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Diplomats, England Fans Honor Battle of Stalingrad Dead

By Reuters

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Gleb Garanich / Reuters

England football fans and a top British diplomat paid tribute to those who died in the Battle of Stalingrad during World War II on Monday in a moving ceremony ahead of England's match against Tunisia, a gesture London hopes may help salve battered ties.

Monday's game, England's first of the World Cup, is being held in Volgograd, which until 1961 was called Stalingrad and was the location of the bloodiest battle of World War II when the Soviet Red Army, at a cost of over 1 million casualties, broke the back of advancing German forces.

England begin their World Cup campaign at a time when relations between Moscow and London are at a post-Cold War low with the two countries at odds over Ukraine, Syria and the poisoning of a former Russian spy in England with a military grade nerve agent in March.

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Deputy British Ambassador to Russia Lindsay Skoll laid one of three wreaths at a memorial complex to the city's defenders, located on a hill above the city's football stadium which is dominated by a hulking statue of a woman wielding a giant sword called the Motherland Calls."

Given the immense suffering of Volgograd and the pivotal part it played in the route towards (World War Two) victory I think it's only fitting that the 2018 World Cup should have Volgograd as one of its host cities," said Skoll, who spoke after a Russian military honor guard marched past giant wall banners bearing the names of Stalingrad's defenders.

"What this demonstrates more than anything is that the enduring nature of the relationship between the UK and Volgograd outweighs any political ups and downs in our relationship."

Sacred Ground

The British gesture, in a building known as the Hall of Military Glory which houses a statue of a hand holding a torch in which an eternal flame burns, is likely to be well received in Russia where the battle site is regarded as sacred ground.

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Etched into the hall's walls is the slogan: "Yes, we were mere mortals, and only a few of us survived, but we all fulfilled our patriotic duty to the sacred Motherland."

The Russian city, which sits on the River Volga close to where England will be playing, is twinned with the English city of Coventry which also suffered heavy bombing during World War II. The late Queen Mother was an honorary citizen of Volgograd in recognition of her post-war relief work for its citizens.

Greg Clarke, chairman of the English Football Association, also laid a wreath on Monday as did an English fan, Billy Grant.

"I was very nervous," to come to Russia, Grant, a black Englishman, told reporters, referring to stories in the British media about racism in Russia. "But from the first day I walked out people have just said to me 'we are your friend' and 'thank you for coming to Russia.'"

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