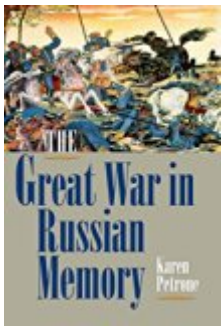
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Petrone. *The Great War in Russian Memory.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 385 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-35617-8.



Reviewed by Mark Smith

Published on H-Memory (July, 2012)

Commissioned by Catherine Baker (University of Hull)

If World War I was the founding event of the twentieth century in Great Britain, France, and Germany, it seemed to lack such a fundamental influence in the history of Russia and the Soviet Union. There, the Great War was only one episode in more than four decades of extreme violence--of war, terrorism, and state killing--that ran from the turn of the century to 1945, perhaps even to 1953. Russia's World War I was, moreover, a shorter war than elsewhere, marked by chaos and desertions, and effectively ended as a full-scale international conflict by the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917. Yet that very revolution, which so profoundly shaped not just Russia's but the world's twentieth century, was unimaginable without the particular circumstances of World War I. Some of the most favored methods of the Bolshevik dictatorship--the ruthless cataloguing of the population, the brutalization of society, the coercive regulation of the economy--also took place between 1914 and 1916, as such historians as Peter Gatrell (*A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* [1999]), Peter Holquist (*Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* [2002]), and Joshua Sanborn (*Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics* [2003]) have shown. The war, it can be argued, shaped the subsequent regime. With her scholarly new book, Karen Petrone also seeks to rescue Russia's World War I from the condescension of posterity, by explaining cultural representations and the problem of memory.

This is not an easy task: it was a difficult war for the Soviet regime to remember. The Great War seemed to bear an uncomfortable relationship with Bolshevik dogma. It was an imperialist war. Easier to remember was the civil war, an emphatically class conflict. It was also more straightforward for the Bolsheviks to invite people to remember the strains of internationalism and pacifism, rather than the fighting, that marked Russia's experience between 1914 and 1917. And yet Petrone has set for herself the problem of investigating how memory of the war as a whole was formed in Soviet public culture, principally in the

period through to 1941. Although her focus is sometimes narrow and specific--she spends many pages analyzing a single novel, for example, before returning to that same text again at other stages of her argument--the approach as a whole is original and effective.

As Petrone explains in the introduction, and again later in her text, the book is split into two parts. Strangely, this division is not replicated in the contents page or in the formal structure of the book--there is no "part 1" and "part 2"--which would further have clarified an already well-designed structure. (Aside from this, which might or might not be an oversight, the production values of this attractive book are high.) The first four chapters are thematic. In the first, Petrone shows how religious and spiritual responses to the war were appropriated and modified--and precisely not eliminated--by the Soviet regime. The next chapter is a discussion of gender. It foregrounds the variety of ways that Soviet public culture reconceptualized masculinity in the context of First World War memory. Next, Petrone considers how violence and killing were described and explained after the event. She includes motifs of pacifism. In the final thematic chapter, she turns to Russian nationhood and argues that the development of national feeling during the war and the memory thereafter were important elements in the escalation of Russian national rhetoric later in the 1930s.

The second part of the book contains two chapters. These focus more explicitly on the ways that particular institutions and texts caused memory to change over time. First, she considers five case studies, discussing the impact of the Moscow Military History Museum; the compilation of a documentary history of World War I; the treatment and memory of Aleksei Brusilov (a leading general of the Imperial Army who went on to fight for the Reds); the reception of Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel ***All Quiet on the Western Front***; and the twentieth anniversary commemoration of 1914. Second, she examines different editions of the same texts: the creep of new excisions throws light on the changing attitude of the censorship authorities and hence the particularities of the public culture of war commemoration (or "Soviet discourse of World War I").

It is in the second part of the book that the argument assumes greatest coherence and is most specifically historicized; the first part of the book, while demonstrating scholarship of a high order, is in places more descriptive. Although she discusses the post-1941 period near the end of the book, Petrone's main aim is to elucidate what World War I meant in Russian culture in the interwar period, which is perhaps a less ambitious target than the title, ***The Great War in Russian Memory***, implies. And this is a book about memory within the public sphere rather than memory per se. There is perhaps a final point. Accepting Petrone's judgments requires the acceptance of her approach. "Discourse" is a common word throughout the book, and this is emphatically a discourse analysis, albeit a historicized one. As such it privileges a limited selection of sources; it does not collect the greatest range of sources that is practical. Not only could different genres of sources have been included--Petrone might have sought out a representative selection of veterans' or widows' letters to authorities, for example, which could have shown a dialogue between personal memories and publicly constructed rhetoric--but she also might, presumably, have selected a different tranche of literary sources. Would a different selection of sources have told a different story? Perhaps. And in the future they might. But Petrone's achievement in this important book is to have set a convincing benchmark for a discussion that will run for many years.

more

C

W

might

s

W

W

of this

,

,

,

,

e

very

n

the

[1]. Peter Gatrell, ***A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Peter Holquist, ***Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921*** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Joshua Sanborn, ***Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics*** (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).