

ROADSIDE MEMORIALS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: Folk Origins and Global Trends

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ABSTRACT: The main goal of this paper is to analyse the phenomenon of spontaneous memorialisation for victims of car crashes in Central Russia. Roadside memorials are similar to traditional commemorative forms; nevertheless, they have new dimensions: they reflect both individual–public and urban and suburban contexts. This paper is based on our 2010-2013 field work in the Tula and Vladimir Regions in Central Russia, and it includes a number of particular cases from other regions of Russia. We use qualitative data: Our collection of the roadside memorials in Central Russia contains more than 250 objects from different regions of Russia, mostly from the regions of Vladimir and Tula, and 50 interviews with people involved in the practice of spontaneous memorialisation. Furthermore, we include such historical material as folk songs and Soviet films. The main goal of this paper is to analyse the phenomenon of spontaneous memorialisation for victims of car crashes in Central Russia. The main question of our article is whether the new tradition of roadside memorials in Russian culture is succeeding traditional commemorative rituals, whether the memorials are a result of globalisation and global trends in commemoration and funeral rites and whether this new practice could show us some fundamental changes in Russian afterlife beliefs.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary funeral rites in Russia, roadside memorials, spontaneous shrines, spatial practices, memorialisation.

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this paper is to analyse the phenomenon of spontaneous memorialisation for victims of car crashes in Central Russia. The main question of our article is whether the new tradition of roadside memorials in Russian culture is succeeding traditional commemorative rituals, whether the memorials are a result of globalisation and global trends in commemoration

and funeral rites and whether this new practice could show us some fundamental changes in Russian afterlife beliefs.

Western authors mostly place the origin of these new practices in the 1960s and the rise of academic interest in them in the late 1980s (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 4). It is widely assumed that the memorialisation of Princess Diana of Wales after her death in 1997 gave a huge impetus to the worldwide expansion of this phenomenon and transformed it from a local practice to a well-known tradition (Walter 1999; Mourning Diana 1999). Roadside memorials, as an individual, familial part of spontaneous memorials, or “spontaneous shrines” as American folklorist Jack Santino named them (Santino 1992; Santino 2001, 12–14, 76–77; cit. according to Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 5), are a new global tradition of memorialisation of unnatural death.

While the anthropological observation of these ritual practices in Russia is just beginning (see for example: Schepanskaya 2003; Sokolova and Yudkina 2012; Sokolova 2014; Yudkina 2014a; Matlin and Safronov 2014; Sokolova and Yudkina 2014), the Western tradition (including Europe, the US and Australia) of spontaneous memorialisation is well described in the academic literature. Here, spontaneous memorialisation is understood not only as a commemoration but as a reaction of society, as “an attitude toward or a position on a public social issue” (Santino 2006, 1). The anthropologists Jan Margry and Christina Sánchez-Carretero use the concept of “grassroots memorialisation” “as a process by which groups of people, imagined communities, or specific individuals bring grievances into action by creating improvised and temporary memorials with the aim of changing or ameliorating a particular situation” (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 2). David Simpson analyses how in the case of memorialisation of the 9/11 tragedy the elements of common funeral rites and culture of mourning in the US were used for political reasons (Simpson 2006), while Erika Doss shows how thousands of new temporary memorials have changed the American landscape (Doss 2010).

Roadside memorials are well studied, too. The American folklorist Holly Everett (2000) describes the multiple purposes of erecting roadside crosses in Texas, US. She stresses that these crosses call public attention to the problem of car accident deaths and act as a sign of attention for other drivers (Everett 2002). The historians John Belshaw and Diane Purvey studied roadside memorials in British Columbia, Canada (Belshaw and Purvey 2010), the cultural anthropologist Leticia Nicolas – in France (Nicolas 2007), the anthropologist Maida Owens – in Louisiana, US (Owens 2006) and the geographers Kate Hartig and Kevin Dunn – in the New South Wales, Australia (Hartig and Dunn 1998). They all weight that the commemoration of car accident victims, besides serving as remembrance for the deceased person, has additional functions. Roadside memorials are connected with social issues, such as bad roads and drunk drivers. Both Russian (Sokolova and Yudkina 2012) and worldwide (Hartig and Dunn 1998; Owens 2006; Tay 2009) data show us the importance of roadside memorials for relatives and friends of those killed. Memorials are perceived by drivers as symbolic signs of safe driving for drivers on the road, and the drivers often slow down when passing such memorials (Tay 2009).

