

Aaron J. Cohen
Professor, Department of History
California State University, Sacramento

Monument: Memorial Culture in Russia through War, Revolution, and Emigration 1905-2005

January 19, 2017 - June 29, 2017

Moscow, Russia

Research Abstract

This grant has been indispensable for my study of Russian and Soviet public monuments in the twentieth century. It supports a monograph that will be an original contribution to our knowledge of modern Russian memorial practices and the first to examine the relationships between imperial, Soviet, and émigré culture and their importance for views of the past in the Russian Federation. The book will have two main arguments. First, we must expand our geographical definition of twentieth-century Russian culture to understand how political ideas, symbols, and representations were made in Soviet public space. Russian historical memory was not limited to the culture of one territorial state; it also existed outside Soviet discourse in the artifacts, relics, and physical and intellectual remnants of imperial Russia and in the people, culture, and institutions of the emigration. The second argument is that we can learn more about monuments and memorials if we understand them as physical objects in public space rather than just as abstract symbols in a broader propaganda or ideological discourse. In the nineteenth-century, Russians invested heavily in monuments to demonstrate political authority and national or dynastic memory, as did later Soviet politicians. Yet physical monuments were rare in the early Soviet period. The reasons for this paradox are complex, but they all emerge from confusion about the definition of public space in the revolutionary period. The production of monuments was not shaped primarily by direct propaganda work or ideology but by institutional,

material, aesthetic, and monetary concerns that do not correspond to our usual understanding of the Soviet Union as a totalizing propaganda state. Today's mixture of imperial, Soviet, and émigré culture is a consequence of this century-long division within Russian culture. This history of monuments also informs the present-day belief among Russian public figures that nineteenth-century-style monuments, memorials, and statues remain an effective means to support specific political views and political and social cohesion.

Research Goals

I finished the research for most of the non-Soviet aspects of this project prior to this grant, so my main goal was to find original documents and library sources on Soviet monuments in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Prior to application, I had completed research at archives in the US, the Czech Republic, Serbia, UK, France, and China, read the major published sources, and made a few short exploratory trips to some Russian archives. In my 2015 ACIE application, I proposed to study Soviet documents in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE), and local archives of Moscow and Saint Petersburg over a four-month period

I used the year between my application and the beginning of my grant to make these research goals more precise. I received support from my university to spend October 2016 in St. Petersburg researching the Soviet period at the Central State Archive for Art and Literature (TsGALI SPb), Central State Archive (TsGA SPb, i. e., Leningrad city government archive), and Central State Archive for Historical-Political Documents (TsGAIPD, i. e., Leningrad Communist Party archive). I finished my research in TsGA and TsGAIPD but realized that work in TsGALI would take more time as delivery time for materials was 10-14 business days. I also discovered

that the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) contained important documents for the revolutionary period in fond 794 (the Union of Artists), and I learned that city archives allowed the photography of microfilmed and original documents on a free and unlimited basis. This policy allowed me to copy a lot more material than I expected and to hope that local and federal archives in Moscow would similar policies when my grant started in January 2017.

Shortly before arrival, I created a more precise research plan. I added several institutions to my Moscow archive list, including the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History (RGASPI, i. e., the Soviet Communist Party archive for the early twentieth century) and the Section for Written Sources at the State Historical Museum (OPI GIM). I hoped that the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI, i. e., the Party archive for the late twentieth century) might reopen while I was in Moscow. I created an Excel spreadsheet for archives with online indexes to identify and prioritize individual files that I wished to consult. By January 2017, I had lists with hundreds or thousands of specific documents in GARF, TsGALI, and RGALI that could potentially be ordered. It seemed to me that six months was a more realistic period to cover this amount of material and that I should concentrate more on prioritizing and gathering data than writing chapters to take full advantage of time.

Research Activities

My research focused on three kinds of institutions: archives with large governmental collections related to monument-building, archives with individual documents or materials about monuments, and the Russian State Library. In twentieth-century Russia, local and central government institutions took the most initiative for monument-building, although some projects did come from NGOs (before the 1930s) or Communist Party committees. I found that it was not

the best use of my time to look for the personal papers of individual sculptors as these are not common and do not usually contain detailed information; many, indeed, have already been published. I also decided to focus primarily on case studies due to the large number of monuments and the inconsistent nature of document retention. My library time was devoted to the art press, illustrated journals, and newspaper articles not available in the US. I found that there was more material in St. Petersburg than I anticipated, including some on imperial Russia, so I ended up making six research trips (12 working days total) from Moscow.

