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Enthusiasm of the Russian Troops at the Final Stage of the First World War, 1914–18: A Case-Study of Creation of the “Heroes of the Second Patriotic War” Monument in Vyazma 1916

Abstract

The article attempts to reconstruct history and considerations of construction of the only Russian monument to the soldiers of the First World War. By summer 1916, Russia had been fighting on

the fronts of the First World War for nearly two years. After rebuilding national economy on a war footing, negative phenomena developed in the socio-political structure of the state, which eventually would result in a nationwide crisis. No less dangerous was the situation in the multi-million Russian army. Having abandoned significant territories, suffering severe military setbacks in 1914–15, the army was losing its morale. There was great war-weariness, prospects for early victory looked vague. N.N. Golovin accurately called it the “broken spirit of the country.” These phenomena in the army found expression in desertion, draft evasion, unwillingness to “fight heroically” and endure hardships. Thus, patriotic initiative of the inhabitants of Vyazma to build a Second Patriotic War monument seems quite remarkable. It is even more peculiar, as monuments were not built until the end of the direct hostilities. Moreover, the public offered to erect the monument at its expense. The construction itself was a grassroots initiative and could have been picked up by other Russian cities, contributing to a revival of public support for the army and raising the troops morale. The project took into account the communal psychology of the Russian peasant, dressed in overcoat and fighting at the front. Names of fellow countrymen recipients of the Order of St George were to be incised on the monument, providing an incentive for heroism at the front. Also, the heroes’ names were to be included in special lists in rural schools. Information on the opening of the monument and proposed forms of perpetuating countrymen was sent to the fronts. A three-minute film was made about the monument in Vyazma. However, despite its clearly patriotic orientation and prospects, the Vyazma initiative was not supported nationwide. The analysis of Russian press in summer 1916 has showed that most popular newspapers and magazines did not publish information on this event. The Second Patriotic War monument in Vyazma is the first and only monument dedicated to the First World War in Russia. The methods of perpetuating heroes were, most likely, never implemented, and the empire itself lasted less than a year. In 1918 the monument was destroyed.

Keywords

Historical sources, World War I, Russian Army, monument to the World War I in Vyazma, army morale, Russian Western front, Smolensk gubernia.

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