

Introduction: Experiences of the “Front” during Russia’s Great War and Revolution

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Despite the obvious importance of Russia’s military involvement in the Great War, not only for the outcome of the war itself, but in shaping the subsequent trajectory of history in that region as a catalyst for revolution, the history of Russia’s land war has not been studied extensively by scholars outside Russia nearly as intensively and thoroughly as the campaigns on the Western Front.¹ Likewise, Russia’s naval war remains largely unexplored compared with the conflict at sea elsewhere.² Viewed in global geographic terms, the military historiography in English about the war has evolved in a distinctly imbalanced way over the last century. The overwhelming majority of publications on this topic have focused on the war not as a global phenomenon but as, firstly, a conflict in Western Europe between the Central Powers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the operations of the Western Allies together with the United States; and secondly, as a struggle for control of the Atlantic Ocean and North Sea. Russia’s military involvement has traditionally been marginalized, and there have been few English-language book-length studies of the so-called Eastern Front (defined to encompass Russia’s struggle not just with Germany and Austria-Hungary but also with the Ottoman Empire in the Caucasus and

¹ See Dominic Lieven, *The End of Tsarist Russia: The March to World War I and Revolution* (New York: Viking, 2015), 17–91 and 343–85, for an authoritative recent account of the war’s impact on the Russian Empire and especially for the author’s comments on the significance of the Eastern Front to World War I history. Other recent important studies of Russia during World War I include Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² This has long been the case, perhaps best described by Winston Churchill in *The Unknown War: The Eastern Front* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1931).

Persia). In fact, somewhat remarkably, Norman Stone's history has remained the foremost exemplar for over 40 years since its publication in the mid-1970s.³

Even within Russia the volume of publications about Russia's Great War has never matched the level of interest in the West (although there are more published studies in Russian than in English). Until very recently, Russia's "Second Patriotic War," as it was sometimes called at the time, was something of a forgotten war in the country's historical collective memory. Even though, as Karen Petrone notes, "the absence of official commemoration did not mean the absence of war memory itself," Soviet citizens found it difficult to learn anything about the conflict in their history books or to find memorials to its victims.⁴ This situation persists to a considerable extent even as this book is brought to completion following the centennial year of 2017. Books about World War I are vastly outnumbered in Russian (as well as Western) bookshops by the enormous and still rapidly growing literature about World War II, and a significant proportion of the current offering consists of Russian translations of older Western studies by such authors as B. H. Liddell Hart, John Keegan, and David Stevenson.⁵

In many respects, the reasons for the relative paucity of scholarship on Russia in the military historiography of World War I are familiar, obvious, and by no means limited to just this field of late tsarist and early Soviet history. Dismissing the war as an imperialist conflict and mere prelude to the October Revolution, the Soviet regime deemphasized its importance in the historiography, established very narrow boundaries for research, and severely restricted access to the archives and contemporary printed matter. Indeed, foreign scholars were routinely denied access even to the valuable Soviet military history publications from the 1920s, let alone the archives.⁶ Also crucially

³ Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914–1917* (New York: Scribner's, 1975). At the time of writing the most recent survey in English, adhering to orthodox military history, is David R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015).

⁴ Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 6. Petrone challenges the idea that there was no such attempt at keeping alive the memory of the war. Another work that explores the memory of the war is Aaron J. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable: World War, Modern Art, and the Politics of Public Culture in Russia, 1914–1917* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

⁵ B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Real War 1914–1918* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930) (later republished as *History of the First World War*); John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998); David Stevenson, *1914–1918: The History of the First World War* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

⁶ The outstanding work published in the 1920s was Iu. K. Tsikhovich, ed., *Strategicheskii ocherk voiny 1914–1918 gg.*, 7 vols. (Moscow: Vysshii voennyi redaktsionnyi

important, as with every other field of Russian and Soviet history, has been the relative lack of knowledge of the Russian language outside of that country. Even the writings of émigré Russian authors have tended to suffer obscurity, with the exception of the few that have been translated into English. Decades later, this problem continues to prevent many academics and students alike from engaging directly with Russian secondary as well as primary sources, and generally the work of Russian historians still needs to be translated in order to be accessible outside Russia.⁷ Additionally, a more specific problem for this field—especially research into military operations—has been a heightened sense in the Soviet Union of the military need for secrecy, above all during the 1930s, as the danger of another great war with Germany loomed.

The evolution of the Soviet military historiography of World War I thus differed in several fundamental respects from its Western counterpart.⁸ If, initially in the 1920s, both were dominated by memoirs and operational and campaign histories written by every type of participant in the conflict, there was a dearth of similar Soviet publications during the 1930s. By contrast, this was a time of much activity and innovation in the West, when historians began seeking both to integrate archival materials into their source-base and to broaden the range of analysis from the Grand Strategy of Nations and Empires to the war aims of monarchs and politicians, the operational plans of generals and admirals, and the detailed examination of new weaponry (albeit the military literature still focused almost exclusively on the battles between the Central Powers and the Western Allies).⁹ Moreover, Soviet military his-

sovet, 1922–23). Each volume had a prominent lead author who served as an operational commander during the war and General Staff officers in the imperial army such as A. M. Zaionchkovskii, and the volumes were published as a series as part of the work of the Commission for Researching and Using the Experience of the World and Civil Wars under the direction of A. A. Svechin.

