

Preface

This book is the first of a two-part collection of essays on the cultural history of Russia between 1914 and 1922, both of which form part of a larger series on Russian history during the Great War, Revolution, and Civil War.¹ The two books that comprise the culture “volume” of the series are intended to complement each other, and they are published separately only for reasons of space. The general aim of the umbrella project to which the culture volume belongs is to consider Russia’s experience of war and revolution as a “continuum of crisis”—in Peter Holquist’s apt phrase²—from the outbreak of conflict in 1914 to the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922. The merits of this approach are at least two-fold: it focuses attention on the history of Russia during the First World War—until recently a largely neglected area—and it connects that history to the early years of the Bolshevik regime, thereby transcending the often artificial partition of 1917 in the historiography of modern Russia. Contributors to this volume were therefore asked to address an aspect of Russian cultural history during the 1914–22 period. Some have taken a slightly broader perspective, and a few are focused predominantly on the years prior to 1917, but all of them advance our understanding of Russia’s experience of the Great War, its relationship to the early Soviet period, and the complex memory of the “continuum of crisis.”

Definitions of culture and cultural history are now so expansive and protean that the subject matter of these two books is potentially enormous. Emmet Kennedy has defined culture as “any symbolic representation of value, particularly of values that are perpetuated in time through the educational process (schools, churches, press, theater),”³ and Peter Burke has described cultural history as “a concern with the symbolic and its interpretation.”⁴ These two statements highlight the difficulty of distinguishing too strictly between traditional understandings of culture as the arts and sciences, and more

¹ Details of the larger series, “Russia’s Great War and Revolution,” can be found at <http://russiasgreatwar.org/index.php>

² Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

³ Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), xxii.

⁴ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 3.

recent approaches that imply almost anything can have a “cultural history” (since all objects and behaviors may be read for their symbolic content). Accepting that cultural history has few, if any, boundaries—a liberating yet potentially bewildering condition—we have not aimed for encyclopaedic coverage of the subject, for inclusion of every conceivable topic. Instead, the contents of the two books reflect the work of scholars whose current or recent research falls broadly into the category of Russian cultural history during the late imperial and early Soviet periods. The result is a diverse and stimulating array of original essays on subjects that range from the experience of cultural institutions and the arts, to aspects of identity and memory in popular culture. Many of the topics have rarely, if ever, been explored for this period of Russian history.

Through their close focus on diverse aspects of cultural life in Russia, the essays collectively demonstrate that cultural responses to war and revolution were far from uniform, and they defy simple generalizations. Nevertheless four broad observations can be made. The first is that, despite the traumatic upheaval that Russia experienced between 1914 and 1922, cultural life appears to have persisted with undiminished energy, even accelerating in some spheres—witness, for instance, the exponential growth in native film production from 1914 to 1917, or the myriad proletarian culture projects launched during the Civil War. The reasons for this “cultural acceleration” were complex and varied: patriotic mobilization; commercial demand; the thirst to comprehend global conflict and domestic revolution; the impulse to escape from reality; and notably the political conviction that culture had agency, that it was a tool capable of reshaping society. These factors help to explain why cultural activity was barely disrupted, even when basic material resources were in desperately short supply.

Secondly, according to the findings of several contributors, popular culture manifested greater signs of Russian national integration during the First World War than hitherto assumed. It was not simply that patriotic sentiment prompted a ban on German films or fueled attacks on European clothing fashions, for example, important though such developments were, especially during the first year of the conflict. Rather, a much wider spectrum of the empire’s population increasingly engaged with a national public culture—especially through newspaper war reportage and efforts of civil society to organize patriotic work—and this may reflect a level of national unity not ordinarily associated with the final few years of tsarism.

The third observation is that—perhaps inevitably—consideration of the 1914–22 period as an integrated continuum reveals as many continuities as it does discontinuities, with the consequence that 1917 appears less prominent as a turning point in Russian cultural history (at least within the confines of this discrete period). The vibrant cultural experimentation of the Civil War years—the subject of many studies—conveys an impression of rapid cultural transformation under the Bolsheviks. Yet when that story is considered in the context of the Great War, the sense of a sharp disjuncture in the cultural sphere

is less obvious. To cite a few examples that are elaborated in the volume's chapters: the attitudes of state and intelligentsia towards culture remained fundamentally similar across the revolutionary divide; changes in sexual mores, often associated with the Revolution, were already underway before 1917; and the history of popular holidays and festivals indicates how traditional cultural forms persisted beneath the veneer of new ideological content. This serves as a reminder that whilst some aspects of a culture—signs, symbols, and names, for example—can be replaced quickly, others—like deep-seated assumptions, values, and conditioned behavior—evolve at a different pace from the welter of military and political events. In that sense, the rhythms of cultural history do not correspond neatly to the chronological parameters of this volume. This does not mean that culture was impervious to the pressures of war, revolution, and civil war—on the contrary, they left indelible imprints on Russian culture—but it suggests that cultural change was less rapid or all-encompassing than political, social, and economic transformations, and that it might be more apposite to think of the period as a transitional rather than a revolutionary one for culture.