In imperial Russia, the main institutions with oversight over monument-building were the Ministry of the Interior (MVD), Ministry of the Court (MID), the Imperial Academy of the Arts (AKh), and elected city governments. Of most interest to me were the monuments after 1907 to political and cultural figures such as Peter I, Alexander II, Alexander III, Petr Stolypin, General Mikhail Skobelev, Lev Tolstoi, Nikolai Gogol, and Ivan Turgenev as well as those related to the Russo-Japanese War and World War I. Most of these documents are in St. Petersburg in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) and Central State Historical Archive (TsGIA SPb). At RGIA I focused on the files relevant to monument-building in the MVD (fond 1284, opis' 187), MID (fond 472, opis' 43), and AKh (fond 789, opis' 13). TsGIA SPb had files on specific monuments in the city council collection (fond 513). In Moscow, I spent about a week in the city council collection (fond 179) of the Central State Archive of Moscow (TsGAM) for monuments to Turgenev, Gogol, Skobelev, and Alexander III. Material on the 1915 Moscow city war cemetery and monument was in the State Historical Museum, and I found the minutes for the 1909 Gogol monument in fond 207 of the Manuscript Division at the Russian State Library.

I used a similar strategy for the Soviet period: governmental institutions responsible for monument construction and case studies that could be followed over time. There were so many

monuments to Lenin and World War II in the Soviet Union that I decided to focus only on Lenin monuments with significant documentation, plans for a Karl Marx monument in Moscow, and cultural figures like Gogol, Maiakovskii, and Gorkii. I also put more focus on the Russian Civil War than World War II to gain insight into Soviet war commemoration before 1945 and to have a point of comparison to non-Russian World War I monument-building in the interwar period and the Soviet cult of World War II after 1945 (both already well-studied).

The boundaries of responsibility for Soviet monuments were more fragmented and changeable over time than in the imperial period, for Soviet bureaucracies was often reorganized over the decades and the institutional competence over art affairs was often unclear. In the early Soviet period, there was no overarching institution or even procedure for the construction of monuments. In the mid-1930s, the government created a central institution, the Committee for Art Affairs of the Council of People's Commissars (*Komitet po delam iskusstv pri SNK SSSR*), that was supposed to approve and coordinate the construction of any major public monument, and after World War II, the Ministry of Culture took over this responsibility. This structure was replicated on the republic and local levels, whose administrators, however, were often unsure of their duties and responsibilities vis-à-vis monument construction. I also spent a lot of time in the collections of the artist unions from the late 1930s to the 1970s, especially with the many transcripts of meetings related to monument construction and commemorative celebrations. This material gave me insight into the personal and professional views of artists, sculptors, and government functionaries regarding contemporaneous monument policy as well as ideas about monuments from earlier periods. No other scholar seems to have made use of these materials.

My strategy was to focus on the central government documents contained in GARF and RGALI, to access republican-level material for the Russian Federation in GARF, and to use

Leningrad as an example of local institutions, primarily through TsGALI SPb. Most of the material for the USSR was, as expected, in the collections of GARF: the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (fond 1235), Central Executive Committee (fond 3316), and Soviet of Ministers (fond 5446). RGALI had many important collections, including the documents of the Committee for Art Affairs of the Council of People's Commissars (fond 962), Ministry of Culture (fond 2329), Union of Architects (fond 674), Union of Artists (fond 2082), and Moscow Organization of the Union of Artists (fond 2943). In RGASPI I read the files of the propaganda and agitation section of the Soviet Communist Party (fond 17, opisi 60, 125, 132). The Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE) had material that overlapped with others, so I devoted my time elsewhere. I spent a lot of time researching the formation and execution of monument policy on the republican level in GARF's collections of the RSFSR Soviet of Ministers (fond 259), RSFSR Ministry of Culture (fond 501), All-Russian Society for Historic Preservation (fond 639), and RSFSR Ministry of Education (fond 2306). My focus in TsGALI was on the Leningrad Organization of the Union of Artists (fond 78), Board of Cultural Affairs for the Leningrad city council (fond 105), and Leningrad Organization of the Union of Architects (fond 341).