According to the Austrian ethnologist Konrad Köstlin, in Europe the rise of the practice of roadside shrines has been observed since the mid-1960s. Beginning in the 1980s the practice spread north, via Hungary, the Czech Republic, Austria, and France, to Germany and the Benelux countries and then reached Scandinavia in the 1990s (Köstlin 1999, 277–279; Gustavsson 2008, 30–31; all cit. according to Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 6). The Serbian scholar Zorica Rajkovic has argued for that this mourning practice existed, or was revitalised in the southeastern European Catholic area, earlier than elsewhere in the world (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 6). Rajkovic conducted field research in 1977 within the

Post Yugoslav territory and stated that this practice has become widespread since the 1960s (Rajkovic, 1988, 121).

Western data on spontaneous memorials for those who died unnaturally and whose death excites social trauma has mostly considered the memorials to be specific societal tools used to communicate with the state and/or show protest or disagreement for actual social issues. This communication channel becomes more important if government feedback and public regulations are dramatically disrupted or do not work in proper order. Thus, regarding spontaneous shrines in the Western scene: “The people involved are ‘mourning in protest’... They want to draw attention to a social issue and convince a broad public of the accuracy of their position to it” (Santino 2006, 2). Of course, roadside memorials are only one form of grassroots memorial, and they are much more about individual mourning. Meanwhile they may include societal protest implicitly and become places for meetings of protest groups or symbols, as for instance the *White Bike* is a symbol for the global ‘Ghost Bike-movement’.¹(Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 4).

Moreover, we share Santino’s concept of the “spontaneous shrine” to describe temporary memorials installed to mark untimely places of death. The American folklorist claims that these spontaneous memorials are more than simply monuments. Santino pays special attention to what relatives and friends say about the importance of the last place where their loved ones were alive. They leave memorabilia there as well as messages addressed to them. Santino also considers shrines as a portal to the other world, a place where two-way communication can occur. Spontaneous memorials become sacred because they develop into destinations for “pilgrimages”, celebrating the individuals who have died (Santino 2011, 98). Meanwhile, Santino does not compare places of premature death and real graves where remains are situated. In our data, the resemblance between these two types of memorials is very close.

While Santino focuses on the performative dimension of spontaneous shrines, the American professor of religious studies Ivan Strenski analyses the relation between “religion” and “spirituality” concerning spontaneous shrines. He believes that the distinction between “high” and popular religious artefacts is not a useful one in this case (Strenski 2003). Hence, when we study spontaneous shrines it is necessary to investigate both “religious” objects, such as crosses, icons, candles etc., as well as “profane” ones, such as toys, personal belongings, letters and any other objects that materialise sorrow and pain. This makes it possible for us to talk about the spatial sacralisation – about those places that are sacred for people who have experienced loss. They are sanctified by both individual and collective prayers and by the installation of crosses and church-related objects.

Can we talk about fundamental changes in the culture of mourning not only in Russia but all over the world? Is it the “new culture of disaster” (Fraenkel 2011, 242), the “new state mourning” (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 32) or “memorial mania” (Doss 2010, 2)? When we talk about the contemporary processes of memorialisation in the public space we have many questions. Why are spontaneous memorials and commemorations dedicated to the victims of tragic events (car accidents, but also terrorist attacks and natural disasters), but no plaques are put up in hospitals or hospices where children have died? What reason is the most important for putting up a memorial? Age is not always the determining factor for the memorials’ installation, but often, when only children suffer in a tragedy, it effects a strong emotional reaction in the community. Following Jan Margry and Christina Sánchez-Carretero we distinguish two main factors that determine the creation of the memorial: the status and the cause of death. The first is if a dead person is perceived as a victim and his or her death could

¹ A *White Bike* is a bicycle set up as a roadside memorial in a place where a cyclist has been killed or injured, usually by cars. It is intended as a reminder to passing motorists to watch out for vulnerable road users. *White Bikes* are usually junk bicycles painted white, sometimes with a placard attached, and locked to a suitable object close to the scene of the accident.

have been prevented. The second is related to whether there are people who are responsible for the tragedy; is there an opportunity to blame the “other” (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011, 32)?

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The sources for this article are the authors’ collection of roadside memorials in Central Russia, which contains more than 250 objects in different regions of Russia, mostly from the regions of Vladimir and Tula. Each object contains as much information as possible about the memorial – the exact place (GPS coordinates), a description of the external appearance of the memorial, signs of visits (food, whole cigarettes, new and old flowers, items for cleaning), time of death etc. When possible, interviews with visiting relatives and neighbours were conducted.