Finally, the essays suggest that cultural life was not only tightly intertwined with its social and political contexts, but that the wider history of Russia's Great War and Revolution cannot be fully comprehended without due attention to culture in its broadest sense. Cultural activity was one of the central mechanisms for circulating information, promoting patriotism, exchanging views, attacking hierarchies, exploring alternatives, and escaping reality. Even after the fall of the autocracy, cultural activity was the principal way in which most ordinary people connected with public life: through reading, viewing, listening, and socializing in a variety of cultural settings. More broadly, popular culture—the values and attitudes of ordinary people—set limits to what was adapted, ignored, embraced, or resisted. It was for these reasons that the Bolsheviks, as much as their tsarist predecessors, placed great emphasis on the importance of cultural policy (the short-lived Provisional Government paid less attention to this matter).

The chapters are arranged into sections that reflect certain thematic synergies. They are bracketed by an introduction (in book 1) that discusses the broader context of cultural policy in late imperial and early Soviet Russia, and by two concluding essays (both in book 2) that draw together the volume's themes from both a Russian and a wider European historical perspective. Given the mercurial nature of culture and cultural history, there is an inevitable element of overlap between some topics and sections, and certain chapters could have appeared in different sections, but ultimately we think it is more helpful to have some subdivision of the chapters than to present them without any attempt at classification. A few topics that readers might expect to find under the heading of "culture" are treated elsewhere in the wider project on Russia's Great War and Revolution: the intelligentsia, for instance, is discussed as a social category in the Home Front volume, although many of its representatives certainly appear throughout this volume. Moreover, the

Russian Leaders of the Great War and Revolutionary Era in Representations and Rumors

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Images of political leaders and statesmen are an important resource for political mobilization. This resource acquires considerable significance in times of acute political crisis and military conflict: those who are actively involved in politics during times of crisis often seek to identify themselves with leaders—with heads of state and/or leaders of public movements. The study of the formation, circulation, and reception of images of Russian political figures during the Great War and revolutionary era is therefore exceptionally important for our understanding of the political developments of that time. Examining cultural forms of political representation furthers our understanding of political cultures.

This theme has already been reflected in the works of various historians. Richard Wortman, in his remarkable book devoted to the various representations of the Russians tsars, gave consideration to the modification of Nicholas II's image during the Great War.¹ The story of how these images were received by the tsar's subjects, however, remained beyond the boundaries of that study. Richard Abraham has written the fullest biography of A. F. Kerenskii, the most popular figure of the February Revolution.² The author could not ignore the emerging cult of the leader of the Revolution. Various aspects of the "Kerenskii cult" have been considered by A. G. Golikov and G. L. Sobolev.³ It nonetheless appears that a fresh assessment of the multi-

¹ Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 1: *From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), and 2: *From Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Translations of these two volumes were published in Russia in 2002 and 2005.

² Richard Abraham, *Alexander Kerensky: The First Love of the Revolution* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987).

³ A. G. Golikov, "Fenomen Kerenskogo," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 5 (1992): 60–73; G. L. Sobolev, comp., *Aleksandr Kerenskii: Liubov' i nenavist' revoliutsii. Dnevnik, stat'i, ocherki i vospominaniia sovremennikov* (Cheboksary: Izd-vo Chuvashskogo Universiteta, 1993).

farious images of the “revolutionary leader” present in propaganda, art, and in the collective consciousness of the revolutionary period will allow us to broaden our understanding of the activity of Kerenskii and his opponents, while also enabling us to draw some conclusions about the development of a revolutionary political culture.

The cult of Lenin has received the most interest from scholars—suffice it to mention the books of N. Tumarkin, B. Ennker, and O. Velikanova.⁴ However, in focusing on the key stages of the development of the Lenin cult—the assassination attempt (August 1918), the jubilee celebrations for the leader’s 50th birthday in 1920, his death, his embalment, the posthumous commemorative practices—these authors touch only fleetingly upon the events of 1917. Yet this period of acute, competitive political struggle was immensely important for establishing cultural forms of perception of charismatic leaders and the ways in which they were represented.

