

Brandon Schechter

Robert Dale. *Demobilized Veterans in Late Stalinist Leningrad: Soldiers to Civilians*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 266 pp. ISBN 978-1-4725-9077-0.

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This book provides an intimate portrait of soldiers returning to a key region of Soviet Russia after the Great Patriotic War. The author has mined local archives, press, diaries, and memoirs and found some true gems. He deftly uses individual stories that both encapsulate larger dynamics at play and showcase the diversity of experiences and opinions of demobilized soldiers. The book goes deep into the weeds in describing the situation in Leningrad while also hinting at more general, Russia-wide trends. (The author admits that the situation in the Caucasus or Central Asia lies outside the scope of his study and was likely very different.) While Leningrad occupied a unique place, its fate lay at the crossroads of several major effects of the war on Soviet cities—it was on the frontline for years, was depleted by a combination of evacuation and mass death, and suffered major destruction of its infrastructure.

Robert Dale positions the book at the intersection of several conversations. The work as a whole is part of the larger global history of demobilization after the two world wars, and he draws occasional comparisons with the British, American, and sometimes German postwar experiences. This book contributes to the history of late Stalinism as a period and the author argues that the years 1945–1953 deserve to be studied in their own right. Individual chapters engage topics ranging from disability studies and the history of psychology to urban studies and criminology.

Dale structures the book around the process of becoming civilians from the moment of demobilization (whether in 1945 or the early 1950s), showing the various trials and tribulations of becoming a civilian before the death of Joseph Stalin. Chapter 1 details soldiers' experience of demobilization, from waiting often years to be demobilized, to arriving in Leningrad, which may have been the city in which more soldiers were demobilized than anywhere else and a city in which demobilized veterans were particularly prominent (p. 36). Here the author traces the importance of rumor while waiting to leave the ranks and the often rowdy and destructive behavior of troops en route. This chapter sets up the discussion of the variety of experiences: age cohort, gender, and the nature of wartime service could have an immense impact on how soldiers fared during the transition to civilian life. Part of this was based on the system of demobilization, which in Bolshevik fashion was improvised and announced only after victory. (In contrast, the famous US GI Bill of Rights was announced months before the end of the war, giving soldiers and bureaucrats months to mull it over before implementation.) This had predictable results, familiar to

scholars of the Soviet Union, that are traced through the chapters that follow. An understrength, undertrained bureaucracy was forced to deal with an influx of returning veterans who needed jobs, housing, pensions, and artificial limbs. Neither veterans nor bureaucrats had a clear image of what their entitlements were or how they should be implemented, which gave prominence to local lawyers who helped veterans understand their rights.

Chapter 2 treats housing with great attention to detail and highlights some of the author's most interesting discoveries. It is here that Dale first advances his argument that the picture of veterans as an assertive, privileged group after the war was, in truth, much more complicated, particularly in the desirable but battered locale of the Soviet Union's second city. Dale reveals that even before the famous revocation of privileges associated with medals announced in late 1947, veterans seldom received their entitlements, in particular housing and work, that were clearly guaranteed. Massive waiting lists, the flood of veterans into the city and oblast, and the devastation of housing stock meant that veteran status was not enough to secure basic needs. Even majors and colonels found themselves in dire straits, and individuals resorted to a variety of strategies—staying with relatives, sleeping in public places, and using hostels as either a place to live or address—in order to stay in the city long enough to receive housing. Others utilized a government program to build their own subsidized housing, a strategy more common outside of the city. Dale briefly describes the parallel story of rebuilding Leningrad, something chronicled in more detail by scholars such as Lisa Kirschenbaum (2006) and Steve Maddox (2014).

The subsequent chapters revisit the themes of an overtaxed bureaucracy and soldiers desperate to settle into civilian life through the lenses of labor, trauma, and crime, with a final chapter on the memory of the war. Chapter 3 argues that the attempt at remobilizing soldiers into the workforce did not allow them to rest sufficiently and come to terms with their experience before diving back into serious labor. The Soviet leadership viewed the labor front as a key battlefield for turning yesterday's soldiers into today's shockworkers, yet rendered surprisingly little support to this transition, particularly when contrasted with the US and UK. Graft and personal connections are revealed to have been key to landing coveted positions in provisioning, in ways similar to those outlined in James Heinzen's recent work (2016). Dale presents the veterans here at their most assertive, particularly officers who demanded jobs with similar prestige as their military ranks and veterans who came to dominate universities.

The final three chapters address issues of trauma, crime, and the intersection of high politics with soldiers' individual processes of what Dale calls "demobilization of the mind." The themes of these chapters often bleed into one another and it is not always clear why some information and arguments appear in one or another chapter (e.g., the discussion of brutalization and fear I cite below). Chapter 4 deals with trauma, both physical and mental, examining demobilized soldiers' attempts to secure status of invalid and treatment or avoid treatment in order to maintain benefits. Dale adeptly draws comparisons with the stinginess of other European states demobilizing soldiers at the time and reminds the reader that treatment focused on re-

turning men to labor in a society with no real place for people who were not able-bodied workers. Chapter 5 examines the postwar crime wave and makes an argument against brutalization that hinges largely on the fact that, despite Stalinist society itself being very violent, soldiers were able to separate wartime violence from their postwar experiences. Dale points out a key difference between Soviet society and its Western counterparts: a lack of fear of brutalized, demobilized veterans as potential sources of danger. This chapter draws on the particularly violent and chaotic experience of mass rape and state-sponsored looting as backdrop, but not explanatory factor, to a spike in postwar crime that derived largely from chaos, poor conditions, and the ready availability of weapons brought back as trophies. Chapter 6 brings politics into the story in a major way, exploring how soldiers' return to normal life happened in the context of the *Zhdanovshchina* and Leningrad Affair (tightening of censorship initiated by the Communist Party propaganda chief Andrei Zhdanov in 1946–1948 and political repressions against the Leningrad party organization during 1949–1952, respectively), detailing soldiers' involvement in the creation and maintenance of the war's mythology. According to Dale, in learning to silence their own memories and hew to the official narrative, soldiers became "ordinary Stalinists."

Overall this is quite an interesting book, but there are a few unanswered questions worth returning to. Dale points out that several groups—veterans, re-evacuees, and *blokadniki* (survivors of the 900-day siege of Leningrad during World War II)—all had their own privileged status that lead to competing claims in which the hierarchy of who should receive what was by no means clear. This is fascinating, but he fails to give us a clear picture as to how specific to Leningrad this situation was. Clearly *blokadniki* were unique to Leningrad, but perhaps another group such as partisans could have supplanted them in a city like Kiev or Minsk, while re-evacuees were returning to major cities throughout the western Soviet Union during and after the war. Dale makes a fascinating argument against brutalization among soldiers and the absence of fear of returning veterans among civilians, while also decrying the lack of a language of trauma and psychological services for returning veterans. I was looking for him to tease out the relationship between this lack of a language of trauma and the lack of brutalization and fear more explicitly. Finally, Dale never fully unpacks the significance of the scale of mobilization and demobilization in explaining the phenomena he explores. In other words, did the fact that the majority of men of certain age cohorts served create a different sense of what was normal? Dale does a good job of telling the local story but could have given readers a little more interpretation, particularly in terms of the wider implications. That being said, this book provides a very insightful and thoroughly researched account of the lives of veterans in a crucial city.

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