This collection is the result of our 2010-2013 fieldwork, where we registered 138 roadside memorials in 2010² situated in the regions of Vladimir and Tula and 47 over the next years, broadening our study to other parts of Russia.³ During our last field research in the Vladimir region in 2013 we registered an additional 75 memorials.⁴ For this article we furthermore use the results of 50 interviews with people involved in the practice of spontaneous memorialisation (the respondents are mostly residents of settlements where the commemorative signs are placed and two relatives), undertakers, professional drivers, Orthodox priests, traffic police officers, road servicemen and local authorities. Furthermore, we include such historical material as folk songs and films of two famous Soviet directors – Vasiliy Shukshin and Leonid Bykov.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

When we talk about roadside memorials in contemporary Russian culture we should take into account the different types of commemorative traditions in Russian society.

First of all we should remember Russian Orthodox Church funerals and commemoration traditions (Bouzin 1997; Kremlyova 1997; *Pokhoronno-pominal’nye obychai i obryady* 1993; Sedakova 2004; Bouchard 2004). These traditions include regular commemoration of the deceased on the third, ninth and 40th days, followed by annual commemorations, commemorations on Easter Sunday and on *Roditel’skaya subbota* (“Parents’ Saturday”).⁵ Ordinarily the family holds the commemoration on the grave of deceased. According to the folk Orthodox tradition people usually bring commemorative food to the graves (sweets, apples, Easter cake, vodka) and items (cigarettes for men and toys for children).

Nowadays the roadside memorials in Russia look very similar to graves in Russian graveyards. They often contain a bench and a small table, a tombstone or a cross, plenty of

² Our field work in 2010 was focused on an examination of the roadsides of the main roads in the districts of Melenkovsky, Selivanovsky, Sobinsky, Sudogodsky in the Vladimir Region (including M-7 Federal Highway, P-72, P-76, P-125 and some other Regional Roads) and the districts of Beliovsky, Venevsky, Donskoy, Dudinsky, Efremovsky, Kimovsky in the Tula Region (including M-2 and M-4 Federal Highways, P-92, P-95, P-114, P-132, P-139, P-141, P-142, P-145, P-148 and some other Regional Roads).

³ These cases are from the Voronezh, Kaluga, Kirov, Perm, Kostroma, Yaroslavl’, Irkutsk, Riazan’, Moscow and Sankt-Peterburg Regions.

⁴ During the field work in 2013 we made a full observation of roads of all types in the districts of Muromskiy, Sudogodsky and Selivanovsky in the Vladimir region.

⁵ *Roditel’skaya subbota* (“Parents’ Saturday”) is the special day for the commemoration of dead relatives in the Russian Orthodox Church.

artificial flowers and are surrounded by a fence.⁶ The practices near the memorials are the same as in the cemetery – friends and relatives bring commemorative food and drinks, clean the grave and cut the grass around the memorial. Memorials are visited mostly on the Orthodox commemoration days (Easter and “Parents Saturdays”).

According to our data, the time spent visiting the roadside memorials is shorter than visits at the graveyard. During our three years of field research we observed a visiting of a roadside memorial directly only once, in Tula region (near the settlement called Sebino), on 5 November 2010. It was on the eve of *Kazanskaya*, or *Dmitrievskaya* – “Parents Saturday”. The visit lasted less than five minutes; four visitors (an old woman in a black scarf, two middle-aged women and one man) cleaned up the place around the memorial, threw aside all trash and brought fresh flowers. This visit confirmed our initial hypothesis that roadside memorials may be visited on special Church commemorative days like graves at cemeteries.

This situation of equal commemoration of the “ordinary deceased” and those whose deaths are premature is quite new in Russian culture. Traditional Russian folk culture, mostly that of the peasants, considers people whose deaths are premature as having died unnaturally – for instance, people, who died unpredictably, young or in an unnatural death, as well as those who commit suicide and “sorcerers” and “witches”.⁷ In Russian folk tradition, these people are considered to be *zalozhnye* (“hostage”) in death, and traditionally they were not commemorated in the Orthodox way. Instead, people used to commemorate them on a special day – *semik* (the seventh Thursday after Easter) and considered them to have become evil spirits or *brodyachie* – “wandering” dead men. As “bad” deceased they could not be buried inside the cemetery and often had graves outside the premises. People threw heaps of rags, garbage and twigs when passing the places of their premature deaths and/or their graves. But sometimes crosses or even chapels and monasteries were set at special cemeteries⁸ for *zalozhnye* deceased (Zelenin 1995, 63–70). And despite the general negative attitude towards this type of deceased, some of them were canonised by the Church (Panchenko 2012)⁹.

