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The Great War in Russian Memory

Abstract. *The Great War in Russian Memory*, highly academic cultural history book that was published by Indiana University Press in 2011 (p.385). The author needed over the nine years to write this book and answer the question: which role has the Great war in the Russian collective memory and how it manifests. This research takes the questions of cultural history, gender history, propaganda and representations of war in the Soviet Union. Professional usability of this book enhances bibliography and a detailed register of the names and terms. Written with readable style, I highly recommend *The Great War in Russian Memory* to a wider circle of readers. The book should be translated into as many languages because it brilliantly completes our knowledge of Russia during the World War I and, later, the knowledge about everyday life in the Soviet Union.

Keywords: History, Book review, Cultural History, Gender History, Propaganda, Representations of War, Soviet Union, Great War, Everyday Life, Collective Memory.

Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory*, Indiana University Press, 2011, p.408.

Karen Petrone is a professor of history at the University of Kentucky. Her primary research interests are cultural history, gender history, propaganda and representations of war, especially in Russia and the Soviet Union. As author of *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin*, Petrone is also currently working on a textbook project for Oxford University Press, using primary documents to narrate Soviet history from 1939–2000. She is co-editing a book on *Everyday Life in Russia* as well.

The Great War in Russian Memory, highly academic cultural history, was published by Indiana University Press in 2011 (p.385). The author needed over the nine years to write this book and answer the question: which role has the Great war in the Russian collective memory and how it manifests.

At the beginning of *Introduction* (1–31) Petrone writes about the destruction of the The Moscow city Fraternal cemetery. The unique exception to this general destruction was a monument to Sergei Aleksandrovich Shlikhter. Author points out that "the fate of the cemetery demonstrates a dramatic contrast between the Soviet union and much of the rest of Europe" (p.4). The fact is that European countries built tens of thousands of World War I memorials between 1918 and 1939. The author brilliantly finds that "the absence of offi-

cial commemoration did not mean the absence of war memory itself" (p.6). Because of that Petrone decided to recover the Soviet discourse about the war that has hitherto remained largely outside of historical view. With the knowledge that in the Soviet Union was not a singular World War I memory, author involved remembrance of Great War in the interwar period (she notes legitimate reasons for this method, such as Stalinist repressions, power struggles in the Red army etc).

As part of the *Introduction* Petrone writes about *Transnational Contexts and Russian War Memory, Soviet Mobilization for War, Themes and Methods and Russia's War (1914–1921)*. The most important part is the third one, where author explains what kind of sources she used, which methods (literary method dominates), pointing out that there are "four key themes emerge in the contested World War I discourses in the interwar period: religion, heroic masculinity, violence, and patriotism" (p.17). As Petrone explains in the end of introduction, the book is split into two parts. First part comprises four thematic chapters that explore *four key themes*. Part 2 pinpoints how the treatment of these four themes changed over time. Actually, this division is not replicated in the formal structure of the book.

Chapter *Spirituality, the supernatural, and the Memory of World War I* (31–75) begins with the observation that there has been little study of Russian spirituality during wartime (1914–1921). With analyzing spirituality

Petrone begins from tsarist wartime propaganda. Tsarist representations of the war sometimes embraced supernatural myth and emphasized religious faith, particularly in the early period of the war. Author points out that, "as the war dragged on (...), more complex reactions to the sorrows of war could be found in the Russian press" (p.42). Although Soviet leadership tried to prove that religion was a tool of the ruling classes to keep the population in thrall, Petrone explains how many Soviet ideologues engaged religion. Mysticism and folk religion also made their way into Soviet works about World War I.

In the next chapter author examines all *Paradoxes of gender in Soviet war memory* (75–127). Readers are introduced to this topic through character of Cossack Kozma Kriuchkov. This soldier killed eleven Germans in battle while suffering no fewer than sixteen wounds. Kriuchkov is such an important person because his fame spread far and wide; Petrone claims that "Kriuchkov was an icon of Russian national masculinity and the first and most potent emblem of the death-dealing capacity of a Russian military" (p.75). Using literary method, author analyzes Wilfred Owen's poem with the goal to demonstrate the ways in which Russian gendered discourse was similar and different to that of the other European combatants. She also believes that "gender analysis is particularly appropriate to military culture because the warrior is the quintessential masculine hero" (p.79). But the fact that there were fighting women volunteers actually challenged the masculinity of men. During the Civil War, the Soviet state had actively recruited thousands of women into the Red army in support positions, but they did not organize women's combat units.

When Petrone writes about heroism during World War I, she stresses that some Russian writers, like many Europeans of that time, took seriously the notion that it was "sweet and proper to die for one's country". In the following text next question has been raised: how did the unprecedented violence of war affect the bodies and the minds of Russian and Soviet soldiers and veterans. Analyzing war posters like "Help for War Victims" (1914) or "From the Merchants of Moscow to the Soldier-Invalids" (1916) but also Soviet writers, Petrone points out that for many of these memoirists "the drawing of distinctions between the front and the rear relied on gendered language and gender distinctions" (p.125). It is needless to say that all Soviet sources criticized tsarist heroism as destructive.

Next chapter *Violence, Morality, and the Conscience of the Warrior* (127–165) sheds light both on the question of brutalization and nature of the "mythologizing" of violence that took place in the interwar period. Petrone believes that the issue of brutalization is specifically important, because "the Soviet regime was

considerably more violent toward its own citizens in "peacetime" than any other European government" (p.127). Referring to the various scholars, the author has well-observed that there is still scholarly disagreement about the extent to which Bolshevik terror stemmed from revolutionary ideology, the specific conditions of the civil War, or the overall experience of seven years of warfare. At the same time, this does not prevent from the conclusion that "the unprecedented level of violence in the Soviet union in the interwar period cannot be denied" (p.129). In a special section named *A Soviet Pacifist Alternative*, Petrone writes about Soviet paradox: despite their strong belief in the necessity of war, the Bolsheviks expanded opportunities for "conscientious objection" to military service during the civil War. Hereinafter, Petrone writes about "cruelty, depravity, and incompetence of the tsarist officers" which were typical Soviet depiction of the war (p.149).

