

Aleksandra Nedopekina

Vladislav Aksenov. *Voina patriotizmov: Propaganda i massovye nastroyeniya v Rossii perioda krusheniya imperii*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2023. 486 pp. ISBN 9785444819388.

*Aleksandra Nedopekina, Department of History, HSE University, Russia.
avnedopekina@edu.hse.ru.*

Vladislav Aksenov's book whose title translates as *The War of Patriotisms: Propaganda and Mass Moods in Russia during the Collapse of the Empire* was published in 2023. This book was released in the popular science series *What Is Russia? (Chto takoe Rossiia?)* by Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie publishing house. Although this work is partly an adaptation of the author's large monograph (Aksenov 2020) for a wider audience, the central theme of the 2023 book is narrower. Aksenov defines it as a combination of the history of ideas, images, and symbols, and the history of emotions to examine the phenomenon of patriotism in the Russian Empire from the early nineteenth century to 1917. Moreover, the psychological side of patriotic discourses and practices receives here central attention.

It is worth mentioning that this is a popular science book. Literature of this kind is not easy either for an author and editor or for a reviewer. The format requires simplifications and generalizations; thus, popular science literature needs to be evaluated on different criteria than conventional forms of academic writing. The popular language of a book, on the one hand, makes reading more exciting and easier, but on the other hand, it creates unexpected difficulties. For example, here the reader will not find the usual references to historiography; the only way to determine with which research field the author is in dialogue is to look at the list of books in the "Brief Bibliography" section. Besides, the editorial choices regarding citing sources raise many questions. According to Aksenov, the text omits references to repeated sources and archival materials that are difficult for readers to access (p. 10). Due to this approach, some of the numerous quotes are without attribution. Nevertheless, given the author's specific research and creative goal, I believe it is possible and necessary to give Aksenov's conceptual apparatus a closer look. In my opinion, the author's understanding of the early twentieth century as the time of the masses' entry into the arena of history and his focus on the social psychology of a crowd largely determine the strengths and weaknesses of this work.

The book presents a genealogy of patriotic topics from their emergence to their transformation into weapons to identify one's friends and enemies early in the twentieth century. Aksenov extends the original chronological scope of his 2020 study to include the nineteenth century. He argues that during this time a repertoire of patriotic themes, or, as Aksenov calls them, "patriotisms," emerged in the Russian Empire—war, relations between government and society, individual and collective, internal and external enemies, appropriate forms of political behavior, and so on. These patriotisms, in addition to a "rational" (conscious) component, carried a stronger "irrational" (unconscious or emotional) one. This distinction was inspired by social psychology, a direction that has been developing since the late nineteenth century (Aksenov 2020:6,

38). The author presents the “irrational” component of patriotism as a more important and fruitful research focus since ideas, strategies of political actors, or objective data on their own cannot explain the transition from opinion to action. It is especially difficult to trace these connections at the level of large collectives or masses, “in whose behavior spontaneous factors play a major role” (Aksenov 2020:6–7).

Patriotisms in this study act as modes of comprehending reality, self-identification, and public activity. Their diversity allowed different actors and groups to find adequate forms for expressing emotions. In periods of social cataclysms and transformations, the carriers of different patriotisms were increasingly unwilling to take steps toward mutual understanding and to smooth out the rough edges of their ideas and actions. During the Russian Revolution of 1905, the First World War, the events of 1917 and after it, mass moods gravitated toward the more radical and “irrational”: people increasingly lost their temper and preferred action to ideological discussion. Meanwhile, at any given time during the period under consideration in the book, there existed a full range of emotions and feelings, among which it was possible to identify the dominant ones (p. 394). The book is based on very diverse sources: personal correspondence, diaries, memoirs, newspapers, historical and philosophical writings, fiction, songs, and criminal cases. With their help, the author assembles a mosaic of numerous emotional reactions to events, intending to reconstruct the overall mass sentiments.

The book consists of a preface, prologue, five chapters, epilogue, and afterword. The prologue is almost a hundred pages long and presents the main patriotic discourses that developed during the nineteenth century. They are differentiated on the bases of both ideas and emotional characteristics. These patriotisms are distinguished by the category—the state, the supreme power, society, the people, the nation—with which they associated the “motherland” and by what relationship they constructed between the past and the future of their referent community (pp. 23, 103). In the same way, different groups of patriots united around different views regarding which emotions could be felt toward the motherland (pp. 63–64). Furthermore, the debates among patriots of this period largely determined the basic themes and issues that were reactualized in the turmoil of the early twentieth century.