I can give a detailed accounting of six months' activity from my Excel log, photographs, and photocopies: 705 individual files across all the archives visited, 27.7 gigabytes of archival documents and downloaded periodicals, and six full-sized A4 notebooks with indexes, notes on content, and handwritten copies of quotations from non-photographed documents.

Important Research Findings

My research findings served to support hypotheses that I developed before the grant but also suggested important new ideas and directions. As expected, I learned many, many more

specific details about the aesthetics and politics of monuments in twentieth-century Russia. But while I had a good notion about the general contours of my topic for the period before 1945, I had little idea about the monument culture of the postwar Soviet Union. The 1950s and 1960s, I now see, were a critical time in the formation of Soviet Russian culture, a period more important for the post-Soviet culture of the Russian Federation than the Revolution or the 1930s. I also revised my conception of the theory and chronology of Soviet monument culture. This section includes a description of three of my broadest conceptual findings.

First, my research shows that monument-building in Russia was not monolithic but consisted of several memorial cultures that sometimes coexisted in space and over time. These were not “scenarios of power” that followed one after another in succession, as Richard Wortman explored in his classic study of imperial Russian royal iconography, but institutions, practices, and ideas that in some cases were destroyed as regimes changed but in other cases were maintained for long periods of time. Soviet culture, for example, at times reflected aspects inherited or adopted from imperial Russian or émigré memorialization, especially those related to military conflicts such as the Russo-Japanese War. The cult of Lenin, to give another example, was not part of the initial revolutionary memorial culture (1917-1922) but an invention of the early period (1922-1953) that continued and was reinterpreted into the post-1953 monument culture (1953-1991), only to fall away with the end of the Soviet Union and to reemerge weakly in recent years under different circumstances. In other words, twentieth-century memorial cultures were not always as discrete as labels for them imply, and the sharp breaks that we often attribute to the revolution and the Stalinist period were, in this area, not so sharp.

The definition and public presentation of the cultural hero, for example, is a core aspect of Russian monument culture that emerged during the imperial period but continued almost

uninterrupted into the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. In imperial Russia, the aesthetics and practicalities of monument construction were politically contentious as strong traditions coexisted uneasily: an official memorial culture with a monarchical and dynastic ethos, a civic one that represented the values of the Russian intelligentsia and democratic citizenship, and, at the very end, a military-patriotic one that mobilized ordinary people to support the state independently of the monarch. The cultural hero, usually a writer, composer, or artist, was a component of the civic memorial culture as cities and non-governmental organization proposed monuments to Gogol, Pushkin, Lev Tolstoi, Turgenev, and other cultural heroes to signify civic virtue and democratic activism through education to the urban and national populace. The imperial establishment, in the person of the emperor and through the institution of the Ministry of the Interior, held power over public space and rejected any monument deemed politically inappropriate (examples include Tolstoi in Moscow and Chopin in Warsaw). Although the memorial system of the imperial state vanished during the Revolution, monuments to cultural heroes of the Russian intelligentsia, including previously forbidden ones, emerged in great numbers between 1917 and 1920. The Soviet state maintained the importance of the Russian cultural hero by building monuments to old ones (Gogol, Pushkin) and creating new ones (Maiakovskii, Gorkii) interpreted through a Soviet aesthetic and political prism.

Second, and following this idea of multiple memorial cultures, the early Soviet period can be understood as a “Bolshevik” culture with the later period as a “Soviet Russian” culture that differed not just in degree but in kind. Before my research, I had a concrete understanding of the imperial, émigré, and revolutionary memorial cultures as discrete environments, but my view of the Soviet period was divided into two chronological periods that revolved around 1945, “early Soviet” and “late Soviet.”

I now discern a Bolshevik period after 1922 characterized by:

- A relative disinterest in the importance of conventional figurative public monuments
- The valorization of Bolshevik and revolutionary heroes as subject matter
- An assumed audience of Communists and revolutionaries rather than ordinary people
- The use of monuments as a demonstration of power in public space
- A preference for top-down monument planning and production
- A lack of system in the practicalities and aesthetics of monument construction

The Soviet Russian period after 1953, by contrast, brought:

- Great public investment in the production of conventional figurative monuments
- Attempts to include the people and the nation as audience and subject of monuments
- More tolerance of bottoms-up initiative and public input
- Better-organized oversight and planning of monuments (although the scarcity economy never supported the level of production that local and central governments desired)
- Innovation in monument design, including the use of architectural memorial complexes and the application of modernist and contemporary design in sculpture

I therefore view the Soviet memorial culture not as one consistent tradition but an amalgamation of different traditions and practices that evolved with political, economic, and cultural changes, especially the growth of a large-scale industrialized urbanized society after World War II.