Although an examination of the Stalin cult does not altogether fit within the chronological framework of the present subject, the investigative approaches and methods, conclusions and observations of historians are of considerable interest. Among works of this sort, particular mention should be made of Jan Plamper’s book.⁵ In addition, when studying how political figures were represented, one should not confine oneself to analyzing the texts and actions of the objects of political cults and those of their supporters. In history it is often the case that the adversaries of statesmen and political actors inadvertently assist the quest for new cultural forms of glorification of their enemy leaders; occasionally they assist in circulating these cultural forms, and sometimes—against their will—they have a hand in their creation. The context of a political struggle is extremely important for restructuring the processes of political and cultural creativity: adversarial political leaders, together with their supporters, require competitive and creative efforts for the furthering of “their” political cult.

In addition, cults of the “leading figures” are frequently accompanied by the creation of supporting cults of second-rank leaders, “sub-cults.” The formation of a “pantheon of leaders,” an unstable and dynamic structure in which different leaders are apportioned different functions, can have an unpredictable impact on the cult of the main leader.

⁴ Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) (published in Russian in 1997); Benno Ennker, *Die Anfänge des Leninkults in der Sowjetunion* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1997) (published in Russian in 2011); Olga Velikanova, *Making of an Idol: On Uses of Lenin* (Göttingen: Muster-Schmidt-Verlag, 1996); Velikanova, *Obraz Lenina v massovom vospriiatii sovetskikh liudei po arkhivnym materialam* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001).

⁵ Ian Plamper [Jan Plamper], *Alkhimiia vlasti: Kul't Stalina v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), published in English as Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

Finally, it is worth reconstructing how the proffered images of leaders have been received: at times the "interpretation" of messages by their audiences might not have corresponded at all to the intentions of a cult's creators, nor to the political goals of its object. Images of leaders, as they gained ground, were no longer controlled by their creators (and that includes by the leaders themselves). When studying the various perceptions of leaders over time, one should examine the mass demand for these, or other, images; an investigation into leader cults is impossible without considering the history of their consumption.



Russia's entry into the war required from Nicholas II a significant reworking of his own image, and this was manifested in his speeches, actions, gestures, and portraits.⁶ Nicholas himself played an important role in this, although his correspondence with the empress shows clearly that Aleksandra Fedorovna also played the part of "image-maker." The Ministry of the Imperial Court, having subjected all publications containing pictures of the royal family and any corresponding texts to censorship, also had an influence on the circulation of images of members of the imperial household. The role of commercial publications and publishing houses was an important one; they circulated what they considered to be the more fortuitous images and words of the tsar, while suppressing those that they thought unfavorable or irrelevant.

In his attempts to influence the processes of patriotic mobilization, Nicholas II was guided by the tradition of the symbolic presentation of military conflicts in Russia. At times, he replicated the actions and gestures of his predecessors. Thus, he repeated several measures taken by Alexander I during the Patriotic War of 1812. The memory of that conflict, of exceptional importance for Russia's historical memory, was actualized in 1912, when the war's jubilee was widely celebrated. The tsar was not alone in turning to events that occurred 100 years earlier: many Russian propagandists, writers, and artists used elements of cultural memory about the 1812 war in order to comprehend the present military conflicts. It is not surprising that, in 1914, the war was referred to as the Second Patriotic and even the Great Patriotic War.

There was another contextual element that Nicholas II could not ignore: the strategies for self-representation employed by other European monarchs, who were also modifying their images during the war, striving to promote patriotic mobilization and, at the same time, strengthen their political positions. Photographs in illustrated publications kept readers abreast of the new ways in which the heads of European states were being depicted. A well-known rivalry for bellicosity and masculinity existed between the monarchs of the

⁶ For an examination of the ways in which the tsar and several representatives of the dynasty were portrayed, see B. I. Kolonitskii, *"Tragicheskaia erotika": Obrazy imperatorskoi sem'i v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010).

belligerent countries: they would dress in their army's military field uniform and pay visits to theaters of military operations. This was meticulously captured on film for use as military propaganda by the countries in question, and it was also echoed in their enemies' press. The bar was set unattainably high by the "king knight" Albert I, king of the Belgians, who even took to the skies in an aeroplane.

Nicholas II was obliged to act within the confines of his own "scenario of power." Richard Wortman has demonstrated persuasively that images of the "Muscovite" tsar, the "pilgrim," and the "crowned toiler" were especially important for the last tsar.⁷ During the war, the development of this "scenario" led to the emergence of a militarized simplification of the tsar's image: he appeared as a simple officer of the Russian army, and the soldier's tunic (*gimnasterka*) became his permanent mode of dress. The image of the emperor dressed in the field uniform of a Russian officer, singled out by his modesty against the background of his sparkling entourage, demonstrated solidarity with the regiments of the Russian infantry, who were enduring the primary ordeals of war.