This part of research is especially focused on *Class, Ethnicity, and Cossack Identity*. Soviet sources often blamed ethnic violence but there was also an extremely strong tendency for Soviet sources to ethnicize the violence by naming the Cossacks as its perpetrators. Judging from contemporary reports, Petrone's general idea is that "Cossacks may indeed have taken the lead in instigating particular kinds of ethnic violence, but systematic displacement of civilians and looting were carried out by a large number of both Cossack and non-Cossack army units" (p.154).

While the previous chapters have focused primarily on the themes of religion, gender and violence, fifth chapter is devoted to many aspects of national identity. *World War I and the definition of Russianness* (p.165–198) begins with a short presentation about still an active debate: was the Russian empire able to mobilize its multiethnic populations to identify with the Russian nation? The author has given her own perception of the problem: "My analysis of national identity in World War I remembrance engages various aspects of this debate, including the extent of Russian national identity during World War I, the timing of the development of a particular Russo-Soviet national identity, and continuities between tsarist and Soviet national identities" (p.167). *The Paradox of the Soviet Volunteer* (169–178) is particularly valuable part of the chapter. By quoting Soviet-era testimonies author suggests that participants in Soviet narratives had great difficulty in becoming ideal heroes because of the contradictions in Bolshevik ideology.

In this chapter Petrone gives a short explanation of causes of World War I. She unjustifiably rejects the impact of German national ambition, citing as the main causes economics – capitalism, in its advanced form

of imperialism. On the other hand, author points out that Russia was provided with cheap loans floated on the Paris Bourse from 1888 so "French bankers then forced the Russian empire into the war" (p.190).

Next chapter *Arrested history*(199–246) explores reflect on the War, i.e. when, why and how World War I discourse disappeared from Soviet public consciousness. Petrone also writes with ease about the nature of censorship, since she met Soviet censorship during the research many times, especially with the publications from the former Lenin Library, now the Russian State Library in Moscow. *Memory Case Studies*, as a part of the capter, is devoted to the Moscow Military History Museum and compiling a documentary history of the First World War. She concludes that World War I memory was an integral part of Soviet culture in the 1920s and asserts that it is unacceptable to say that World War I was a "forgotten" war in Soviet time.

Chapters 2 through 5 of this book explored four key themes (religion, heroic masculinity, violence and patriotism) through textual examples that remained constant through all Soviet editions of the same work. The first part of the chapter *Disappearance and Reappearance* (246–282) analyzes the same four themes, using textual references that editors deliberately erased from later editions of previously published works. Using this method Petrone allows us to trace specific changes in World War I discourse and the exact chronology of change. Petrone sees orthodox religion as the object of nostalgia rather than criticism.

The last chapter *Legacies of the Great War*(282–301) has three subsections. First of them, *World War I Memory – 1945 to 1991*, begins with the observation that World War II forever changed the meaning but also the name of World War I in the Soviet union as in the rest of Europe. The death of Stalin also brought a change in World War I discourse: many works that had been rejected for publication in the Stalin years reappeared again. Finally, the post-Stalin period opened up the possibility that literary works that could not pass censorship within the Soviet union could be published abroad (Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *The Red Wheel, Knot 1*, etc).

The second subchapter is a kind of a conclusion, where Petrone tries to answer the question: *What Does Soviet World War I Memory Tell Us?* The main author's message is that there was World War I remembrance in the Soviet union, but "the marginalization of World War I was

not the result of some overarching *diktat* from the top, but was instead the result of thousands of individual struggles between myriad Soviet institutions and various social actors working alone or in groups" (p.292). In order to make a circle, Petrone completes her book with the Moscow Fraternal Cemetery, which is revisited after 1998.

Notes (301–338) are an extremely important part of the book. Petrone, according to the chapters, divided it into eight parts. Historical sources and literature are presented for each chapter. This classification allows future researchers easier and faster access to historical material. It is evident that it is used both old and new scientific literature, especially those published in English and Russian language. In *Bibliography* (339–357) is presented list of used archival collections, journals and newspapers, internet sources, reference works and secondary sources. At the end of the book there is the *Index*(359–385), an alphabetical list saying where particular things are mentioned in the *book*. There is the largest number of mentioned people, the key terms and the aforementioned literary works.

Historian of European societies have long examined the memory and myth of World War I. In contrast, Soviet and Russian historians have argued that the Great War disappeared from official and public memories. One of the major goals of this book has been to demonstrate that there was World War I remembrance that developed and evolved within the Soviet union in the first decades after the war. Petrone succeeded in that. In general, Petrone's treatment of Russian history, especially treatment of Stalinist celebration culture and celebration discourse, is something new in European historiography. Of course, Karen Petrone is not the first one dealing with the history of the World War I itself, but definitely is the first to address the problem of the memory of World War I in Russia. The methodology of memory studies -- it's a universe of its own. There have been published so many journals and articles dedicated to this problem and various aspects of this topic.

Professional usability of this book enhances bibliography and a detailed register of the names and terms. Written with readable style, I highly recommend *The Great War in Russian Memory* to a wider circle of readers. The book should be translated into as many languages because it brilliantly completes our knowledge of Russia during the World War I and, later, the knowledge about everyday life in the Soviet Union. Owing to the cultural and political ties between Serbia and Russia, I strongly believe that Petrone's book should be published in Serbia.

References:

1. Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory*, Indiana University Pres.