The difference between the Bolshevik and Soviet Russian memorial cultures can be illustrated with case studies. The status of war monuments serves as one example. The Bolsheviks did not allow the public memorialization of war dead to provide consolation for millions who had lost loved ones or to mobilize the population around some national political goal, not even for their own victory in the Civil War. War memorials, common in Europe and

United States in the 1920s and 1930s, were considered a manifestation of bourgeois militarism and thus could not exist in the USSR (figure 1). In the Bolshevik memorial culture, Civil War monuments represented Party heroes and military leaders, not ordinary soldiers, and valorized the revolutionary leadership of the Bolshevik Party, not the suffering of the people (figure 2). Yet memorials to World War II as expressions of national state legitimacy and popular suffering became a central part of later Soviet Russian patriotism. A shift in the image of Lenin also shows the new importance of the people. Lenin was the lofty and powerful leader of the revolution in the Bolshevik monument culture (figure 3), but sculptors often crafted a more intimate, ordinary Lenin for monuments in the later Soviet period (figure 4). These examples and others show that Soviet culture shifted from that of an international revolutionary state to a more conventional nation-state not so much in the 1930s (as often asserted) but in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Third, Soviet monument culture diverged significantly from the Western experience. In the imperial and revolutionary periods before the consolidation of the Bolshevik state, Russian monument culture broadly followed the period of “statuomania” in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, a product of the expansion of urban space, bureaucratic power, and mass culture and politics that characterized the growth of territorial states. The canonization of cultural heroes, democratization of war memorialization, and criticism of conventional public monuments by art elites and modernist artists and critics all existed in imperial Russia as in other countries. Debates about monument construction, national history, and aesthetics took place in the sphere of the mass media and public institutions. The Bolshevik ethos, however, rejected most of these practices (and even the concept of the traditional monument itself) as nationalist, capitalist, and bourgeois, and the country did not follow many of the trends that were taking place in other states and in the emigration in the interwar period. Discussions and controversies

took place in closed meetings of competition juries and professional organizations such as the Union of Architects. After 1953, the difference between East and West remained but, ironically, inverted. Leaders after Stalin supported public memorials to forge social solidarity with the general population just as traditional monuments began to lose their aura in the West. The “death of the monument” and the emergence of modernist public art in Europe and the US took place at the same time as the traditional monument was reborn in the East, a consequence of the creation of a Soviet Russian patriotic culture amidst the cultural battles of the Cold War.

Conclusion, Policy Implications, and Recommendations

Modern Soviet Russian patriotism took shape in the post-Stalin decades, a historical development that helps us understand current cultural politics in Russia. Post-Soviet Russian memorial culture, at least from the point of view of monument policy, is the successor to the Soviet patriotism that emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s. Attempts in the 1990s to align Russian public art with the West through de-Sovietization of subject matter and aesthetics was only partially successful. The central government since 2000 has embraced Soviet Russian patriotism, especially its military-patriotic components related to the Second World War, a policy that testifies to the continued acceptance of Soviet Russian patriotism by the population. Russian patriotism today, in my terminology, remains largely Soviet Russian shorn of its Bolshevik aspects, just as the revolutionary period consisted of the imperial Russian memorial culture shorn of its monarchical aspects. The government and citizens still value the public memorialization of cultural and political figures, the canon of Russian cultural heroes developed over a century remains unassailable, and abstract or modernist public art is mostly rejected in favor of conventional figurative representation and Soviet-style memorial complexes.

In conclusion, the Russian government and people take their monuments seriously as an integral part of Russian patriotic culture and will likely continue to do so in the future. My policy recommendations reflect this judgement that monuments remain meaningful to Russian people:

- The Russian government uses monument controversies in third countries to bolster its legitimacy at home. Encourage allies in former Warsaw Pact states, Ukraine, and the Baltics to be sensitive about relocating monuments and to prosecute vandals.
- Maintain and repair existing monuments and memorials devoted to Russian- or Soviet-American cooperation or Russian emigres in the US and publicize those efforts.
- Ensure that any US monuments dedicated to World War II contain accurate references to the sacrifice of Soviet and Russian allies (where appropriate) and publicize those efforts.
- Support a politically-sensitive cultural exchange in areas of cultural history, art, and art history for academics and art administrators. If the current state of Russian-American relations makes that difficult, support Russian scholars who have immigrated to the US.

