

# THE SOVIET WAR MEMORIAL IN TREPTOW, BERLIN\*

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**ABSTRACT.** The Soviet War Memorial in Treptow, Berlin, was an important emblem of political power and ideology during and after the cold war. Designed as the Soviet Union's premiere extraterritorial battlefield shrine, the site combines a veterans' cemetery with a large-scale memorial complex celebrating the Soviet victory in World War II. The monument was intended for use in Soviet military commemorative activity and became a key sacred space in the Cult of the Soviet War Dead, but its location in Berlin meant that it served other political purposes. By avoiding definitive statements on key issues the memorial attained a semantic flexibility that enabled it to remain a focal point of commemorative activity for decades. The memorial continues to play a part in contemporary Berlin, though the political overtones are now overshadowed by its role as a shrine to the war dead. *Keywords:* Berlin, national identity, Soviet memorials, urban landscape, veterans' cemeteries.

The Soviet War Memorial in the Treptow district of Berlin demonstrates how the meaning of place is shaped and reshaped through time to symbolize social values and political ideologies. Studies of such value-laden landscapes are an important part of contemporary cultural and historical geography.<sup>1</sup> This interest stems from the view that landscapes “symbolize and sustain collective values over long periods of time” and enable these values to play an important role in the reproduction of a culture (Foote 1997, 33). Attention in geography has often focused on the symbolism of everyday environments, but recent currents in the new cultural geography and other fields have focused more on the elite landscapes of power and control created by corporations, private institutions, and governments.<sup>2</sup>

## MEMORIAL MEANINGS AND MESSAGES

The memorial in Treptow is an excellent example of this latter type of symbolic meaning, one that inscribes a particular view of history on the landscape according to the motives and ideological imperatives of the Soviet Union at the close of World War II. The Treptow memorial, created by a totalitarian state, is an extreme example of the power of ideology to shape place. But memorials in general and war memorials in particular also have attracted considerable comment.<sup>3</sup> In totalitarian states, public art and memorials often reflect attempts by the state to claim legitimacy and in many situations can be viewed as little more than propaganda etched in stone. Memorials to other events—from the loss of great leaders to a community's response to a natural disaster—can be just as enlightening in revealing underlying social, political, and cultural values. War memorials have been attracting more attention re-

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