it. The preferred form of separation was a decorative iron fence (*ograda*) with a lock on the gate, but many cemeteries forbade these fences as they made moving through the crowded cemetery difficult and could be dangerous in winter. Instead, the plot was marked off by a low marble or concrete border (*tsvetnik*), which could be purchased through the cemetery's office. Moscow cemeteries of the Soviet period made a silent comment on the quality of life in Moscow apartments of the time. Almost every grave had its tiny territory jealously fenced off, as if in death there will finally be privacy from the neighbors and a piece of earth that is one's own. Still, the small plots are communal, in that several family members will be buried in a plot about two meters square.

Inside the fence or border the relatives built (or hired one of the grave diggers to build) a small bench and seat, so that visitors to the deceased would have a place to rest. The territory was then planted with flowers or grass, or decorated with sand, crushed stone, or flagstones. The Moscow intelligentsia preferred to decorate its graves with fresh flowers; the working classes decorated with artificial flowers made of plastic, sponge cloth, or paper dipped in wax. Outside each cemetery were crowds of elderly women who sold small, homemade funeral wreaths and fresh cut flowers to the visitors. The police periodically chased them away, but they always returned.

For the first few years after the funeral, the relatives of the deceased would come frequently to the grave to clean off the fallen leaves and water and weed the flowers. Eventually, many families chose to hire one of the many elderly women who frequent the

one walks through the Moscow cemeteries one is constantly being watched by enameled faces, young and old, small, sad faces, smiling, friendly faces, flirtatious faces, famous faces, peasant faces, enigmatic faces.

cemeteries and supplement their meager pensions by tending graves for others. These old women were known to be extremely conscientious and reliable; every day they were to be found at the cemetery, checking the graves for which they were responsible, rearranging flowers (sometimes sentimentally moving cut flowers from a grave with many to a grave with none), sweeping dust and snow off the monuments.

A funeral in Moscow could be very expensive, considering that the average income was less than 225 rubles a month. While official funeral expenses were in line with official incomes, the unofficial funeral expenses reflected the more realistic costs set by the economy of the "left." It was possible to bury for as little as 200 rubles (assuming that plot and monument were already to hand, that the relatives opted for the less costly cremation and buried the capsule themselves, that there was no religious ceremony, and that the name to be carved on the marker did not have too many letters). It was also possible to spend 20,000 rubles on a single burial, and people did. Graves, of course, are not for the dead but for the living, and many people exhibited their wealth and influence in this manner. Funerals in Moscow were also time-consuming. If the grave has to be newly outfitted, it would take the better part of two years to complete all of the arrangements.

Once the burial took place, relations with the deceased rarely ceased. Cemeteries were busy places; they had many visitors, especially on summer weekends and holidays. Many Russians felt close to their dead, going to grave sides for advice, a chat, inspiration, or just to get out into the fresh air.²¹ Many city dwellers who had no place to put a flower pot in their apartments made the family plot bloom like a botanical garden. Moscow cemeteries were not generally depressing or forbidding places.

²¹ Once the author was invited to a picnic by a friend who had been widowed for eight years. Taking food and wine, we drove to the cemetery where her husband is buried. There, on the little table and bench built into one corner of the plot, we picnicked, surrounded by beautifully tended nasturtiums and begonias. As we ate, she addressed various comments to her husband and even to his neighbors, with whom she seemed to be on good terms. She had brought his favorite wine and poured a glass over the grave (we drank the rest to his memory). As we left, she put down an apple. This was a regular visit for her; sometimes she came alone, other times she brought relatives, a friend, or a neighbor with her.

ANCIENT REMNANTS IN THE SOVIET PERIOD

The Russians' close relationship to their dead, despite a pointed de-emphasis of death and death rituals by officially optimistic and radiant future-oriented Soviet ideology, is not difficult to explain. The ancient Slavs were ancestor worshipers with an extensive system of beliefs and customs regarding the dead and elaborate funerary rituals.²² Even contemporary Soviet ideology was unable to escape entirely from the pull of the old ways overlaid by Christian traditions (cf. the officially encouraged cults of Lenin, the revolutionary martyrs, and the war dead).

