

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

emphasis in these two books is largely Russo-centric, providing a degree of focus for an otherwise diverse range of subjects. Other nationalities of the tsarist and early Soviet polities feature more prominently in other volumes of the project (albeit not necessarily from a cultural perspective).



Unless otherwise noted, all dates before February 1918 are given in the Old Style (Julian) calendar, which was 13 days behind the New Style (Gregorian) calendar used in the West. The New Style calendar was adopted by the Russian government in February 1918. Russian names and terms have been transliterated according to the Library of Congress system (with exceptions for rulers' names and a few others that are widely known in their anglicized forms). Russian patronymics (full name or initial) have been included for individuals who are not well-known or readily identifiable (except where their patronymics are unknown). Places of publication of books cited in the footnotes have been included, except where unknown.



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