

## Jason R. Morton

**Karen Petrone. *The Great War in Russian Memory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 408 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-35617-8.**

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As indicated by the title, *The Great War in Russian Memory* aspires to be both a particular history of Russia and an attempt to engage with much broader conversations about the memory of the First World War and its place in the establishment of the postwar order in Europe. Unlike Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Fussell 1971), a work of literary history, which claimed that the war established a complete rupture with past modes of expression and representation, Karen Petrone's book documents the memory of World War I in Russia in order to establish continuities. Petrone bridges a prominent divide in the literature, where the Soviet Union is often depicted as having no public memory of the war comparable to that of Europe. Her claim that, in spite of its revolution, the Soviet Union still had a postwar culture that retained significant traces of the past is a subtle challenge to the entire concept of historical rupture.

Petrone's work investigates a variety of cultural artifacts, including literature, films, museums, and diaries, to demonstrate that, despite being largely excluded from histories of Great War memory, the Soviet Union did in fact participate in the pan-European cultural response to the war. The first half of the book explores Soviet incarnations of themes commonly associated with the European memory of the war: "notions of religious faith, the construction of heroes and enemies, representations of manhood and womanhood, justifications of wartime violence, and articulations of national identity" (165).

The second half of the book emphasizes the particular development of Great War memory in the Soviet Union. Petrone claims that since the state folded the memory of the war into the mythologies of the revolution and the Civil War, the conflict had no official narrative in the Soviet Union: arguing that this marginal status ultimately yields a more diverse and "contested" representation that grants a unique perspective on the evolution of Soviet culture during the interwar period. The picture she paints is ultimately messier than the abrupt shift from internationalism to Russo-centrism described by many historians of the Soviet 1920s and 1930s and reveals, among other things, that "the project of nationalization was part of the Soviet 'ecosystem' in the 1920s, even if it was not a dominant feature of the landscape" (247). Likewise, instead of a clear divide between the rejection of the Great War in the 1920s because of its tsarist connections and the resacralization of its memory in the 1930s as another war with Germany loomed, Petrone describes elements of the Great War legacy being repeatedly forgotten and remembered in response to various social, cultural, and political factors on the ground.

While successful in writing the Soviet chapter into the literature on Great War memory, *The Great War in Russian Memory* contains passages where the author's desire to emphasize similarities between the Soviet and European experience detracts from her analysis of the specific Russian context. For instance, in her chapter on Russian spiritualism Petrone claims that "despite its radical new ideology, the Soviet Union nonetheless followed the European pattern of sacralizing its...soldiers" and concludes that "Soviet rationalism could not succeed in vanquishing the competing religious, spiritual, and mystical worldviews, and so it absorbed them instead" (33, 34). This is a caricature of Bolshevik ideology, which, as an heir to the Russian revolutionary tradition, had a significant quasi-religious, romantic component long before the war or the revolution. It would be more effective to examine if and how these pre-revolutionary tendencies changed in response to the Russian experience of war and the Bolshevik experience of power.

This tendency is more detrimental to her primary argument about the memory of World War I. The claim that "there was no overarching Soviet mythology of World War I, and no heroic mythic World War I narratives that were separate from larger revolutionary narratives" implies that in order to count, a Soviet World War I narrative must conform to the European timeline of 1914–1918. Yet, for many soldiers in the Soviet Union (on all sides of the conflict), the experience of World War I was inseparable from that of the subsequent revolution and civil war. The fact that the memory of the war tended to be attached to these larger narratives was arguably not an exclusive result of top-down imperatives. Petrone's frequent distinction between Great War and Civil War narratives seems too artificial, especially when contrasted with her more nuanced approach elsewhere. Rather than emphasizing Soviet examples that conform to the European model, it would be helpful to have a more focused examination of the place that the Great War occupied in the development of official and popular interpretations of subsequent events.

Far from being absent, the memory of the Great War was a necessary component of the official mythology of the revolution, where it was consistently explained as the result of capitalist imperialism. Yet this does not mean that the official image of the conflict was static, especially in its immediate aftermath. The Soviets did not have a monopoly on "official" representations during the period between 1918 and 1921. Many White officers had formerly served the tsar, and a significant proportion of the soldiers on all sides were veterans of the war with Germany and Austria-Hungary. How did the memory of that conflict function in development of the new one?

During the early stages of the Civil War, many Soviet depictions of the ongoing struggle in Europe presented the two conflicts as one. Forces under Nestor Makhno in Ukraine simultaneously fought against the Germans and Anton Denikin, a former tsarist general and the leader of the anti-Bolshevik Volunteer Army, before eventually turning against the Bolsheviks. How did they understand the enemy—or the distinction between the Great and Civil wars? Wartime propaganda from all sides—speeches, orders, newspaper articles, and recruitment posters—should offer valuable insight into the role played by the memory of the Great War in emerging narratives about, and attempts to enlist support for, the Civil War.

Tracing the evolution of this process on an individual level would require careful examination of diaries and letters spanning the two conflicts. At several points, Petrone attempts something like this through reference to the diary of Dmitrii Furmanov, the author of the 1923 novel *Chapaev*, which was written based upon his experiences serving as a political commissar during the Civil War. She examines his posthumously published diary from 1914 to 1916 to demonstrate that “not all of the raw material” he used to write his novel “came from his experiences...in the Civil War” (151).

Petrone’s overall analysis of this material is somewhat lacking. Citing his description of a conversation with a Cossack in 1916, she claims that “Furmanov’s diary...revealed how ethnicity served as a primary factor in intensifying the violence of war, overshadowing class hatred and class distinctions. He challenged the overarching Soviet interpretation of World War I as an ‘imperialist’ struggle of capitalist powers; instead his memoir depicted war as a mortal conflict between rival nations” (153). The phrasing here suggests that a diary entry written prior to the existence of the Soviet Union was intended as a challenge to its interpretation of the war. Her depiction of the diary as a “memoir” (which, unlike diaries, are written at a distance from the events that they describe) further reinforces the sense that this passage was a deliberate and contemporary polemic with Soviet doctrine.

*The Great War in Russian Memory* is an important addition to both the literature on World War I and Russian/Soviet historiography. It provides fertile ground for further research, which should aim to go beyond accepted paradigms about the European experience and examine how Russian memory became Soviet.

## REFERENCES

Fussell, Paul. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.