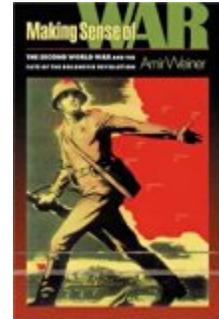


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Amir Weiner. *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. 416 S. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-05702-6.

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Amir Weiner's book presents World War II as the pivotal event in Soviet history between the formation and collapse of the USSR. It does this by looking at the experience of warfare, occupation, recapture, and postwar settlement in the Ukrainian region of Vinnytsia. In the first half of the twentieth century Vinnytsia suffered a sequence of traumas beginning with the expulsion of ethnic Germans and Jews in 1915, followed by civil war, collectivization and famine, further deportations of Germans and Poles in the mid-1930s, mass executions in 1937-38, German occupation from July 1941 to March 1944, and postwar famine in 1946-47. Among these the war deserves a special place because it created a kind of new beginning for Soviet power.

Weiner argues that the war is treated too often as a mere interlude in Soviet history between the prewar and postwar eras, or at most as a disturbance that took time to fade. "[C]ontemporaries", he argues, "could not conceive of the war as detached from the permanent, unfolding socialist revolution" (p. 8). As this revolution evolved, its:

"road [...] was punctuated by a series of traumatic events that both shaped and were shaped by the revolutionary project. Within this chain of cataclysms, the war was universally perceived as the Armageddon of the Revolution, the ultimate clash dreaded yet expected by the first generation to live in a socialist society, the event that would either vindicate or bring down the system, depending on one's views and expectations" (p. 17).

The war gave rise to a myth that defined the state more powerfully than the revolution that gave birth to it. "Juxtaposed against other heroic tales within the Bolshevik narrative of the Revolution, the war superseded

other foundational myths, such as the civil war and the collectivization of the countryside, which were increasingly viewed as distant, irrelevant, and, in some cases, too controversial because of their traumatic legacy" (p. 8). Moreover, its importance did not fade with time; instead, it was taken outside history and became timeless.

The main aim of this book, therefore, is to establish how the Soviet culture, social order, and political system were changed by the war. Before the war, social origin was the most important criterion of selection for promotion and repression. Weiner argues that one effect of the war was to downgrade the importance of social origin in favor of two other criteria for sorting people: wartime conduct, and ethnicity. He goes on to show just how complex and difficult a matter this was.

The cultural mechanism that led to personal regrading by the criterion of wartime conduct was an idea in the heads of people. The idea was that the war had healed the divisions in the nation and provided the opportunity for redemption. The people who carried this idea in their heads were the returning front-line soldiers, the *frontoviki*. Weiner shows how many people considered that their experiences of the war, and their own and others' good behavior during it, had removed the stigmas of adverse social origin and redeemed prewar sins. Their lives could begin again. This integrated the wartime experience into the process of repeated purification of Soviet society, but also changed the cleansing process by making social origin redeemable. On the other hand, those who behaved badly in the war were not redeemable. Weiner shows that, as a result, the postwar era began with a new secret party purge amid the shattered ruins of the Ukraine and this purge took precedence over

other the pressing tasks of reconstruction.

A more complex mechanism led to personal regrading by ethnicity. Before the war the Soviet state had encouraged, in the Ukraine as elsewhere, a policy of promoting ethnic particularism within a universalist concept of Soviet multinational statehood. Hitler's war of annihilation, and German policies of occupation and ethnic cleansing, made Soviet citizens, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles and Germans, Slavs and Jews, sharply aware of where they stood in relation to the cutting edge of Nazi racial distinctions. Stalin sharpened his own cutting edge. In the first days of the war he had the Red Army stripped of ethnic Germans. Later he ordered the internal exile of the Volga Germans and some of the Caucasian nationalities that he suspected of collaborationism. Weiner argues that after the war the authorities universalized the suffering that resulted, denying that there was any ethnic hierarchy of martyrdom or any special place in it for the Jews. At the same time they encouraged an ethnic grading of contributions to victory, emphasizing the role of the Russians and Ukrainians; this encouraged a popular anti-Semitism that was pervasive and sometimes brutally overt but not genocidal. It also paved the way for the anti-Semitic themes of Zhdanov's nationalism and the later allegations against Stalin's doctors.

Ukrainian nationalism was also changed by the war. Just as Soviet institutions were partly ethnicized, Ukrainian nationalism was Sovietized. Weiner shows that those who dreamed of a sovereign land free of Russians, Poles, and Jews found the soil of postwar Ukraine to be infertile. Having found from experience that Hitler was worse than Stalin, many of their countrymen and women determined to stick with the devil they knew. Young people and the returning *frontoviki* exerted important influences in this direction. As a result Ukrainian nationalism did not go away, but it was able to persist compatibly with a state that mercilessly exterminated the

guerrilla bands of the dreamers and at the same time celebrated the unification of the Ukraine's ancestral lands.

The evidence basis of the book is exhaustive. It ranges from Stalin's speeches to archives in Moscow, Kiev, Vinnytsia, Washington, Stanford, Toronto, and Jerusalem, via a mass of newspapers, memoirs, fictional literature, and secondary scholarship. The outcome is a book for specialists. To get full value you will need to start with a good bit of knowledge about Russian and Ukrainian history and literature in general terms.

You may also need patience. I found this a difficult book to read for two reasons. One is that it forced me to rethink some of my ideas, which was good. A less good reason was that Weiner's prose is sometimes obscure. It takes a little effort to sort the many startling and original discoveries, including many not listed in this short review, from the hand-waving. The reader does not get much help with signposting from chapter headings like "Memories of Excision, Excisionary Memory." The themes of the book are clear enough in an overall sense, but it is rarely obvious what particular question is being answered at any given moment. Sometimes the accumulation of detail threatens to overwhelm.

In the end the determined reader will be amply rewarded with valuable new insight into the changed nature of the Soviet postwar world. Weiner's book may also be much appreciated by scholars interested in comparative transitions from war to peace in 1945.

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