The heir to the throne, 11-year-old Grand Duke Aleksei Nikolaevich, who had accompanied Nicholas II on trips to the front since autumn 1915, dressed in the uniform of a simple Russian soldier. Such simplifying measures that corresponded to the religious and aesthetic views of both the tsar and the tsarina, who sought a mystical link to the "ordinary people," were intended to promote the patriotic mobilization of the population—in every country, the war, which required the active and conscious participation of millions of people, was a unique kind of "democratizer," a fact that the Russian autocrat could not ignore. Propagandists wrote with tenderness about the "simple" countenance of the tsar, in which the imperial couple took such pride. However, one can hardly consider these strategies of "simplification" wholly successful: even some confirmed monarchists were disappointed by the ordinary countenance of the "unsightly colonel."⁸ Other compatriots of the tsar preferred to see not the "simplification" of the emperor, but rather the democratization of Russia.

Still less successful was the promotional project of Empress Aleksandra Fedorovna. If the tsar adopted the role of a "simple officer," then the empress assumed the role of a "simple sister of mercy." Together with her two eldest daughters she undertook a preparatory course and passed the examination necessary to qualify as a nurse. The tsarina and tsarevnas worked in a hospital and even assisted during surgical operations. Posters and postcards acquainted the population with these activities; in official portraits the empress

⁷ R. Wortman [Wortman], "Nikolai II i obraz samoderzhavii," in *Reformy ili revoliutsiia? Rossiia 1861–1917. Materialy mezhdunarodnogo kollokviuma istorikov*, ed. D. Gaier [Dietrich Geyer] and V. S. Diakin (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1992), 18–30; R. S. Wortman [Wortman], *Stsenarii vlasti: Mify i tseremonii russkoi monarkhii*, 2: *Ot Aleksandra II do otrencheniia Nikolaia II* (Moscow: Ob"edinennoe gumanitarnoe izdatel'stvo, 2004), 656.

⁸ Kolonitskii, "Tragicheskaia erotika," 72–240.

and her daughters were depicted wearing the modest uniforms of Red Cross nurses. At the outset of the war, the tsarina's popularity grew somewhat; over time, however, negative images increasingly circulated.

A notable proportion of the tsar's subjects—even those well-disposed towards the monarchy—considered that the tsarina, with the help of her “advisors” (primarily G. E. Rasputin), was, in fact, the country's ruler, and had pushed her husband away from power. These rumors did not correspond to reality, although from August 1915, when the emperor became the supreme commander in chief of the Russian army, the empress's involvement in politics definitely increased.

Rumors that the tsarina held pro-German views spread widely. Moreover, she was accused of preparing a separate peace and even conducting espionage on behalf of the enemy. Historians have not found convincing evidence to support these unlikely rumors. The tsarina herself, however, facilitated the circulation of gossip, conducting correspondence with relatives in Germany without appropriate discretion. The letters contained not only news of family affairs: in April 1915, the tsarina received a letter proposing a discussion of conditions for the termination of war (the German emperor was, allegedly, unaware of this initiative).⁹ Many representatives of the political elite became aware of the empress's correspondence, and this affected her reputation.

Finally, there was talk among both representatives of “high society” and the common people that the tsarina was deceiving her husband. Rumors named a number of her alleged male and female lovers, but Rasputin was mentioned especially often. These rumors were completely groundless. The tsar and tsarina, however, were victims of their own piety in this situation: public opinion did not shake their confidence in the special mission being conducted by the exotic “elder” (*starets*).

Imprudent actions on the tsar's and, particularly, the tsarina's part encouraged the spreading of rumors, yet the empress also became a victim of her own promotional project: patriotic images of the tsarina and her daughters were received and “interpreted” in a most unpredictable manner. Thus, with time, the image of the “simple sister of mercy” became a great problem for the royal family. Many confirmed monarchists were unpleasantly taken aback by the fact that the tsarina was performing the role of a “simple handmaiden”: this was regarded as sufficient in itself to damage the prestige and dignity of imperial rule. “The ermine mantle suited the Empress better than the dress of a sister of mercy.”¹⁰

⁹ Joseph T. Fuhrmann, ed., *The Complete Wartime Correspondence of Tsar Nicholas II and the Empress Alexandra (April 1914–March 1917)* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 119.

¹⁰ A. A. Mosolov, *Pri dvore poslednego imperatora (Zapiski nachal'nika kantseliarii ministerstva dvora)* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, Sankt-Peterburgskoe otdelenie, 1992), 98–99; A. I. Spiridovich, *Velikaia voina i Fevral'skaia revoliutsiia, 1914–1917*, bk. 3 (New York: Vseslavianskoe izdatel'stvo, 1962), 74.