In contrast, in contemporary Russia, those who die unexpectedly, for instance in a car accident, in a fire, or commit suicide, do not lose commemoration. Instead they get a double commemoration – at the grave and at the memorial near their place of death.

THE APPEARANCE OF ROADSIDE MEMORIALS IN RUSSIA

The very tradition of marking the deceased’s professional affiliation at the grave is very ancient throughout the world (for instance special items laid beside the dead bodies of kings, warriors, doctors, hunters and potters; inscriptions on tombstones, sculptures and symbols informing about a persons profession etc.). In contemporary Russia it is common to mark the tombstones of doctors with a snake, of soldiers with a star, of teachers with a book etc. In some cases the cause and circumstances of the death are noted, too. According to our field research observations it could be a car or a steering wheel for those who died in a car accident. In spite of the obvious functional and pragmatic similarities between the roadside memorials and the vowed crosses and “graves” of the *zalozhnye* dead, it’s hard to speak about generic continuity

⁶ As we can see, the main shape of Russian roadside memorials differs from the Western ones, with white crosses, wreaths or bunches of flowers, with or without names (Nicolas, 2007; Everett, 2000; Smith, 1999; Owens, 2006). We can definitely say that the shape of roadside memorials replicates the dominant characters of the graves and gravestones in the culture (Bouchard, 2004).

⁷ It’s worth mentioning that in traditional folk culture the same rules apply for people who die in an accident (innocently) and people who commit “sins” (sorcerers, suicides).

⁸ For more about special cemeteries, the so-called *skudel’nitsy*, and about *semik*, see Yudkina 2014b.

⁹ On the commemoration of unnatural death in Russian culture see also Warner 2002 and Warner 2011.

between them. Instead, these two quite different phenomena are combined by common spatial and semantic contexts – the notions of memory, death and roads (on the road semantic in Russian culture see, for example, Schepanskaya 2003).

In Russia the setting of the commemorative signs at the places of car accidents has become widespread over the last 20 years due to a huge increase of the number of private cars. Nevertheless, the practice existed before. We can find examples of this in the modern folk tradition – for example, in a song composed before World War II: This song is about a driver named Kol'ka Snegiryov, who crashed trying to outrun his beloved, also driving a car. This song has a great number of folk versions where car brands, places and even names differ, but the plot and the ending are the same:

...V tom	... In this
Kholodnom i gryaznom ovrage	Cold and muddy ravine
Skhoronili yego navsegda.	He was forever buried .
I na pamyat' likhomu shoferu,	And in memory of the dashing driver
Chto mashinu, kak veter, gonyal,	Who drove like the wind,
Na mogilu polozhili fary i ot 'AMO'	Headlights were put on the grave
Pognutyi shturval...	And a broken car wheel
	(Pushkaryov 1995, 124)

This song was reinterpreted during World War II and became very popular among Soviet front-line drivers. At least once the description of the grave from the song became the model for the renovation of a real Soviet driver grave situated near the river Vistula in Poland. Car headlights, a wheel and a sheet of paper with the lyrics of this song completed an ordinary plywood monument where the name and surname of the song hero were replaced by that of the deceased (ibid., 126).



ILLUSTRATION 1: Memorial devoted to war drivers “To drivers-warriors, to drivers-toilers” (Bol’shaya Cheremushkinskaya St. 1, Moscow). Photo: Anna Yudkina.

War drivers were important not only for the front-line, but also for civilians. That is why monuments dedicated to them and war cars are set in many Post-Soviet towns. The importance

of these drivers was preserved after the war, during the period of economic reconstruction. Considering that professional drivers have been the main participants in traffic a long time before the 1960s and 70s, we would argue that they were the first main actors and re-translators of the practice of roadside shrines.

The practice of roadside memorials is also reflected in Vasiliy Shukshin's film *Zhiviyot takoy paren* ("There is Such a Lad"; 1964) about Pavel Kolokol'nikov, a young driver from Altay (South Siberia, Russia). This film is based on Shukshin's short stories about his native region *Sel'skie zhiteli* (1963). In one scene (55:40–57:07) Kondrat Stepanovich, Pavel's elder colleague, tells him about the tragic death of their colleague and shows him the place of the car accident and the roadside memorial with a star on the top. The monument is located on a cliff above a river, and close to the place there is a large stone with the inscription "Oh, Vanya, drug" (Oh, Vanya, friend). The look and the location of the monument allows us to assume that this is not the real grave. The two drivers make a stop near the memorial to commemorate their colleague with vodka and cigarettes.