Co-Curricular Activity

During my grant period, I completed one article in English using research based on my archival and library work: “Neither here nor there: War memorial landscape in imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Russian emigration, 1914-1939” for a forthcoming volume entitled *Landscapes of the Great War*. I also gave two public lectures, one in Moscow and one in

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, and I revised both in Russian for forthcoming publications:

“Amerika posle Rossiisko-amerikanskoi kompanii: Znachenie Kalifornii i Aliaski” for the newsletter *Amerikanskii ezhegodnik* (online) and “Znachenie Kalifornii v russko-amerikanskikh otnosheniakh: Istoricheskii obzor” for the volume *Krashennikovskie chteniia*. In

Petropavlovsk, I gave an interview on Russian-American relations to the local television station.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/Presentations and Publications

I am confident that I have gathered the most important material for my project and do not need to return to Russia for further research. Huge numbers of documents still exist in Moscow for the 1960-1990 period, especially concerning dozens of individual monuments, but I have good information on my chosen case studies. I have arranged for a short archival research trip to Ukraine this fall to research several monuments in Kiev and Odessa. I would also like to go to Moscow for a few weeks to work in RGANI once it has reopened but do not view that as critical.

I intend to turn this research into an academic monograph and will spend the next year creating a proposal and roughing out the three remaining chapters on the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. I have several academic articles planned from material gathered during my time in Moscow. One compares the construction of monuments to Peter I in St. Petersburg, Tallinn, and Riga in the early twentieth century. The second article is entitled “From Bourgeois Militarism to Soviet Patriotism: The Transition to War Monuments in the Soviet Union, 1917-1967.” I will present it at this year’s ASEES conference and then revise for submission for peer review to a leading Russian history journal. In August 2017 I will also present a paper “Memorial culture and the limits of iconoclasm: The fate of tsarist monuments in revolutionary Russia and the early Soviet Union, 1917-1927” at the Royal Geographical Society (London) annual conference.

Figures

Figure 1: Report on a French

World War I monument, *Ogonek*,

August 31, 1932, p. 7.



Caption:

Heralding a new bloodbath. The French bourgeois is doing all that is possible to raise the patriotic spirit of the population. Parades, maneuvers, the dedication of monuments to the victims of the war, and so on follow one after the other. Just recently a grand ceremony of the highest order was conducted at the grave of soldiers who fell at Fort Douaumont near Verdun during the World War. The deaths of the 400,000 soldiers who fell in the four years of the war at the walls of the fortress are being used by the French imperialists for the glorification of military valor. The independent “socialist” war minister Paul-Boncour gave a speech at this ceremony that could have been done by the most chauvinist general. In the photo: the memorial and cemetery at Fort Douaumont.

Analysis: War memorials in France are recognized in the Soviet press as a bourgeois tool for the mobilization of patriotism, nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. European socialist politicians are presented as “social fascists” who participate in the maintenance of the capitalist imperialist system. In France, the monument is a large ossuary surrounded by the graves of French and German soldiers; it celebrates the sacrifice of the dead for the fatherland and provides a cemetery for relatives to remember loved ones.

Figure 2: Image of the monument to Chapaev in Samara, *Ogonek*, February 23, 1933, p. 10.



Caption:

