

## Elisabeth Anstett

**Serguei Alex. Oushakine. *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. 299 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-7557-3.**

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A leading voice of social anthropology on the post-socialist world, Serguei Oushakine has for some years published a consistent body of work on questions regarding changes occurring in post-Soviet societies, including *Travma-punkty* co-edited with Elena Trubina in 2009, which explored the social aftermath of biographical and collective breaking points, and more recently *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*, co-edited with Costica Bradatan in 2010 and devoted to the transformations of the intelligentsia after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Published in 2009, *The Patriotism of Despair* focuses on the issue of the political self-identification of people directly challenged by the dislocation and dissolution of the Soviet state. This study is based on fieldwork undertaken from 2001 to 2004 in Barnaul, in the Siberian region of Altai, and aims to explore how various social groups coped with the obsolescence of their former system of values and frames of self-representation. Oushakine's main objective was to offer a clear understanding of how communities cross times of trouble, reorder political and symbolic chaos, and fight with potentially self-depreciating images. He was particularly interested in identifying symbolic anchors, or transitional objects, used as a "set of navigation tools in the fragmented and disorienting post-Soviet landscape" (p.4) and providing a way to reconstruct a self-narrative. These various objects, such as places, artifacts of material culture, rituals or elements of speech, are indeed acting as vectors of permanency in a context of multiple disruptions.

The book is composed of four sections, each one devoted to a specific social group unsettled by the fall of the Soviet Union. The first section ("Repatriating Capitalism"), based on interviews conducted with Communists, National-Bolsheviks, anti-globalist and various political activists, shows how the new market-driven economic practices are filtered and re-read through the lens of myths (bearing the heavy burden of conspiracy schemes) and ideological constructions perceived as distinctively Russian. The effects of globalization are viewed by these activists as proofs of a destructive plot driven from outside and are, by contrast, used to emphasize the elements of national culture perceived as last true collective property.

The second one ("The Russian Tragedy") focuses on the scholarly and intellectual world and shows how Gumilev theories of *ethnos* have been digested to create an academic nationalism sometime linked to open anti-Semitism. The interviews conducted by Oushakine among Barnaul academics coming from various social sciences, focusing in particular on the case of the philosopher Vasilii Filippov, chair

of the Philosophy Department of Barnaul State Pedagogical University, show perfectly how national history is re-written as an ethnic project via the use of the “vitalist” paradigm.

The third section (“Exchange of Sacrifices”) is devoted to veterans of the war in Chechnya and underlines the heavy legacy of the Soviet prison world. Convict habits and prison slang indeed efficiently provided a strong sense of community correlated to a valuable representation of national belonging; the predominance of an outlaw model being explained by a double process of social marginalization on one side, and criminalization of the economic spheres where veterans gained privileges and specific exemptions after their return, on the other.

The fourth and last section (“Mothers, Objects, and Relations”) focuses on the Council of Mothers of Soldiers and shows how kinship ties offer a symbolic matrix capable of reformulating all types of social relations and therefore legitimating this “patriotism of despair.” In Russian society, the mother/son relationship stands as a metonymic expression for the motherland/citizen link, all the more since war memorials as much as private graves inscribe experience of war, sense of loss, and private tragedy within collective space.

In studies of nationalism, the very notion of patriotism has lately emerged as a key element to perceive the transformations occurring within post-Soviet societies, as it offers a unique way to approach social and symbolic stakes lying behind all kinds of new political discourses and practices.

One of the main contributions of Oushakine’s book is to show how these patriotisms are knitted from the inside through the daily building of nationalist rhetoric as well as the everyday framing of self-identity narrative among a generation of former Soviet citizens who acknowledge themselves as having been “cut in half” between a before and an after. Thus, we have to underline that Oushakine’s methodology—choosing to focus on a long-term and qualitative approach to fieldwork, carefully listening to ordinary voices of de-Sovietization’s losers while cautiously paying attention to provincial context—allows him to cast light on tendencies already pointed out on a macro-level by analysis of political leaders’ discourse. Ways of thinking and ways of doing “patriotism” are indeed presented, described, and documented here in a very accurate and comprehensible manner, allowing the reader to grasp the very dynamic qualities of these symbolic re-creations as well as their historical roots and to understand how painful and brutal they may be.

*The Patriotism of Despair* thus perfectly manages to demonstrate the way global symbolic orders have been recomposed after having been targeted by a collapse that has threatened and endangered all social categories in former Soviet societies. Thus, the question remains open: to what extent do these patriotisms create “patriots” without “patria” and therefore build true nationalism? As long as the “homelands” of war veterans, anti-globalist activists, scholars, and mothers of warriors definitely seem to differ radically in their content and nature, as well as in their borders and limitations, it could have been useful to see more clearly where, how, and when patriotism and nationalism merge or diverge.

The ultimate question remaining is that of the legacy. If we consider, with

Oushakine, that these forms of patriotism are framed and directly driven by an intimate experience of the fall of the Soviet Union and should therefore be read as a legacy of Soviet times, what will become of these ways of doing patriotism in the future among younger generations? The question is left open. And these new generations undeniably offer a thrilling field for Oushakine and others where to carry out further studies of patriotism.

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