Chapter 1 covers the period from the early years of the twentieth century to the outbreak of the First World War. This time is characterized by a growing collective nervousness about the rapid scientific and technological development, urbanization, and potential military confrontations. Rumors, images from fiction, and various futuristic and eschatological predictions—spread through literature and, most importantly, popular press—created a vicious circle, resulting in a proliferation of emotions (p. 109). Thus, “the growing anxiety before the war itself increased the probability of its outbreak as if contributing to the self-fulfillment of the prediction” (pp. 161–162).

The second chapter describes the events of the summer of 1914, before and after the beginning of the First World War. The focus is on worker protests in Russia’s industrial centers and on the countries and alliances involved in the coming military conflict. Observers and participants in public discussions made sense of the rapidly unfolding events by drawing on patriotic discourses to make sense of the extraordinary circumstances they found themselves in with the onset of the war (p. 195). At the

extremes of the ideological-emotional spectrum were high enthusiasm for and extreme fear of war and mobilization (p. 190). The "overproduction" of patriotic images and mass psychological agitation affected the mental health of many people (p. 196), which contributed to the growth of aggressive and chauvinistic sentiments (p. 228).

The third chapter focuses on military propaganda, which mobilized the power of the printed word and visual images to justify military conflict, even in eschatological terms. Thus, cultivating hate for the enemy was supposed to remove "the internal psychological barriers preventing soldiers from shooting the enemy" (p. 246). At the same time, the constructed images of heroes fueled "patriotic euphoria" (p. 266).

Chapter 4, with the telling title "Patriotic Deviations", examines spy mania, denunciations, search for internal enemies, looting and violence by the Russian army, and impersonations of the members of the royal family and other public figures as manifestations of mass "psychosis." Wartime tested people's mental capacities both at the front and in the rear, resulting in behavior "beyond the norms of a mentally healthy peacetime person" (p. 321).

Chapter 5 deals with civic self-organization to help participants and victims of the war and also with shifts in mass attitudes. It examines the most common expressions of patriotic behavior: charitable initiatives, volunteerism, and other activities of public organizations. Special attention should focus on how forms of solidarity turned into platforms for criticizing the tsar and his entourage (p. 372). The general sense of crisis did not bypass the political elite that, in particular, escalated the confrontation between the tsarist government and the State Duma (p. 393). Thus, by the summer of 1915, mass optimism was replaced by the realization that the war would be protracted. "Patriotic anxiety" grew, fueled by alarmist and misleading rumors (p. 412), leading to spontaneous "revolutionization of society" and the well-known events of February 1917.

The epilogue presents the events after the February Revolution as the beginning of a new "emotional-patriotic cycle." The previous one began with the enthusiasm of the summer of 1914, went through the patriotic anxiety and disappointments of 1915–1916, and came to a new patriotic euphoria in early 1917 (p. 415). However, a feature of this new phase was the significant affective overheating of society. Consequently, the "honeymoon" of the revolution paralleled a rise in mental illness (p. 431). As the patriotic fervor cooled down, socioeconomic and political problems became more and more acute and led to increasing "depression" and "apathy" of the masses (p. 448). In turn, the Bolsheviks picked up on the transformations that the February Revolution had opened the way for. They found themselves "emotionally, mentally closer to those marginalized strata of society that had suffered most from the warfare" (p. 454). The Civil War that followed the October Revolution was a consequence of aggravated social contradictions: in a situation of the "crisis of rationality," patriotic ideas elevated the social schism to the level of a "war of patriotisms" (p. 454).

In the afterword, the author addresses the timeless question of the coexistence of patriotisms. He reflects on how individual "psychological problems" of patriots interfere with productive discussion and the building of social consensus (p. 464). He appeals to the reader to restore the humanistic dimension of patriotic discourse and to recognize the "small world" of the "living human" as the most important patriotic value (p. 496).

Reading this work is fascinating because the text does not lose dynamics from the abundance of details. The foregoing retelling of the chapters inevitably simplifies the author's narrative. Aksenov's observations about the importance of considering the emotional nature of patriotic discourse are undoubtedly insightful. The book draws attention to generalized psychological portraits of patriots, especially their capacity for empathy and sympathy for the other. Psychological lens gives a deeper understanding of the transition from abstraction to real action, from individual choice to the resulting collective expression. For example, the Narodnik movement of the second half of the nineteenth century reveals an "empathy for the peasantry, a desire to help the suffering, a readiness for self-sacrifice"—an emotional level without which the ideological content would lose its essence (pp. 70–71). Aksenov also provides highly interesting insights about rumors and their great power, regardless of whether they are true, in the context of informational crises (pp. 409–410). Most importantly, the author shows how fragile was the power of elites who pretended to monopolize the definition of patriotism—the emotional power of the masses was unpredictable and beyond anyone's control. For instance, meetings in support of the Russian army in the summer of 1914 escalated into pogroms and acts of collective hooliganism that involved various strata of society (pp. 305–308).