ILLUSTRATION 2: Screen shot from Vasiliy Shukshin's film "Zhiviyot takoy paren" (Does live this kind of guy) (1964).

We find another example in the final episode of Leonid Bykov's film *V boy idut odni stariki* ("Only Old Men are Going to Battle"; 1973). This film is about the life and service of Soviet pilots during World War II. In one scene (1:23:30–1:25:20) the characters *Maestro*, *Makarych* and *Kuznechik* come to the aerodrome to inform the pilot Masha that her beloved *Romeo* has been killed, but they find only a memorial, since it turns out that Masha has perished in an earlier air battle. The commemorative sign has the shape of an obelisk, and the pilot's photos and a plaque with their names are fastened to the monument as well as something simulating an airplane propeller.

We are aware that movies and short stories can be questionable historical sources, so these two memorials might have existed only in the imagination of the directors. Of course, now it is hard to verify whether such memorials existed in real life, but concerning the realistic manner of both directors, we can suppose that they might reflect the realm of the 1940s–1960s in a certain way. Thus these objects might be relevant considering the genesis of roadside memorial practice. It's worth noting that the profession and cause of death are clearly marked and that the look of the graves corresponds to the look of modern roadside memorials. The clear marking of professions was not only the Soviet way of rethinking grave monuments; it existed earlier and in other countries. Meanwhile, speaking about the genesis of roadside

memorials in Russia we can assume that the official Soviet symbolic logic of memorialisation for heroes (people of such heroic professions as warriors, pilots, astronauts etc.) was transferred to individual practices because it was the only form for grief canalisation appropriated for that period.¹⁰

As we see it, the practice of roadside memorials is influenced both by the tradition of marking the deceased's professional affiliation at the graves, as well as by the prevalence of real burials outside cemeteries (near roads, in the forest, in fields, in the centre of settlements etc.) which occurred during the period of World War II in the Soviet Union. Immediately after the war these temporal burials were turned into official memorials; some of them were united, and others were transferred to special parts of ordinary cemeteries. Still, they were and are considered places for commemorations with certain appearances and certain rituals connected to them.

It's worth noting that the earliest commemorative sign we found during our fieldwork was dated to 1986 and is situated in the Tula region. However, one of our respondents (from the Kondrakovo settlement in the Vladimir region) informed us that she put up a roadside memorial near the place where her husband crashed in 1976, and she assumed it was a quite widespread practice even in the mid-1970s. Later she had to destroy this memorial under pressure from the local government. All our respondents around about 50 years of age talked about the practice of roadside memorials as a tradition which has "always" been around since the 1970s (the time of their youth). Still, both professional drivers and people of other professions pointed out that the number of memorials increased in late 1980s.¹¹

As cars ceased to be a luxury item in Russia, the number of private cars increased – as well as the number of signs set in commemoration of people who died in car accidents. According to official statistics annually on the roads of Russia 200,000 traffic accidents happen, about 27,000 people die and more than 250,000 people are injured (*Svedeniya* 2014). It is complicated to give complete statistics on the number of the commemorative signs throughout the various countries, but we have sufficient reason to suggest that the practice of commemorative signs is widespread both in Russia and beyond its boundaries. Nevertheless, the most interesting issue for us, as researchers, is not only the very fact of their numerical growth but also the set of ideas and practices implicated in the commemorative practice.

ROADSIDE MEMORIALS NOWADAYS

In Central Russia, roadside memorials share many common features with standard cemetery graves. Visual data allows us to suggest the approximate time of installation, whether this place is visited and what people do on these sites. Several types of memorials can be distinguished although one generally finds few which are of one pure type alone. The memorials are generally found to combine elements of other types. The five sorts of distinctive features of roadside memorials found in Central Russia are as follows:

¹⁰ The authors would like to thank Dr. Elena Levkieskaya for this insight.

¹¹ We should mention here that the number of private cars in Soviet Union was very small.

