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‘Soldiers of the Word’: Soviet War Correspondents, Russian Nationalism and Masculinity from the Second World War to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

This project explores the effects of war on societies. It does so by analyzing the lives and works of individuals critical to the ways wars are experienced, interpreted and remembered: journalists and writers serving as frontline correspondents in two wars: WWII and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The personal and public lives of frontline reporters in both conflicts are central to this study. First, their lives are revelatory of important trends. Second, this group was critical in shaping popular perceptions of war and concomitantly ideals about sex roles and national identities. A discussion of the activities and impact of war correspondents in the politics of knowledge production about war, national character, victory and defeat will ultimately build a rewarding comparative framework for discussions of mass media’s role in times of war and the impact of coverage on ideals of nationalism. This study takes as its main source base not only published texts, broadcasts, memoirs, and archival materials produced by and about Soviet war correspondents, but also letters from readers and listeners about correspondents and their reports from the front.

Using archival sources, newspapers, literature and memoirs, I endeavor to understand how Soviet journalists during times of war viewed their professions, how they interacted with one another and their readers. In the course of my project, I have posed a number of questions. What kind of relationships did they form with their subjects and how did

they select heroic types to interview in their coverage? How did writers and reporters turned war correspondents understand their relationship to these wars? How did they mediate the extreme emotions of war? How did their experience of war and as oracles of warrior identity shape their post war views of domestic and international politics? How was war reporting and war related literature politicized and censored Communist party authorities? What was the link between Russian nationalism in the twentieth century and military conflicts? How did journalists' accounts of war and their memories of war change or reinforce ideals of manhood and womanhood? How did these narratives link Russian ethnic identities to gender norms?

Five months of research in Moscow archives, the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) and the Russian State Archive of New History (RGANI), have led to a number of preliminary conclusions and insights that will be further developed and published as a monograph and scholarly articles. Besides research in archival collections, while in Moscow, I collected literature, poetry and memoirs on the subject of World War II and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from the perspective of the Soviet participants.

At the start of my project I contended that the rise of Russian nationalism during WWII, in a state ostensibly dedicated to working class internationalism, was a product of changes in the relationships between men and notions of masculinity as much as it was a product of Communist party endeavors to instill loyalty at a time of profound national crisis. This hypothesis was supported by a wide range of source I encountered in the course of my research. Given the relative freedom to select their own approaches to reporting in the chaos of the early period of WWII, journalists on the frontline were instrumental in producing emotionally laden notions of duty and friendship among soldiers in the face of death for a national cause. The sanctification of camaraderie among men was a significant departure from journalistic practices and ways of imagining the Soviet collective before WWII. First, it was an abrupt turn from the atmosphere of suspicion and divisions along class and political lines in the preceding decades of revolutionary strife, Civil War, collectivization and the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s. Second, the change in themes after the start of the war, with its emphasis on male friendship, had a great deal to do with the effects of total war on all Soviet citizens and the frontline experience of the correspondents themselves. Soviet war correspondents during WWII were integrated fully into the fighting units and subsequently of the 943 war correspondents assigned to army and naval units, 225 perished at the front. Their full integration into the combat unit fostered a sense of shared mortal danger and soldierly fraternity that subverted the paternal authority and hierarchy inherent in the Stalin personality cult. The fraternity and self-assuredness born out of an imagined national consensus took on central roles in coverage and literature foretelling the inevitable and righteous victory of Russian civilization and humanism over "Nazi barbarism." The idealized traits of warrior masculinity, the selfless liberators, and saviors of the nation, infused ideals of masculinity and shaped the gender order for decades to come.

