

How & Why Russia Forgot The Great War

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Russia lost 3 million people in World War I. But it also provided examples of explosive military strength and economic resilience that would make any nation proud.

And yet, though the 100th anniversary of the war — which Russia joined on Aug. 1, 1914 — has revived some interest in the event, Russians generally do not often speak of World War I.

This is a nation that loves and cherishes memories of other past military triumphs. World War II has developed a cult-like status over the decades, and even the Great Patriotic War against Napoleon is widely discussed and revered.

But beyond the history books, the Great War hardly features in mass culture, having contributed neither myths nor heroes to Russian folk culture, and hardly having made a dent in nation's wealth of arts and literature.

World War I's marginal position in Russian lore owes to the fact that it fell between the cracks of history, or — more specifically — between the Tsarist and Bolshevik regimes, Russian scholars said.

In destroying the tsars, the Bolshevik revolutionaries denounced the Great War as imperialist, thus robbing it of its potential for a popular legacy.

"The two world wars are antithetical national myths for Russia," said prominent philosopher and columnist Maxim Goryunov.

"It is an either-or situation. [World War I and World War II] are mutually exclusive, you cannot celebrate them both," Goryunov told The Moscow Times on the eve of the war's 100th anniversary on Thursday.

The Forgotten War

Russia boasts two major museums dedicated to the legacy of its 1812 war against Napoleon. Scores of museums celebrate the memory of World War II, and monuments to its heroes and victims can be found in abundance in every post-Soviet city, from Kaliningrad to Siberia.

But the country's first-ever World War I museum is only slated to open its doors in St. Petersburg next Tuesday, 96 years after the war ended.

The situation is no better where monuments are concerned: The first monument was unveiled in a park in Moscow's Sokol in 2004 on grounds that had been used clandestinely by the Bolshevik regime to bury the Great War's dead en masse. The park is now slated for partial demolition.

Only 15 percent of Russians know that World War I was triggered by the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, and only 12 percent can correctly list the warring parties, according to a nationwide survey conducted by state pollster VTsIOM.

More than half of the 1,600 Russians polled earlier this month, found themselves at a loss to answer either of these questions. In other words, they knew nothing about the war.

No One to Promote It

The problem with World War I is that the Russian regime that sent its troops to the front line was itself a casualty of the war, historians said.

The Romanov regime was ousted by the Bolsheviks, who saw the Great War as "imperialist" and actively opposed it, even as their countrymen fought on the front lines.

The Bolsheviks' negative view of the war became the party line, and lingered for decades in the Soviet history books, said Dr. Yelena Rudaya, a leading expert on World War I who works for the Historical Perspective Foundation, a conservative non-profit think tank in Moscow.

"They labeled it 'a shameful page of our history,' though it was actually a glorious one," Rudaya said of the Bolsheviks.

By contrast, the 1812 war had the tsarist regime to promote it, and World War II had the Soviet leadership, which made it a cornerstone of their patriotic ideology, said historian Valentin Shelokhayev, an expert on the late Russian empire.

"A war's memory is preserved from generation to generation by the political system [that survives it]," said Shelokhayev, who sits on the academic board of the Institute of Russian History at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

"But other people came to power in 1917," he said.

Russia generally has a poor historical memory, Shelokhayev said. A prime example is the 1917 revolution: Once celebrated as the most important event in history, it has gradually been forgotten, he said.

Almost half of Russians, or 47 percent, said the Bolshevik Revolution did not matter to them, and another 15 percent had no opinion on the matter, according to a 2012 poll conducted by the state-run Public Opinion Foundation. The study surveyed 1,500 respondents nationwide.

Mixing Red & White

But the legacy of the Great War is finally hitting its stride in Russia, pundits said.

"Attention is mounting, thanks to the anniversary," Rudaya said.

The war can actually be said to have had a unique impact on modern Russia: Igor Girkin, aka Strelkov, the best-known warlord of the pro-Russian insurgency presently blazing in eastern Ukraine, is an avid historical re-enactor whose interests center on World War I troops, as well as the White Army forces that fought the Bolsheviks during the Civil War of 1917 to 1922.

However, Girkin — who has been known to impersonate tsarist dragoons and machine gunners alike, and whose former day job was that of an FSB officer — is also known to evoke Stalin-era war rules in his orders. In May, he was reported to have had two marauders executed in line with a Soviet martial law decree issued at the start of World War II in 1941.

World War I is gradually emerging from obscurity as the divide between the communist past and the tsarist times blur in the Russian public conscience, philosopher Goryunov said.

"These days, a Red commissar is shaking the hand of a White officer," Goryunov said.

"This is an unnatural, insane, neurotic blend," he said. "But miraculously, it works ... because the people honestly don't care."

Saving the Entente

After teaming up with France and Britain to join the war, Russia's contribution proved crucial to the Triple Entente's victory right from the start, when the opening of the Eastern Front foiled the German blitzkrieg that had threatened to destroy the French and British armies, historian Rudaya said.

Russia beat the Great Retreat in 1915, losing Poland, Lithuania and Galicia in today's western Ukraine, but counterattacked with the brilliant Brusilov Offensive in 1916, which broke the back of the Austro-Hungarian army.

General Alexei Brusilov, who led the offensive, has since been recognized as one of the best military commanders in Russian history, which is studded with superb war leaders.

At 1.6 million deaths, the offensive was also one of the bloodiest military operations in history, on par with the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942 to 1943.

Russia's World War I fight ended in 1917, when domestic chaos demoralized the army and led Russia to wage a separate peace with the Germans. At home, 1917 was marked by the abdication of the Romanovs and the Bolshevik rise to power.

Economic Wonder

Russia was not ready for the war when it happened — a trend later revisited in World War II. Military reform had been plodding along since the loss of the Japanese War of 1905, but money was too tight for any serious imperialist grabs, said Rudaya of the Historical Perspective Foundation.

"Russia had no solid offensive plans ... but was sucked into the war because of its obligations to its allies," agreed Shelokhayev of the Institute of Russian History.

However, the country weathered the pressure of war well: Russia's GDP only began to sink two years after the start of combat in 1916, at which point it lost a modest 10 percent, according to study published last year by Mark Harrison of the Warwick University in Britain and Andrei Markevich of Moscow's New Economic School.

By comparison, the GDP shrunk 48 percent during the Civil War, between 1918 and 1919, the study showed.

The Great Retreat, for example, was caused by "Ammo Hunger" which allowed the German artillery to pummel Russian positions in Poland and Galicia without hindrance. Despite a demand of 1.5 million artillery shells per month, Russia only produced 650,000 shells over the whole of 1914, according to a historical study published last year by Forbes Russia.

But the industry was rerouted, and within a year was cranking out nearly 800,000 shells per month, the study said.

Also, while Russia imported TNT for shells before the war from Germany, of all places, by 1917, it had stockpiled about 16,000 tons of domestically made explosives — more than enough ammunition for the bloodbath that would define the ensuing Civil War.

The unparalleled breakthrough was due to quality management of the military-industrial complex and patriotic zeal of Russian entrepreneurs, the study said.

But of the two people behind the industrial war effort, one fled from the Bolshevik regime to the U.S., and the other died in 1937 on the eve of his already-planned arrest.

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