To the Fighter-Revolutionary

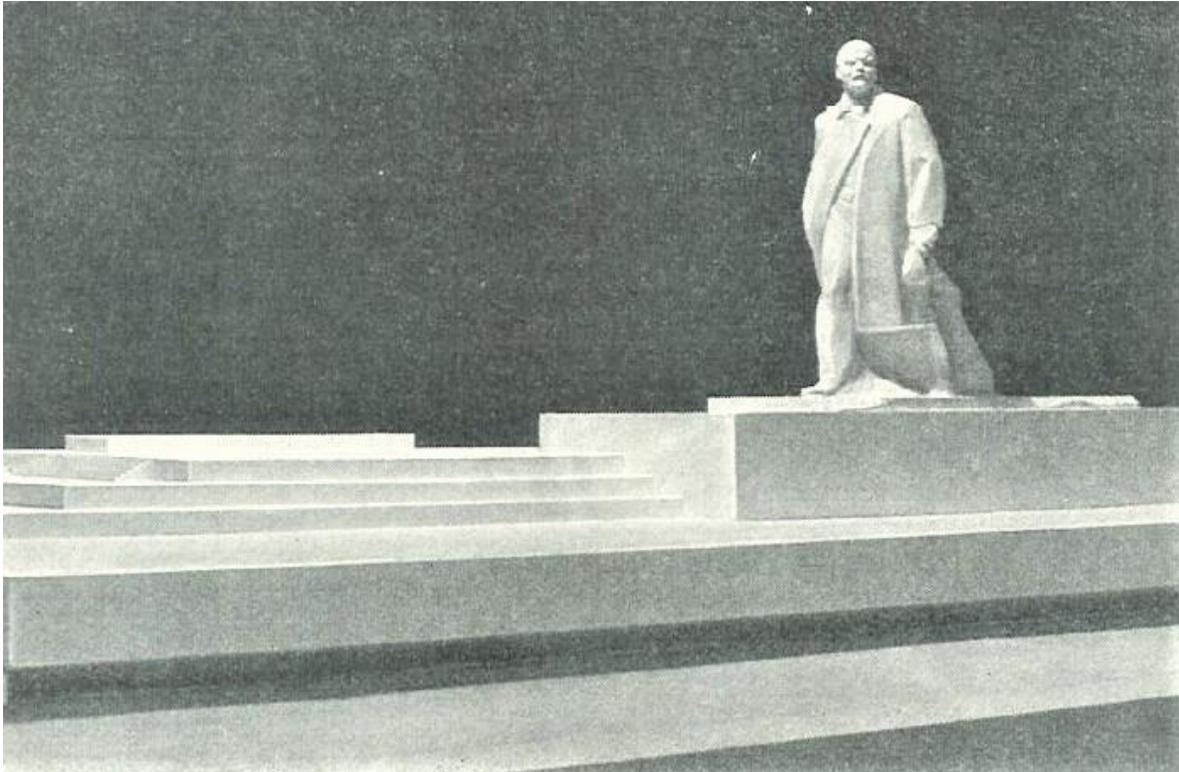
Analysis: The Russian Civil War commander Vasilii Chapaev is depicted in a manner consistent with Bolshevik memorial practice as politically-motivated hero. He is shown as leading to victory a group of Red Army soldiers who are spatially subordinate to main figure. The monument thus subsumes the Civil War to the victorious Bolshevik revolution, not the Soviet state, and Red soldiers to their political leaders. It does not serve as a site for mourning, suffering, or personal or individual contemplation to ordinary Red Army soldiers or their families.

Figure 3: Illustration for the planned Palace of the Soviets, 1950. Wikimedia commons.



Analysis: The proposal in the 1930s to put a 100-meter-tall monument to Lenin on the roof of the Palace of the Soviets (never constructed) in Moscow shows both the giganticism and the unreality of Stalinist aesthetics and the understanding of Lenin in Bolshevik memorial culture. Here Lenin is shown in the typical pose of the revolutionary leader who towers above the rest of humanity, separated and inaccessible. He also represents the godlike power of an internationalist dream: in the words of one commentator in 1940, this “monument to Lenin will be an expression of the most holy dream of humankind – Communism.” N. Atarov, *Dvoretz Sovetov* (Moscow 1940), 12.

Figure 4: Model of a proposal for the Lenin monument in Moscow. O. Pronina, “Glavnaia zadacha – narodnost’!” *Stroitel’stvo i arkhitektury Moskvy* 3 (1960): 18.



Analysis: The third attempt to build a major public sculpture of Lenin in Moscow took place in the 1960s, an era when the “people” were important as objects and consumers of monumental art. As the author of a review of the monument competition observed, “The fundamental quality of the future monument should be its popular nature (*narodnost*), for Lenin and the people (*narod*) are one indivisible whole.” (Pronina, 15). This proposal was typical of the entrants in that it presented Lenin, although much larger than life size, on the same level as passers-by, surrounded by an architectural space that was both expansive and provided access, through stairs and platforms, to the main figure. Lenin himself is depicted not in the revolutionary leadership pose standing above all other people but more prosaically as an ordinary, if resolute and powerful, pedestrian.