Many of the most prominent works published during and after the war were discussed in session of the Soviet Writers' Union and the stenographic reports, found in RGALI, are valuable source for understanding how the work was received, how the author explained their intentions and how criticisms of these works reflected changes in official positions on the multiple issues. The contours of Russian nationalism that permeate the work of journalists and writers during and after World War II took on new forms and diverged from official Russo-centrism because many writers turned war journalists experienced

their time on the frontline and in the war ravaged countryside as an eye opening exposure to the “people.” Traveling through small towns and villages, spending the night in peasant huts, living side by side with Russian soldiers, became defining experience for writers, some of whom called it “romantic.” These impressions were articulated and dispersed when they returned to Moscow to report on their work to their colleagues and permeate stenographic reports of evenings organized by the Soviet Writers’ Union Military Committee and in subsequent published texts and private correspondence.

A great deal of archival materials, especially in RGASPI’s collection of materials from the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Communist Party Central Committee (f. 17, op. 125) facilitate insight into evolving practices and rules of the Soviet Union’s domestic and international media systems and networks of foreign correspondents. Soviet officials struggled to develop and improve a maladroit system of broadcasting and reporting intended for foreign audiences. The shortcomings of the Soviet news services such as TASS and SovInform-bureau were recognized as significant handicaps in the competition with non-Soviet news services and later in the atmosphere of the Cold War when Soviet reporters and writers were expected to forcefully struggle for the hearts and minds of non-Soviet audiences. Previously classified documents from the Communist party archive reveal the extent to which Soviet authorities monitored and studied press networks and information ministries of Europeans such as the Nazis and the British. These sources vividly demonstrate their efforts to “keep up” with and understand media competitors in order to develop a language and thematic that would appeal to foreign readers. Materials from RGANI for the period after 1948 to 1991 are replete with proposals and criticism of the Soviet media system abroad and the never resolved inability of Soviet narratives intended for an international audience to communicate effectively.

My hypothesis that writers and journalists thought that the start of World War II and the Soviet Union’s eventual victory was a sign of a complete break with the past was correct. This sense of a break was so strong that it was directly attacked by authorities who insisted that the war was part of a continuous march of Soviet development and that Soviet victory only proved the inevitability of world revolution rather than as a sign of a new era. The subject of national rebirth, individual and collective heroism and the ultimate defeat of what once seemed to be an unbeatable force, appeared in the works of many journalist as proof that this war gave birth to a new man. This was an unacceptable interpretation for Communist authorities who insisted writers demonstrate that the Soviet system as it existed prior to the war gave birth to a new kind of person destined to be victorious against fascism. This divergence between the vision of a break with the past among journalists and Communist party authorities contained fissures on the issue of Russian nationalism and the role of the Russian “people” in the ultimate victory. Those who stressed a break with the past also tended to point to “the people” rather than the Communist party as a leading force in victory over fascism. Although Stalin may have singled out the “great Russian” people as the leading ethnic group in this conflict, the tendency to single out the Russians as the primary force of victory was problematic and not necessarily enforced among writers and journalist. It appears that a number of other officials in the Agitation and Propaganda department sensed the implications of over emphasizing “Russians” which inevitably downplayed the role of revolutionary ideology and the Communist party in the struggle (besides offending other ethnic groups who fought for victory).

Another prominent theme is a struggle between many writers-journalists and censors over the role of the frontline journalist as a hero figure. There were repeated criticisms of writers for “I-ism”, in other words putting themselves at the center of the action. Many writers were accused of making themselves seem important in the story they were telling or expressing opinions about the course of the war or the decisions of military leaders, including Stalin. Indeed, the line could be blurred between warrior and writer. Some of the frontline journalist, all of whom wore uniforms with officer insignias, participated directly in combat because soldiers in the chaos of the battle field turned to the journalist, who they mistook for officers, and expected them to lead. Some writers welcomed the opportunity to prove themselves because they wanted to overcome their reputation as “soft” intelligentsia. This striving to prove one a heroic “hard” and brave man was a central experience for many and this metamorphosis seemed to occur in the midst of “real” men and “the people” far away from urban intellectual life.