Illustration 1. Types of memorials (by Karina Bagramova)



1. Marble or metal obelisks



2. Granite or marble slab, set into the earth vertically



3. Iron plates welded into two iron bars



4. Welded steel construction



5. Stone of irregular shape

ILLUSTRATION 3: Types of memorials (by Karina Bagramova)

1. *Artificial flowers and wreaths*

This type is the most frequent. Flowers, bouquets or wreaths are fastened to a road post, road sign, road bump, bridge railing or tree by sticky tape or wire. This sign is the cheapest, quickest and easiest to install. Its installation does not require any great effort or special equipment. In some cases the study of this practice shows that flowers can be an intermediate step before the installation of more elaborate commemorative sign; however, there is no reason to assume that this is the rule.

This type of signs can be found both on highways and in settlements, where it is most typical. Sometimes it is the only opportunity for the family to mark the site of the tragedy, such as in cities.

2. *Car details: steering wheels, tires, wheels etc.*

It should be noted that the very car skeleton is taken away by road services right after an accident. The composition of memorials often includes details of the car, basically the steering wheel, tires, wheels and car brands. These clearly indicate the cause for the memorial. Furthermore, as a professional driver told us, there is a strict prohibition among professional drivers to use car details left after a crash.¹² It's interesting, therefore, that the image of the vehicle or car is often used in the design of the tombstones installed in cemeteries in order to mark the professional identity or cause of death (Gromov 2010, 30–33).

3. *Wooden or iron cross*

These crosses are mostly of an Orthodox design – an eight-ended cross with or without an image of the crucifixion. The cross can be supplemented with signs (name, dates of birth/death and/or a photograph) or not. Crosses can be combined with artificial flowers or car details and may be complemented with bench for sitting or natural flowers.

4. *Monument*

Together with the memorials with artificial flowers this type is the most frequent. These memorials look like tombstones installed in cemeteries. We can distinguish the following subtypes: (1) obelisks – marble or metal, (2) vertically installed granite or marble slabs, (3) iron plates welded to the two iron bars, (4) welded steel constructions, (5) stones of irregular shapes etc. (see Illustration 3)

A monument of this kind can be supplemented with types 1 and 2. They also have religious (Orthodox Christian, mostly) symbols: a crucifix, and/or a cross engraved or fastened to the top of the monument or within a wreath and (in rare cases) an icon. It is worth mentioning that some monuments do not contain any religious symbols at all, as well as some of the monuments do not have any information about the deceased.

5. *Memorial*

The above-described types of commemorative signs have one or two elements (a monument, cross, details and/or flowers or wreath), and as a rule, they occupy a small area and the space surrounding them is not involved in the sacred commemorative space. By a “memorial” we

¹² As he explained, truckers might use the details of broken cars to repair their trucks because there might be no car service on the road.

mean a commemorative sign consisting of 5-10 elements. Moreover, the memorial space is structured in a much more complicated manner.

The main space of the memorial may be paved with tiles, covered by gravel or sand or the grass around it may be mown. In addition, space is sometimes limited by a fence. In memorials we can distinguish the conceptual centre of the composition clearly (usually the centre consists of a monument or a cross), a path leading to the centre (paved, iron or earthen stairs), and a periphery (usually flower beds or shrubs). The different spatial zones are not homogeneous.

Such a typology provides additional data for analysis because it allows us to suggest differences between the roadside memorials in settlements and beyond their boundaries. Monuments, memorials especially, are mostly spread outside the settlements. In addition, the composition of roadside memorials outside settlements is more complex; consequently, the memorials themselves, as well as traces of visits, are preserved better than in cities.



ILLUSTRATION 4: Roadside memorial from Yaroslavl' Region. Photo: Anna Sokolova

Visual inspection of the roadside memorials allows us to conclude whether these sites are visited. We can judge this by the following pieces of evidence:

1. a path leading to the memorial from the roadway and/or trampled grass in front of it;
2. grass mown around the memorial;
3. cigarette butts or whole cigarettes burned for smoking;
4. candies, apples, chocolate;
5. glasses and bottles of alcoholic beverages;
6. fresh cut flowers;
7. items (e.g. CDs and toys);
8. debris (old wreaths, dried flowers);
9. rags and water bottles to clean the monument;
10. flower beds;
11. candles, candlesticks and icons.

It's worth mentioning that all of these traces of visits are similar to cemetery practices in Central Russia. Judging by these traces we can assume that visits coincide with the days of birth or death and also with the Orthodox commemorative days.

