Everyday Violence and Survival in German-Occupied Smolensk

Kerch, Leningrad, Stalingrad, Smolensk—these are four cities in the former Soviet Union that are known as goroda geroi (hero cities). The honorary title was assigned to a total of twelve cities to commemorate their history of occupation under the German regime, 1941-44. Together with Murmansk, Smolensk was the last city to receive the title in May 1985, thus joining the ranks of sites central for the official Soviet war memory that focused on victory and heroism of the Soviet people against terror and exploitation by the Nazi regime. The experience of Soviet citizens who were caught under conditions of occupation, however, remains elusive, even after a number of publications on the Leningrad Siege, the mass murder of Soviet Jews, and Soviet soldiers’ battles against both fascism and dismal fighting conditions.[1] Laurie R. Cohen’s account is thus a welcome addition to the study of Soviet life during World War II and its aftermath.

Smolensk occupies a central place in Russian and Soviet historiography and cultural imagination. The site of one of the largest battles during Napoleon’s Russian campaign during which more than thirty thousand soldiers fell, the city and its population were immortalized in Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace (1869), an expected read for Russians who thus in many ways identify with the city and its history of invasion, resistance, and resurrection. World War II continued this history, when German troops captured the city in July 1941 and fought off Soviet counteroffensives until the city’s liberation in September 1943. However, the continuous battles between Soviet troops and German-occupying forces around Smolensk enabled the defense of Moscow, the Soviet capital, by slowing down the encroaching army. Historically, the capture of Smolensk often preceded the capture of the capital, thus the site was of crucial military importance, for German armies as for previous invaders. Cohen’s work helps us to understand how such strategic military significance impacts the life of an urban population.

Smolensk under the Nazis provides what the author calls a “micro-history” of the occupation, illuminating primarily civilians’ experience in an occupied city. Placing her work in the field of everyday history (a concept developed by German scholars, who called it “Alltagsgeschichte”), Cohen attempts to account for how people lived under foreign rule; how they adapted to the new governing structures; how they dwelled, ate, or worked; and how they related to one another. The book is structured in four parts: “Methodologies,” “Record of the War and Occupation,” “Popular Attitudes, Propaganda, and Enemy Imagery,” and “Restoration and Reconstruction,” each of which, the introduction suggests, can be read separately and out of order. But with a scope of one to four chapters, the parts are somewhat uneven, and as frequent cross-references to preceding or subsequent chapters indicate, there is some repetition and discontinuity that some readers may find challenging.

Cohen utilizes an impressive array of sources, including oral history interviews that she conducted in
2000, recorded interviews conducted within the Harvard Refugee Interview Project in the 1950s, newspapers, diaries, and memoirs, as well as materials culled from German, Soviet, American, French, and Austrian archives. Drawing on perspectives of civilians, along with military and administrative personnel, the book offers rich insights into how an urban population of originally 150,000 responded to bombardment, military invasion, and ongoing destruction. More than 90 percent of the city was destroyed. Thousands of residents were deported for forced labor in Germany proper or labor camps, while many others were raped as an act of war. Over two thousand Jews and a small population of Roma were segregated and killed. Interview sources used in the book show how various Soviet citizens dealt with the newly established rule. The reader understands that official Soviet war memory often neglected behaviors that contradicted expectations toward ideal Soviet citizens. For instance, both German occupants and some Soviet citizens took possession of property left behind by Jews as they moved to the ghetto or were killed. The military invasion, including air raids and artillery shelling, of course destroyed many buildings and sites of the city. Urban historians looking for more details on how Smolensk as a city, or landscape, was affected by the occupation may be disappointed, as the volume does not provide such a perspective.

In line with her initial discussion of methodological specificities of writing everyday history, Cohen details the potential and the challenges of working with personal accounts. Notably, her discussion of “work” during the occupation highlights the care scholars ought to bring to historical sources. When narrators claim that “nobody worked” under the German-occupation regime, they may try to conform to Soviet-era rules of communication where the speaker’s admission to have worked during the occupation may have produced a charge of treason (p. 78).

In this vein, chapter 8 is most interesting as Cohen provides a close reading of oral accounts to extrapolate about how distinct groups were perceived, and perceived each other, during the war. Offering a stimulating example of in-depth work with oral history, Cohen detects the workings of official, state-sanctioned discourse as well as personal interpretations of group membership. The interaction between the two, she shows, produces accounts that downplay Jewish suffering. For example, using five sources, she notes how most accounts limit a discussion of Jewish suffering to align with a propagated Soviet account, while digging deeper shows that, indeed, Jews were particularly targeted by the occupation. Of course, in addition to limited exposure among the interviewees and restrictions on public discussion of the Holocaust during Soviet times, one ought to consider the fact that the murder of Soviet Jews was deeply embedded in an assault on the whole Soviet population and thus, for many, does not appear to carry special meaning.

Scholars of everyday history regularly face the danger of assembling as many sources as possible and thereby losing sight of the potentially problematic nature of some accounts, or of the overall context of individual experience. The care and critical use of oral history ought to be continued in all such sources, otherwise readers remain unaware of the author’s own perspective and analysis. Cohen, for instance, quotes from a German portrayal of the battle for Smolensk that is fraught with Cold War propaganda against “fanatic Communists” and claims that, “for the first time … the difference between fighters and non-fighters, between soldiers and civilians was lifted” (p. 56). The 1964 book by Wolf van Aaken quoted here (Hexenkessel Ostfront: Von Smolensk nach Breslau) was released in the notorious Pabel publishing house, which made much of its money by publishing and selling the so-called Landser-Hefte, cheaply produced booklets that romanticized German military fighting and continuously propagated anti-Russian sentiments. A critical comment challenging the one-sided portrayal (which also elides the brutality of German troops against Soviet civilians) rather than the attribute “thrilling” would have been in order. Similarly, Soviet peasants’ help for Smolensk Jews in the form of food deliveries for which they charged exorbitant prices deserves scrutiny. After all, moments like these illuminate how the murder of Soviet Jews not only was met with compassion but also benefited their non-Jewish compatriots.

The author’s choice to reproduce the original Russian speech when citing oral history interviews she conducted herself enables a careful engagement with oral history sources. All work with foreign-language sources might benefit from such attention. Publishers will be reluctant to allocate the necessary space, but an equally comprehensive treatment of archival sources would help overcome the gap in evaluating oral and written sources. To limit such special scrutiny to oral history interviews continues to mark them as problematic sources while official records or memoirs supposedly are not.

Overall, Smolensk under the Nazis gives vivid insights into Soviet life under the occupation by gathering sources and recent scholarship on the plight of civilian
Suffering during World War II, highlighting forced labor, the mass murder of Soviet Jews and Roma, gender and sexual violence in wartime, and the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war. Bringing these different fields together to focus on one locale, the book provides a stark reminder that war and occupation have lasting effects on personal and social relationships as well as a town’s infrastructure. In addition, Cohen offers a new perspective on a place that most North Americans associate with the murder of thirty thousand Polish officers by Soviet forces in Khatyn, a forest outside of the city, and the recent plane crash in 2012 that killed a number of Polish politicians who came to commemorate this mass execution. Knitting together many fields of study, and giving a detailed account of the occupation of Smolensk that shows connections between the past and the present, Cohen adds an important text to the study of World War II and the Soviet Union.

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