In May 1945, Joseph Stalin raised a toast to the “health of our Soviet people and, most of all, the Russian people. [The] trust of the Russian people in the Soviet government [was] the decisive force that ensured victory ... over fascism” (pp. 35-36). Joseph Stalin's toast proved to be one of the main catalysts for Jonathan Brunstedt's argument in his work, The Soviet Myth of World War II: Patriotic Memory and the Russian Question in the USSR.

Brunstedt argues that in the immediate post-World War II period after the fall of the Third Reich, there was a myriad of narratives encapsulating the memory of struggle against fascism. These narratives culminated into two primary narratives of the war. The first proved to be ethnically focused and hierarchically understood: Russocentrism. Russocentrism espoused that it was the Russian people who demonstrated “leadership of an ethnically diverse and hierarchically configured collection of nations” (pp. 31). The second narrative, known as the “pan-Soviet” narrative, “limited displays of the singular role of the Russian people and heterogenous hierarchy more generally in favor of a laterally united and Russian-speaking ‘Soviet people’” (p. 31).

The historiography on the matter of memorializing and remembering the Great Patriotic War in the former Soviet Union is both voluminous and central to understanding the argument, as shown by Brunstedt. Yuri Slezkine contended that the Soviet people were inundated with information regarding the Russian people's leadership and greatness. In National Bolshevism, David Brandenberger argues, the memory of the Great Patriotic War culminated into a war myth that preserved a Russocentric understanding of the victory over fascism. “Brandenberger affirms the link between the war’s memory and the Russian people's enduring status as the paramount Soviet nation” (pp. 20-21). Other scholars, such as Yitzhak Brudny, argue that “faced with a decline in revolutionary fervency, the [Leonid] Brezhnev led Politburo of the 1960s and 1970s made an ideological compromise, co-opting elements of the Russian nationalist intelligentsia [to] bolster the state's mobilizational capacity” (p. 21). This bonding of Russian and Soviet nationalism was disseminated through the preservation of literature, more specifically, through the preservation of “village folk writers” and journals (p. 21). There are scholars who see the myth of World War II as something that fostered a “pan-Soviet identity, one that superseded hierarchical ethnic particularism” (p. 19). Barbara Epstein is one such scholar. In The Minsk Ghetto 1941-1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism
(2008), Epstein argues, as quoted by Brunsted, that the “Great Patriotic War became the basis for a new or at least refashioned and revived Soviet identity, transcending the various ethnic groups ... composing the Soviet Union” (pp. 19-20). But Brunsted explicitly states in his work that his book is built on the scholarship of Amir Weiner. In Making Sense of the War (2000), Weiner comes into agreement with Epstein as he argues, as quoted in Brunsted, that a “cross-ethnic” understanding of the legacy of the Great Patriotic War developed the ideological terrain necessary for an “integrating theme” to take root in the Soviet Union. Of course, ethnic heroism, and the primacy placed on the Russian people during the war is not ignored by Weiner. Indeed, Weiner contends that the Soviet government indulged in a “balancing act” between Russian nationalism and the pan-Soviet narrative (p. 20). And given the primacy of the Russocentric narrative, it is precisely this “balancing act” that Brunsted hopes to explore further in his own work.

Brunstedt’s work certainly adds to the historiography. He states that his work contributes three “significant contributions” to the field. “Wartime threads,” “discursive tension,” and “the doctrine of the Soviet people” are the centerpieces for his argument and original contribution to the field. In the introduction, Brunstedt unpacks what each of these terms means in his study. Wartime threads is the claim that Russocentrism under the Stalinist regime was one of many “competing patriotic strands” of understanding the war during and after the conflict (p. 22). Discursive tension is the assertion that both Russocentrism and the pan-Soviet movement were “divergent patriotic discourses” competing for primacy within the Soviet Union (p. 27). The Soviet people doctrine reevaluated Russocentrism once destalinization commenced. “Rather than tolerate contrasting Russocentric and pan-Soviet variations on the war’s memory as Stalin had done, Khrushchew and his successors put forth the pan-Soviet myth as the sole ... expression of victory” (pp. 29-30). This was the Soviet people doctrine.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 explores the implications of Stalin’s toast to Russia to “tease out its rather inconsistent and ambiguous connection to the ... war narrative” (p. 32). Chapter 2 deals with the survival of the pan-Soviet legacy of the war despite the dominance of the Russocentrism of the Stalinist regime. Chapter 3 pursues the tensions between neo-Stalinists and those who sought to de-Stalinize the Soviet Union and promote the pan-Soviet understanding of the war. Chapter 4 centers on the efforts to “commemorate” the war, thus generating a true “war cult,” and chapter 5 examines Russian nationalists and their efforts to “Russify” the legacy of the war while at the same time “adhering to ... pan-Soviet configuration” (p. 32).

This work is an imposing intellectual force in Soviet studies. The source base is remarkable. Brunstedt, for example, uses The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia (1994) by Nina Tumarkin, one of the first studies ever published on this topic of war remembrance in the Soviet Union. “The Soviet Culture of Victory” by Mark Edele, a recent study, is also used in the conversation about Russian leadership and socialism within the Soviet Union.[1] Jochen Hellbeck’s Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin (2006), among other works, is foundational to understanding the relationship between the Soviet government and its citizens. Brunstedt consults Roberto Carmack’s Kazakhstan in World War II: Mobilization and Ethnicity in the Soviet Empire (2019) to gain a case study on the implications of “Russocentric propaganda” beyond the borders of Russia (p. 16). This work is an amalgam of social history, political history, cultural history, and, above all, a history of memory. Brunstedt follows the tension between Russocentrism and the Soviet Union into every corner of sociocultural and political space in his research. From the Politburo of the Communist Party to the
works of academia, literature, music, and architecture, this “discursive tension” Brunstedt speaks of is found in all corners of Soviet society.

This work is a towering academic achievement that puts forth imposing evidence and a convincing thesis. Brunstedt is thorough in his research, and he offers up a compelling and original argument to Soviet and Slavic studies, particularly with his contention regarding the divergent nature of the two ideologies in question. This work is recommended to specialists in Soviet and Eastern European studies. And given the, as Tu‐markin noted in one of the book's cover blurbs, “timely” nature of this work, it would not at all be surprising to see this caliber of work come to the forefront of many academic communities as geopolitical questions begin to surface in parts of the former Soviet Union.

Note


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