All informants from settlements where roadside memorials are set (Zlobino, Ivatino, Skripino, Archangel, Krasnaya Gorbatka, Kondrakovo, Pervomaiskiy – Vladimir region,

2010, 2013) know people in whose memory the monuments were installed, the date of the car accident and whether relatives and friends visit them.

An old woman from Skripino village has a commemorative sign set close to her house. It is installed on the spot where a local resident, a middle-aged drunk man, was hit by a bypassing truck. His mother and sister still live in the village. The mother, passing by the monument, always stops for a while and crosses herself; she also takes care of the monument and mows the grass around it. Our informant approves of her behaviour and disapproves of the brother of the deceased, who lives in another village and neglects to mow the grass.

Another young woman from Moscow, much devoted to a car crash shrine, told us that the place has become a place of memory and mourning to which she always bring fresh flowers. She lost her mother as a teenager to a car crash, and her family installed a granite monument there with an engraved photo one to two months after the accident, earlier than at the official cemetery.

Thus, one of the major typological features of roadside memorials is that memorials located on roads within settlements and cities highly differ from those located beyond them. Because it is complicated or even impossible to set a monument or memorial in cities; in these cases relatives and friends mark the place of death by artificial or fresh-cut flowers. Family and friends install a commemorative sign to mark the very site of the tragedy and sacralise it. At the same time, other people also perceive this space as a special area.

It is worth noting that the behaviour of the memorials' visitors on highways is similar to that in the cemeteries (mowing the grass around the memorial; remembrance with vodka, candies, cigarettes at the monument). In the villages we see a more simplified practice: relatives bring new flowers and wreaths, sometimes mow the grass around the commemorative sign and hand out candy to people living nearby but do not leave it near the sign and do not commemorate the deceased by drinking a glass of vodka.

ROADSIDE MEMORIALS IN RUSSIAN LAW

It is necessary to stress that roadside memorials do not have a definite legal status in Russia. At present, there is no direct law concerning commemorative signs on the roads in Russian legislation. Indirect regulation of this issue is contained in the federal law about roads and traffic activities in the Russian Federation. Article 25 prohibits building anything in the immediate roadside area (*Federal'nyy zakon Rossiyskoy Federatsii 2007 № 257*). This area is only one meter from the edge of the roadway, then the wayside begins – its width can be up to 150 meters depending on the road category. The law says the following about building in this area:

8. The building and renovation of road constructions and road service, installation of advertising constructions, billboards and guide-board within the roadsides are possible if the road owner permits so (written agreement).

Thus, the law does not say anything about the setting of commemorative signs in the roadsides explicitly, but also does not prohibit it, saying that it is possible but only if the road owner, that is the local authorities, permits it.

However, in 2007 the State Duma of the Russian Federation rejected the legislative proposal of deputies from Chelyabinsk to fine citizens for the installation of monuments and other commemorative signs along the roads.

Moreover, in different Russian regions local authorities conduct campaigns against commemorative signs on the roadsides from time to time. In addition, the monuments are destroyed during the expanding of the roadway. However, such initiatives do not hamper the installation of new commemorative signs.

ROADSIDE MEMORIALS: CULTURE AND BELIEFS

Our findings imply another important question: What ideas do the commemorative practices implicate? On the one hand, it is clear that commemorative signs at the places of car accidents do not coincide with the real graves. It is prohibited by federal laws about the burial and funeral business (*Federal'nyy zakon Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 12 yanvarya 1996 № 8*). On the other hand, often relatives and friends associate the place of a car crash with the post-mortem fate of the deceased.

Social attitude towards roadside memorials is important, too. The social attitude toward this phenomenon is ambiguous and contradictory: Some consider it as a caution against imprudentness on the roads but do not perceive it as a negative sign or an evil omen; others (especially if the memorial is located close to their home) are categorically against the installation of commemorative signs. They argue that their living space becomes a cemetery space (according to the interviews). Perhaps, such opinions can be explained by the idea in traditional Slavonic culture about cemetery space as a space of death, strictly isolated from the living space. In this case, every single memorial creates a kind of spatial enclave for death, and their installation along the roads legitimises their status and imparts a cemetery meanings to roads.

As our interviews show, the installation of commemorative signs can change the semantics of the road space significantly. In this case, depending on the type of memorial and how it is perceived, we may distinguish five types of meanings: (1) a dangerous place on the road, drivers need to slow down and drive carefully to prevent an accident,¹³ (2) a very bad, "evil", place, (3) setting a cross to sanctify the "terrible" place in order to neutralise fear (Schepanskaya 2003, 303), (4) semantics of death and cemeteries and (5) a commemorative space.