Secret reports to authorities from (and about) journalists shed light on a number of other dynamics in wartime Soviet Union. Some of the frontline correspondents used their position as mobile representatives of newspapers to search out and collect foodstuffs, motorcycles and other expensive equipment and resell in urban areas. Editors of newspapers such as *Krasnaia zvezda* selected new furnishings from properties confiscated from Nazi officials once the Red Army occupied German territory. A number of journalists also wrote to authorities during and immediately after the war to decry the behavior of soldiers and officers either on leave or after demobilization. They describe the rise of lawlessness and banditry with the arrival of demobilized troops. A number of journalists also reported in secret memos on the rise of anti-Semitism which they ascribed to attitudes picked up by soldiers and then brought to the home-front. As the war came to an end, journalists engaged in the politics of personal attack on one another based on “moral” principles at a time when the war had destroyed family structures and anyone could be accused of failing to remain faithful to their wives. Soldiers and officers during the war inundated writers such as Konstantin Simonov and other officials with letters complaining about the behavior of wives at home or about the behavior of Soviet women in occupied areas. There was a debate among officials on ways to respond to requests from soldiers to publicly rebuke women who would not wait. Here we see the development of a new sexual mores regime aimed at public figures and intellectuals.

There was a tug of war to define emotions in response to war, combat, loss and recovery. Mediating the extreme emotions of war was a difficult task for writers and reporters on the frontlines. Excessive focus on emotions, especially on the emotion of fear, elicited objections from military and political censors who insisted such topics were not reflective of a Marxist materialist approach to society. “Fear” became so politicized because it was associated with the first few months of the war when Soviet troops were retreating and writers struggled to find a way to talk about retreat without offending official sensibilities. Communist party officials were not unanimous on the subject either. Many were willing to see a discussion of retreat because it stood in such sharp contrast to the subsequent course of the war when Soviet technology and the resolve of Soviet or Russian troops repelled the once seemingly invincible enemy. Fear was also a central and contentious theme in the coverage of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. The guerillas encountered by Soviet troops appeared “fearless” to journalists like Gennady Bocharov and Artem Borovik while Soviet troops appeared to live in a constant state of alarm.

Journalists and writers were initially encouraged to instill hatred for the enemy as one of their primary duties by publicizing atrocities against Soviet civilians and soldiers. Later in

the war and in the post-war period besides assailing authors like Ilya Ehrenburg for excessive “hate” in their work, there was also an attempt to reign in mourning, pessimism and sadness in the work of writers. Moreover, as the war progressed, the language of anti-Nazism became deeply intertwined with hatred of Germans as a racial category, a special “beast” capable of atrocities. By 1944 Communist party authorities and the Agitation and Propaganda department began a campaign against such extreme emotions in literature and reports from the front. Some authorities were uncomfortable with the notion that Germans as an ethnic group were “naturally” predestined to act like beasts. This flew in the face of Marxist materialism and could also flame racist thinking among the Soviet populations about their own primordial or biologically predetermined ethnic and national identities.

The meaning of war and the image of the Russian soldier as a hero liberator were further refined and politicized for other ends especially during the era of Brezhnev. The end of Brezhnev’s rule over the Soviet Union brought an intervention into a foreign country where Soviet forces confronted a highly motivated guerilla force funded by enemies of the Communist regime. This war and its coverage by reporters finally allowed to describe conditions on the ground after 1986 turned the image of the hero upside down and reshaped the meaning of journalism for Russian writers and reporters. Because, Aleksandr Prokhanov, a former journalist in Afghanistan, and the current editor of the right wing *Zavtra* newspaper, is now a regular figure on Russian television, I was able to follow the ways Prokhanov uses the legacy of World War II in his advocacy for the resurgence of Russian influence and “virility” in international politics. Being in Moscow made it possible to acquire a newly published biography of a Gennady Bocharov, a central figure in the coverage of Afghanistan. All of these resources and experiences are essential building blocks for a monograph where I will compare and contrast the work and impact of Soviet frontline journalists on images of war, nationalism and gender roles.

Materials gathered in Moscow will contribute to a better understanding of the role of media in the Soviet Union and Russia’s current political dynamics. The questions raised and the arguments developed by such a study are of direct relevance to contemporary issues such as the role of journalists as witnesses and arbiters of personal, group and national ideals in a time of war.