⁷ The best example of a translated work is N. N. Golovin, *The Russian Army in the World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931). Golovin wrote this book while in emigration in France.

⁸ Nonetheless, there were some important exceptions, of which one recommended book from the Soviet period is I. I. Rostunov, *Russkii front pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975).

⁹ Much of the work produced after the 1920s consisted of books and articles written by former tsarist officers in emigration. A systematic list of this material is in Aleksei Gering, *Materialy k bibliografii Russkoi voennoi pechati za rubezhom* (Paris: Passé Militaire, 1968). Before the war ended, British memoirs and official histories started to appear, and this material dominated the early English-language historiography of the war. An example of a key early work using such sources is the aforementioned Basil Liddell Hart's *The Real War 1914–1918*, which was published in 1930, and C. R. M. F. Cruttwell, *A History of the Great War 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934). Both of these

torians did not follow the lead of their Western counterparts when the latter began to take their work in new directions from the 1970s and 1980s, seeking to break away from national and military histories of World War I by reframing the study of the conflict through a rich variety of largely cultural and social themes, and looking beyond military history archives for sources that revealed broader, more cultural approaches. Ranging from studies about the war's impact on cities and on social groups such as workers and women, to the civil-military consequences of mass casualties, death, and dying during the war effort itself as well as in the aftermath of the war, this new research allowed for a more complex portrait of the level of mobilization of nations and the extent and its impact on a much greater diversity of participants in the war effort.¹⁰ But crucially, the lack of access to the primary sources prevented Western historians like Norman Stone from applying this approach to Russia's war. Thus, if the historiography of the Western Front during recent decades has offered a more extensive definition of World War I as a "Total War" by focusing on every aspect of the war from its human experience to its impact on civilization in its broadest conceptualization, the same could not be said concerning the scholarship about Russia.

Only with the collapse of the Soviet Union did historians both within and outside Russia begin in earnest to examine the social and cultural aspects of the war in Russia.¹¹ The resultant new body of literature has start-

books offer a few chapters on the Eastern Front. One of the earliest books in English to focus exclusively on the Eastern Front is Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 6: The Eastern Front* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1931).

¹⁰ Examples of this literature include Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914–1918: Understanding the Great War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); John Horne, ed., *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe During World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); J. M. Winter, *Capital Cities at War: London, Paris, Berlin, 1914–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). These titles represent just a very few of the many books that have broadened the content of World War I studies. The point remains: none of these books offer a systematic analysis of anything that happened on the Eastern Front. In most cases the Eastern Front is not mentioned at all.

¹¹ For examples of this emerging literature, see William C. Fuller, Jr., *The Foe Within: Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Peter Gatrell, *Russia's First World War: A Social and Economic History* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2005); Hubertus F. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905–1925* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003);

ed a process of revealing Russia's limited strength and multiple weaknesses that determined the course of its Great War experience, helping significantly to broaden, deepen, and better define our understanding of the "Total War" that culminated in the collapse of the empire and the emergence of the Soviet Union. Inevitably, much remains to be done, and it will be a long while before historians of the Eastern Front begin to ask, as some historians such as John Horne are now beginning to do for the Western Front, whether this more cultural approach is reaching the limits of its utility.¹²

This book—the first part of an entire volume in the Russia's Great War and Revolution series about military affairs—seeks to promote and extend this nontraditional form of military history in relation to Russia.¹³ The point of departure for this type of examination rests with the premise that the military history of World War I in the Russian theater cannot be sufficiently understood by focusing exclusively on descriptions of war plans, strategy, and operations, and that, precisely because war is a human activity, it is crucial to establish the place of humans in this military story. After all, no military activity could proceed if the rest of society failed to contribute to the war effort, as became vividly clear in Russia in 1917. So whereas "traditional" military histories often overlook this issue, reducing warfare to planned strategies and their execution and numerical representations of troops and their movements on maps, this book aims to foreground the military experiences of the people who endured the demands, the challenges, and the deprivations of the war.

Our intention for this volume initially was to highlight and explore the "frontline" experiences of the troops who had to fight in the trenches and the sailors who manned the warships during World War I. As such, it was intended to complement the second book in volume 3 of the Russia's Great War and Revolution series, which focuses on experiences of the war and revolution on the Home Front.¹⁴ Almost immediately, however, the scope was expanded to include the experiences of people conventionally excluded from the traditional definition of "military personnel," such as nurses, chaplains, and civilian

and Melissa Kirschke Stockdale, *Mobilizing the Russian Nation: Patriotism and Citizenship in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹² See, for example, Horne, *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe*.

¹³ Important examples of this emergent literature in English are Igor Narskii, "The Frontline Experience of Russian Soldiers in 1914–1916," *Russian Studies in History* 51, 4 (2013): 31–49; and William G. Rosenberg, "Reading Soldiers' Moods: Russian Military Censorship and the Configuration of Feeling in World War I," *American Historical Review* 119, 3 (2014): 714–40.

¹⁴ Adele Lindenmeyr, Christopher Read, and Peter Waldron, eds., *Russia's Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–22, Book 2: The Experience of War and Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2015).