Review of Carleton, G. Russia: The Story of War. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2017 by Professor Andrew Monaghan,

In Russia: The Story of War, Gregory Carleton, Professor of Russian studies and Chair of the Department of International Literary and Cultural Studies at Tufts University, presents what he calls Russia's war myth, illuminating the common stock of assumptions and consistent vocabulary that underpin it. This is myth as sacred tale, central to Russian national identity and a frame of reference based on archetypal sets of causality, character types, scenarios and outcomes on which Russia's past is structured. In so doing, he depicts the duality of Russia's image: to many outsiders, it is an insatiably aggressive country, but to many Russians it is a country that is a defender, protector, even saviour, fighting one invader after the next. The distance between these different interpretations is unbridgeable, he suggests, even though they come from the same events and actions.

Carleton draws from a wide range of sources from across Russian culture to make his point, and his argument
is structured across seven substantive chapters, with a short epilogue that includes the war in Ukraine. The
book also includes a short "filmology" as an Appendix, referencing relevant Russian films, miniseries and
television shows, and a useful and interesting collection of maps, images and photos from the author's
personal collection.

Indeed, the book serves as a short, intense course in Russian culture, weaving in the work of Pushkin,
Dostoyevsky, Karamzin, Tsvetaeva, Alexievich, and particularly Tolstoy's War and Peace: 'nothing to this day,
even from World War II, can dethrone it as the statement of Russia at war', Carleton argues [p.51]. And there
are many others, too, perhaps less well-known in the Euro-Atlantic community, but deserving of recognition,
including Boris Vasiliev, author of His Name Wasn't Listed, a book that Vladimir Putin included in his top ten
list of books foreigners should read to familiarise themselves with the Soviet/Russian experience of the

Second World War.

Chapter 1 establishes the foundations of the war myth. 'Invasion, resistance, self-reliance and self-sacrifice
constitute the pillars on which Russia's grand narrative of war rests' [p.29], Carleton argues, and 'the ideational
fusing of land and faith combined with the need to protect it permeates Russia's sense of war to the extent
that it can function as a signature mark of national identity' [p.25]. Carleton reflects on both Russia's
salvational role as both a shield and a sacrifice, saving Europe from destruction by the Mongols and as a
country 'becoming Russia under the trial of invasion' [p.14].

But simultaneously he develops the theme of 'Rus becoming Russia as an expanding nation, itself attacking
and invading neighbours' [p.14]. This sets the scene for recurring arguments throughout the book, and draws
the myth's direct links between Alexander Nevsky, Dmitri Donskoi and Ivan the Terrible through the ages
to today: 'past as present'. Thus Carleton notes how The Military History of Our Country, published in 2003 by
the Russian Defence Ministry, points to how Nevsky's 'feats instil caution about Russia's neighbours,
particularly those in the West, and Donskoi's victory underscores that national unity is the precursor to
success. Ivan's conquest of Kazan demonstrates that sometimes the best way to neutralize a foreign threat is
to swallow it up' [p.20].

Chapter 2 takes as its central focus Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. From here, Carleton riffs forwards
in time, to Russia's wars with the Turks, and back, to the Time of Troubles. The chapter illuminates how the
myth frames the roots of Russia's greatness in terms of feats of arms, and how to attribute Napoleon's defeat
to the cold was seen as an 'unpardonable insult'.

Chapter 3 addresses World War II, or the Great Patriotic War as it is known in Russia, with all its echoes of
1812. Here, Carleton weaves in not just the official myth of pride in sacrifice, but also Russian critiques of it,
particularly shame in carnage. He vividly juxtaposes the official line, for instance, of the 1943 Soviet crossing
of the Dniepr ("the River of Heroes"), with Astafev's criticism of the idiocy of command that cost thousands
of lives at the "river of hell".

