

Soviet death and hybrid soviet subjectivity: Urban cemetery as a metatext

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Abstract

© 2018, Ab Imperio. All rights reserved. Based on analyzing visual and verbal texts on gravestones and reading the entire layout of cemeteries and funeral rituals as semiotically meaningful metatexts, this article approaches the phenomenon of Soviet subjectivity from an unusual perspective. Death as the ultimate culmination of lived experience documented Sovietness more conclusively than any “living” manifestations, which only highlights the fundamental ambiguity of the Soviet mind and society as reflected by the USSR’s mortuary sphere. The author identifies and examines the dialectics of “purity” and “hybridity” within the Soviet urban cemetery space. The discourse of cultural purity persisted throughout most of the Soviet period despite the regime’s halfhearted attempts at arranging distinctive ethnocultural groups into a mosaic whole. Hybridity as a product of synthesizing new common meaning and social identity from diverse cultural and social elements was mostly a grassroots phenomenon. The observable changes in cemeterial “text” throughout the 1920s-1980s display little or no correlation with the normative Soviet discourse and regulations as expressed in official documents and the authorities’ projects for reforming the funerary sphere. Thus the corpus of cemeterial texts appears to be a product of society’s collective imagination inventing a popular version of Sovietness, only to some extent mediated by communist ideology and administrative measures.

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