

# H-Net Reviews

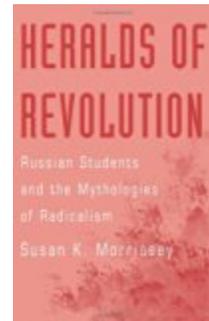
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Susan K. Morrissey. *Heralds of Revolution: Russian Students and the Mythologies of Radicalism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. viii + 288 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511544-4.

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## Heralds of Revolution

Although other new works on the revolutionary period have included students, Susan Morrissey's *Heralds of Revolution* takes a new approach in examining *studenchestvo* from the perspective of revolutionary narrative. Morrissey emphasizes the creation of a story of revolution and students' involvement in it, rather than on actual events. This invented narrative has shaped the historiography of both the student movement and the Russian revolution (p. 7). According to Morrissey, the story of consciousness began to unfold and coalesce into a tangible narrative for students in the 1890s, reached its apogee during the revolution of 1905, and then splintered. From 1905 on the story of student heroism, student destiny, and student political involvement merged increasingly with narratives from other classes and groups.

After 1905, although students continued to attempt to reconstruct a narrative and to build on the traditions of *studenchestvo*, they were never again able to shape one cohesive story of student development. Thus, Morrissey divides her work into two parts: "The Making of Revolutionary Heroes" (the development of a revolutionary *Bildungsroman*) and "The Mire of Life" (attempts by students to mold their story in the new political landscape). To reconstruct this story of consciousness, Morrissey used a variety of published sources written by and about students all across the empire as well as archival records about St. Petersburg students.

Morrissey begins by exploring the genre of the stu-

dent memoir, a tradition she claims spanned a fifty-year period of diverse experiences but within which certain "typical student experiences play an important narrative role as plot motifs" (p. 43). Although the constructed narrative most certainly was not historically accurate, the shared story held meaning for many generations of students and often influenced student actions and student cultures. In this sense, the reality of the student situation was less important than the myth of student culture. Chapter Two builds on the already developed idea of consciousness to discuss the development of the student movement (1899-1904).

Chapters One and Two are largely introduction, intended to give a solid grounding to the idea of narrative, consciousness and the story of formation (*Bildungsroman*). Chapter Three however provides new insight into how the "official" story could and did conflict with real life. "Where did the public identity of the "student" end and private life begin?" (p. 77). As with any "imagined community," *studenchestvo* embodied a diverse group of people and ideas. But, the rhetoric of student life failed to address the student as a private individual. Its value system "was based on the political sphere and the importance of heroic political feats" (p. 98).

One notable exception to the seamless story of student life was the female student (*kursistka*). Although women students joined demonstrations, marches and protests, "gender shaped their attitude toward education

and the experience of student politics” (p. 81). Women students from the beginning faced a dual loyalty: to the student movement and to higher education for women. Chapter Four, “When the Street Entered the University,” serves as a bridge to the next section of the book on the post-1905 situation, providing a short summary of the 1905-07 revolution and its impact upon student life. After 1905, with dreams of university autonomy and academic freedom, ostensibly fulfilled, students increasingly split over goals and visions at the same time that other groups enter the political arena.

Part II forms the most fascinating part of the book. These chapters deal with the reappraisal of *studenchestvo* following 1905. Although the book’s organization and cohesion benefit from the early overview chapters, these last four chapters explain why students could not form a cohesive unit after 1905 in the same way that they did prior to 1905. Chapter Five emphasizes the mixed messages of the student movement following 1905. Though students still called on earlier images of the heroic, ethical, and united *studenchestvo*, in fact the movement found itself struggling against the new post-1905 image of the student as bourgeois, drunken, disorderly and/or morally bankrupt. For students themselves, the perceived end to the old student narrative left them struggling to find meaning in their lives.

Chapter Six is devoted to the changing nature of the debate over women’s roles and women’s education. By the turn of the century most groups advocated educating women. However, the goals of education for women differed radically from those for men. Rather than educating herself for public service or for a profession, “the enlightened woman was charged with nurturing and enlightening the next generation of sons” (p. 177).

Chapter Seven takes up the idea of suicide as portrayed in the student and regular press. Morrissey convincingly argues that although students may in actual fact have committed suicide for personal, private reasons, in the politicized atmosphere of *studenchestvo*, their suicides were elevated to heroic, public acts. Poverty, moral bankruptcy, the emptiness of life after 1905, and the autocracy were alternately blamed for an epidemic of student suicides. Student suicides after 1905 continued to draw on the “heroic tradition but lacked a clear political lesson” (p. 204).

Overall, Morrissey has produced a readable, interest-

ing book, which draws on earlier works on student life and education but which differs in its focus on the myth or story of *studenchestvo* rather than on the realities of student life.[1] Her evaluation of student life through its stories, mythologies, and traditions adds insight into the revolutionary period and serves to remind historians that all too often this rhetoric, created myth, and imagined community is taken at face value without recognizing the subtle gradations between private life, public life, and the story of revolutionary development.

The only minor criticism one might make of Morrissey’s work is her reliance on St. Petersburg as the center of the student story. Morrissey made this decision as a way to limit the vast resources at her disposal. Still, one wonders if the story of student consciousness would not be even more fractured and diverse both before and after 1905 if one examined student groups outside of the center. Nonetheless, even with her self-imposed limit on archival research on students studying in St. Petersburg, she still found an overwhelming variety of sources. She used several different groups of archival sources on students, published journals and newspapers, student literary collections, memoirs, and even a sex survey given to female students. Although the work is readable and full of interesting anecdotes, it will be most useful for academics and advanced graduate students. Undergraduates will find the liberal sprinkling of foreign words and the interplay between historical events and the story of consciousness to be confusing.

#### Notes

[1]. Patrick Alston, *Education and the State in Tsarist Russia* (Stanford: 1969); Daniel Brower, *Training the Nihilists: Education and Radicalism in Russia* (Ithaca, NY: 1975); James C. McClelland, *Autocrats and Academics: Education, Culture, and Society in Tsarist Russia* (Chicago, 1979); Samuel Kassow, *Students, Professors and the State in Tsarist Russia* (Berkeley: 1989). Morrissey takes issue with several of Samuel Kassow’s points. For instance, Morrissey credits Kassow with examining the ethos of *studenchestvo* but claims that this ethos is flexible and changes with time rather than static.

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