However, I would also like to express some criticisms of the book. The first concerns the work with the sources. The methodological framework of the book relies on the notion that it is possible to understand the moods of the masses and reasons for their behavior through the sum of testimonies. Such an approach overlooks the social background of witnesses, the genre conventions of different sources, or the role of the speech act, which, by the way, have been the focus of another recent study of the same period of Russian history (Kolonitskii 2022). On the one hand, Aksenov's work can be seen as innovation in writing a history of early twentieth-century turmoil across social and cultural boundaries and attempting to find a reality that is not mediated by discourse. On the other hand, does this approach not reduce the mediating role of testimony to an objective broadcast? To what extent are private experiences or the sum of experiences representative and useful for understanding larger communities? For example, the part of the book on military volunteering presents evidence about men and women who willingly went to the front. While recognizing the different roles and career opportunities that service at the front opened up for men and women, I find the author's explanations of gender-specific motives for volunteering lacking grounding. For males, the desire for a military career, the need to realize a craving for violence, the pursuit of upward social mobility, or idealistic patriotism were found to be common (pp. 355–358). In the cases of female volunteers, apart from "sincere patriotism," "personal interests" were limited to escaping family problems and domestic discomfort (pp. 363–365). However, whose point of view is expressed in this schematic? Why did men, for example, not flee from the shabby everyday life if the urban environment, according to the author, predisposed to mass "melancholy" (pp. 196, 216)? In this case, the author's conclusions do not seem convincing enough not only to speak about personal motives (sincere or insincere patriotism) but also to extrapolate the conclusions to the population at large.

Another point relates to the approach of the book itself. The chosen psychological angle draws the oppositions of reason/emotion, rational/irrational, norm/disease. The second component of each pair carries negative connotations, which contradicts the supposed epistemological neutrality of the study. For example, the author points out the potential connection between “empathy” and “psychopathy” of patriots—that is, the ability to empathize with another and its absence—and ideological preferences. Thus, empathy was typical of more humanistic-pacifist currents, and psychopathy of state-militaristic ones (p. 83). Patriotism itself acted as an “instinct” that prevented a “rational” worldview and awakened “archaic,” low passions usually restrained by cultural norms (p. 251). Undoubtedly, this lens allows to undermine the thesis of the linear development of society, highlighting rather than smoothing over the contradictions and dynamics of ideas and reactions of both individual patriots and large communities. However, the discourse of psy-sciences creates its subjects in a certain way that is inseparable from moral evaluation. If we describe reasons for patriots’ or crowds’ actions as “psychopathological form of patriotism” (p. 196) and “underdeveloped psychological feeling” (p. 468), we may find ourselves ending our inquiry too early. For inspiration, it might be possible to go to E. P. Thompson’s classic work *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd* (1971), which attempts to discover rationality in spontaneous mass action. Even without going beyond social psychology, it is possible to wonder what was mass “hooliganism,” drunkenness, or looting in each case. Was not there behind “irrationality,” for example, a desire for justice, power, or the right to take control of one’s own life, in case of the involuntarily mobilized persons, for example? The answers to these questions are perhaps better to develop in studies that do not pretend to be so chronologically and thematically comprehensive. Undoubtedly, *The War of Patriotisms* is very rich in quotations and covers a wide range of subject matter; therefore, it appears comprehensible and comprehensive.

Despite all the above criticisms, it is worth noting that Aksenov’s monographs contribute to debates about the connection between ideas and actions. However, if readers wish to delve deeper into the author’s methodology and find more case studies, I refer them to his 2020 book. In turn, *War of Patriotisms* would be a good choice for those who want to get acquainted with the main topics and problems of Russia’s history of the early twentieth century or for those looking for an easy and entertaining read. The monograph will be attractive to specialists dealing both with the history of the Russian revolutions and World War I and with the history of patriotic and nationalist ideologies in general.

REFERENCES

- Aksenov, Vladislav. 2020. *Slukhi, obrazy, emotsii: Massovyie nastroyeniia rossiian v gody voiny i revoliutsii, 1914–1918*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie.
- Kolonitskii, Boris, ed. 2022. *Slova i konflikty: Iazyk protivostoianii i eskalatsiia grazhdanskoi voiny v Rossii. Sbornik statei*. Saint Petersburg, Russia: Izdatel’stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge.
- Thompson, E. P. 1971. “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century.” *Past & Present* 50(1):76–136.