As the roadside memorials are a part of the mourning culture, we should understand why these material objects are so important for the relatives. We think that contemporary Russian society has practically lost the traditional culture of the grief experience, and overcoming the grief through spiritual practices is largely lost. We refer both to urban and rural people, ethnic Russians, living in Central Russia. In traditional life, the mourning period was strictly regulated – it had a beginning and an end; it should be finished and then the people involved should return to a normal social life. This is the particular meaning of the funeral and commemorations as the *rites de passage* (van Gennep 1999, 150). The cultural prohibition on "endless mourning" has weakened as the idea about private death was transformed in Soviet times through Soviet atheistic propaganda and in the post-Soviet times because of the devaluation of the idea of an existence after death. As a result, the cultural permission to end the mourning and get back to normal life do not work any longer – especially not in particularly strong emotional cases, such as the sudden death of young persons in a car accident. The generations who were raised in the period of Soviet atheistic propaganda have no socialisation regarding the religious way of overcoming life crises. At the same time, the financial part of commemoration has increased

¹³ Compare with (Tay, 2009).

significantly, with monuments becoming more expensive, large and elaborate in cemeteries.¹⁴ Moreover, people leave more material objects and more food on the graves and at places of premature deaths, and they organise expensive funeral banquets.

We can suppose that the “materialisation of grief” in contemporary Russian memorial culture is increasing. Previously, the main channels for grief were immaterial spiritual practices such as individual prayer, participation in church services or common commemorations. Regarding traditional mourning culture, food was a material component of the commemoration during funeral banquets or the symbolic *hristosovanie* with the dead¹⁵ in the cemetery on Easter Sunday. The participants of the commemoration ate the food completely or left a small symbolic part of it at the grave. In this case, the basis for this ritual is the idea about a common meal between the living and deceased members of the community in order to renew the communication between them (van Genneep 1999, 150) and the idea of sharing a “part” with the dead people (Sedakova 2004, 265–276). However, this ritual was usually performed with “good” dead ancestors, not with the potentially deceased who died prematurely. As we can see now, people bring lots of food and drinks to roadside memorials. They do not eat it while commemorating the deceased. The food is just left near the memorial on the roadside and is replaced on commemorative days. We consider this food left on the memorial as a tribute for the deceased – food, toys or cigarettes for a beloved one, who used to use these things in life and suffers from a lack of these items in the afterlife.

We emphasise that it is not only because the skill of the religious way of dealing with death is lost but also because ideas of “death” and “afterlife” are conceptualised differently now. The post-mortem human existence is equally related with two places – both the place of sudden death and the real grave. We can see equal commemorations at both sites. Both those involved in commemorative practices and those not involved stress the necessity of erecting roadside memorials in the case of car accidents and equal commemoration at the grave and memorial. These changes in afterlife attitudes are well realised by the Russian Orthodox priests, too. Though most of the roadside memorials in Russia contain Orthodox crosses or icons, priest do not consider them to be a continuation of Orthodox commemoration. According to our interviews, they mostly consider it to be a “paganism revival” and stress that the only place for the grave, crosses and commemoration is a graveyard, not a roadside. For example a rural dean of the Suzdal rural district says:

It is just useless. [...] Some people erect not just crosses but even arbours and chapels! [...] and when he drives that road he always see that arbour, and he stops and he sits beside in this arbour and remembers... Well, you can do the same in your morning prayer about his soul. You are better to visit a church on “Parent Saturday” to pray about his soul. It would be useful for the soul, that’s what the soul needs, but not a chapel on the road, where you can sit aside and remember... And what is more – they desecrate this commemoration by drinking alcohol! So there is no sense at all in this [practice] and there is no need to do it, because there is a graveyard, where the body is, and there is a Church, where the prayers are.

We can conclude that the practice of spontaneous shrine installations at the places of premature and unexpected human deaths is a widespread cross-cultural phenomenon – of course, with specific forms in different parts of the world. In this paper we have considered the form of memorialisation in contemporary Russia of roadside memorials. They are similar to traditional forms functionally and pragmatically but have new dimensions at the same

¹⁴ Compare to (Matich 1998).

¹⁵ *Hristosovanie* is an Orthodox folk tradition where ritual food, e.g. Easter eggs and Easter cake, is exchanged with other members of the community – including deceased members.

time and reflect fundamental transformations in the mourning culture and afterlife beliefs in Central Russia.

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