Several interesting pagan elements from the traditions of the ancient Slavs remained in the funerary ritual of Soviet Muscovites. They still covered all the mirrors and opened a window if someone died at home (so that the soul, released from its body, could leave the apartment through the window and begin its journey to the "Other World," and not take refuge in the mirror, or worse, slip into the reflection of a living person). Pregnant women were still not allowed to participate in funeral arrangements or see the deceased in case the baby was affected. Coins thrown into the grave represented both money to spend in the Other World and a bribe not to return to haunt the living. The pyramid of dirt and flowers (and eventually the tombstone) over the grave were to weigh down the deceased and keep the body in the grave.

The modern funeral feast was also permeated by ancient rituals. The *kut'ia* and *bliny* traditionally served at the funeral feast came originally from holidays associated with ancestor worship in the distant past, such as the winter solstice celebration (*Sviatki*; in which the intercession of the ancestors returns the sun). Intoxication, feasting, and merry-making (*gulian'e*) were an important part of the ancient funeral rites: laughter and good feeling neutralized any ill will felt by the deceased toward those who remained among the living; laughter and celebration also reaffirmed the life force after the presence of death. Setting a place for the deceased at the table was one way to placate his spirit and make him feel included

²² For general overview of ancestor cult and funerary traditions, see Iu.M. Sokolov, *Russkii fol'klor* (Moscow: 1941), 129-135, 173-181; for more detailed information, see N.N. Veletskaia, *Iazycheskaia simbolika slavianskikh arkhaiskikh ritualov* (Moscow: 1978) or V.I. Eremina's *Ritual i fol'klor* (Leningrad: 1991). The subject of death, funerary customs, and the treatment of the dead is covered by an enormous body of research.

and accepted; it also suggested to the deceased that he not to come to visit the living except as an invited guest, with a place at the table. A place at the table would be set for the deceased on each anniversary of the death.

Various grave rituals survive into the 21st century. Drinking at the grave on anniversaries and holidays or bringing flowers and food to the grave are modern versions of the ancient votive offering brought to placate the ancestors. It was not unusual in the Moscow cemeteries to see small toys on the graves of children or tiny bottles of cognac on men's graves (much appreciated by the grave diggers). Orthodox clergy still visit Moscow cemeteries to bless the dead on Radunitsa, the Tuesday of the second week after Easter (one can sign up at church to have their plot blessed); Radunitsa was the major spring ancestor worship holiday among the Slavs. Even today Muscovites take eggs, fruit, bread, candy, and liquor to the cemeteries on *Radunitsa* and share a meal with their dead.²³

The ancient Slavs often went to the graves of their ancestors to ask advice and make prophecies. Modern Muscovites occasionally do the same. A renewed interest in the Russian past has even affected the form of grave markers. Occasionally one will see wooden crosses or "small chapels" (*chasovenki*; little wooden roofs, frequently carved and decorated with a bird motif, set atop a wooden post) on modern graves instead of stone markers.

To my knowledge, no serious study of funerary practices in the Soviet Union exists. This investigation, by no means exhaustive or complete, is a first step in that direction. In the Soviet Union, attitudes toward death, like so many other facets of contemporary Soviet life, were both "official" and "unofficial." Official public life ignored the topic of physical death, yet unofficial private life made a cult of it. Nowhere were dead writers, dead warriors, or dead revolutionaries so revered as in the Soviet Union. One had only to look at the lines to Lenin's Mausoleum, at the crowds around the graves of Vladimir Vysotskii, Vasilii Shukshin, and Aleksandr Pushkin, at the brides who leave their wedding bouquets at the Tomb of the

²³ *Radunitsa* is an ancient Eastern Slavic pagan festival of the spring, associated with ancestor worship. It was later assimilated to the Christian Easter celebrations. Today Russian Orthodoxy celebrates this festival on the Monday or Tuesday of St. Thomas's Week, the second week after Easter. This is a day of prayer for the dead, but its roots are not Christian.

Unknown Soldier, at the incredible monument to the dead on Mamaev Kurgan in Volgograd, at the shoulder-to-shoulder crowds in the cemeteries on Victory Day, at the visitors to Piskarevskoe Cemetery, honoring the dead of the siege of Leningrad. World War II lives in Russian memory because that memory rests on more than 20,000,000 dead -- death that touched every household in Russia. Russians still make pilgrimages to monasteries to visit the relics of dead saints; they still tend graves that are no longer there. The study of a society's attitude toward its dead is yet another way to better understand the living.