

After the Cold War

By Martin Evans | Published in History Today Volume: 59 Issue 9

If one wants to survey the Soviet anti-fascist vista that imposed itself both physically and metaphorically throughout Communist Eastern Europe after 1945, there is no better vantage point than the Treptow Monument in central Berlin. Situated in the Treptower Park on the banks of the River Spree, the monument's centrepiece is an immense 40-ton statue of a Red Army soldier. Saviour, liberator, protector, this imposing figure – head fixed nobly high, trampling a swastika underfoot and shielding a small girl in his arms – exudes an aura of principled ferocity that was an emphatic statement about Communism's victory over Nazism.

Sculpted by Yevgeny Vuchetich (1908-74), the monument, whose upkeep was one of the Soviet Union's stipulations for agreeing to German reunification, was officially unveiled on May 8th, 1949 at the height of the Cold War. Flanked by a series of frescoes glorifying the struggle of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War and bearing quotations from Joseph Stalin in Russian and German, Treptow overlooks a mass grave containing the remains of 5,000 Soviet soldiers who died during the final Battle of Berlin in spring 1945. Its symbolism casts the arrival of the Red Army as an act of fraternal liberation: Soviet heroes freeing captive populations from the grip of fascism. In this way it stood as a constant reminder of a debt of gratitude. It was also deliberately selective. Distilling the war on the Eastern Front into a simple story of the good (the Soviet Union) against evil (Nazi Germany), the Treptow Monument conveniently overlooked the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 to focus the narrative on the military achievements of the Red Army.

Across the Eastern Bloc this message was asserted through monuments and ceremonies everywhere, though in practice there was scope for some variation as each regime incorporated the general theme into its own vision of national Communism. The one country where the Soviet master narrative was least flexibly imposed was East Germany, largely because, given the direct competition with West Germany, this was the place where Cold War polarities were most acute. With this in mind a new identity was constructed for East Germany on a clean slate based upon anti-Nazism. Thus, East Germany preserved the concentration camps at Buchenwald, Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen not as memorials to the Holocaust but in homage to Communist anti-fascism. Statues, sculpted in the socialist realist style, depicted male prisoners side by side with their Soviet liberators. No reference was made to Jews, Roma, homosexual and non-Communist victims in order to transmit a highly specific political message, namely that fascism and monopoly capitalism were responsible for war crimes and that the German working class, led by the German Communist party and allied to the Red Army, had heroically resisted Nazi rule at all levels. Taken together these two lessons underpinned the foundation of the East German state, articles of ideological faith that laid the basis for the country's unyielding battle against international capitalism.