In chapter 4, Carleton changes focus from the level of war to that of battle, particularly to Borodino in 1812,
and to the battle at Brest Fortress in 1941, to reflect on the Russian soldier's resilience, and the suffering,
death and sacrifice on which the Russian myth of exceptionalism is built. Thus he describes the relationship
between "stoikost", a blend of courage, resilience and defiance, and the extensive casualty lists that have
usually accompanied Russia's wars. He points to the 'eerie conclusions' a westerner can encounter in the
degree of pride taken in Russian military history: A lengthy casualty list could be interpreted as a positive sign
because more dead meant less retreat, which, in turn, meant more "stoikost" on display on the battlefield
[p.130].

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 range wider still across the Russian experiences of war from the Russo-Japanese war to
Afghanistan and Chechnya, and the struggles to balance the courage of individuals â€“ such as Admirals
Kornilov and Nakhimov in the defence of Sevastopol during the Crimean War, and units, such as the crews
of the ships Variag and Koreets at Chemulpo in February 1904, with the brutality and appalling conditions of
service. In this way, Carleton explores how defeat and fiasco have been transformed by the myth into
heroism.

This is not just fascinating historical and cultural reading: the arguments throughout the book are an
education for those trying to understand Russian defence and security thinking today, and offer answers to
three prominent and related questions that are often paradoxical to Western observers. First, the book
explains Russian fears of how invasion and encirclement go hand in hand. In his discussions of the invasions
of 1812 and 1941, for instance, Carleton shows how it seemed that Russia took upon its shield the blows not
just of France and Germany, but of 'the whole West that rose with them'. As he states of the war in 1812,
'for Russia it seemed that Europe â€“ or the non-Orthodox West â€“ had united against them. Alone, Russia
would decide its own fate and in so doing change the world' [p.44]. Encirclement is isolation, Carleton argues,
and it is not just geographic, but spiritual.

Second, although he does not make it explicit, Carleton explains Moscow's current fears about "Colour
Revolution" and regime change operations. In chapter 6, "Deadliest Sin", he discusses in detail the Russian
fear of domestic instability. 'If, according to myth, no foreign power can vanquish Russia', he suggests, 'then
only one thing can bring it down, and those seeds of destruction will first sprout on its own land. Internal
discontent and division constitute Russia's Achilles' heel' [p.218]. Fratricide is seen to open Russia up to
outside predators â€“ a fear that dates back to the Middle Ages but repeatedly recurs through to modern times
to the Civil War. This is precisely how the Russian leadership today understands Western "Hybrid Warfare".
Putin has often spoken on this theme, and Carleton cites his inaugural speech in 2000. For further supporting
evidence, he might have added that Putin stated in late 2014 that 'the history lesson about periods of
fragmentation must trigger a danger signal. We must treat this very carefully and not allow such things under
any circumstances. We must know our history'.

Third, Carleton discusses how Moscow sees efforts to revise history as a national security question and part
of the "Information War". He points to the EU's declaration in 2008 identifying the USSR with Nazi
Germany as partners in crimes against humanity, but with the USSR 'given first billing'. Carleton is clear:
'downplaying the Russian role, disparaging it, ignoring it ... there is no greater affront, since it effectively
writes them out of the greatest moment of their history' [p.105]. This, he argues, is seen in Moscow as a high
stakes battle in the "information war", with the 'real goal' being seen in Moscow to be an attempt to form a
new 'pan-European identity on an anti-Russian basis and at the expense of Russia' [p.108].

Throughout the book, Carleton treads a fine line between laying out the Russian myth and juxtaposing it with
Western views of that same history, while also gently reminding the reader that others, including the UK and
USA, have their own war myths. Carleton is admirably concise in keeping the text to 256 pages plus notes.
Drawing the line on what to exclude must have been difficult: there is so much to say on these all themes,
and there must have been strong temptation to link the myth more explicitly and thoroughly to contemporary
policy and rhetoric, to include more on the war in Syria, and perhaps even to reflect on how the Russian
approach to History and its methodology differ from current Western approaches, compounding the sense
of different conclusions from the same evidence. Nevertheless, this is a fine book â€“ essential reading forÃ‚Â those who seek to understand what "Russia at war" really means.

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