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# The First World War in Contemporary Russian Historiography - New Areas of Research

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## Abstract

*For a long time in Soviet (Russian) historiography, the First World War (WWI) was known as the “forgotten war”. Therefore it can be said that during Soviet times, the history of WWI was in many respects only studied informally. Over the last 15 to 20 years, however, this topic has experienced something of a renaissance in Russia. This can be seen in the publication of a considerable number of sources and in the expansion of the perspectives of modern historiography – historians have begun to study topics that had, until recently, almost never been examined. The centenary of WWI no doubt has had an influence on the growth of interest in research regarding the war – at the state level, we notice an attempt to revive the historical memory of events that happened a century ago. In this article, the major trends of contemporary Russian historiography of the First World War will be examined and analysed.*

## Key Words

First World War, Russia, Soviet historiography, contemporary historiography, war literature.

This article is titled “The First World War in Contemporary Russian Historiography –New Areas of Research”. I deliberately made this specification, because currently, there is in Russian historiography, increasing interest in the history of the First World War. Not only is the number of publications growing daily, but the number of research issues brought up by experts is also expanding. Many of these issues are novel in the context of Russian historiography, which is also why it is almost impossible to cover the entire gamut of problems in modern Russian historiography in one article. This article therefore restricts itself to examining the most notable achievements that historians have registered over the last few years.

In order to understand how historiographic approaches and interpretations have changed during the last decades, it is necessary to remember how this tragedy was studied after the end of the First World War by Soviet historians.

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Even Mikhail Pokrovskiy, the famous Russian historian of the 1920s, called the First World War the “forgotten war”,<sup>1</sup> and in many respects he was right. During the Soviet era, this area of study was not popular amongst historians, to say the least. Immediately after the end of the war, Russia underwent huge political changes. Both the revolution of 1917 and the civil war shook society to its core and fundamentally altered its character, arguably overshadowing politically the events that had taken place between 1914 and 1918.

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To interpret the past, including the First World War, Soviet historical sciences used in the main the class approach; there were therefore “popular”, “attractive”, “irrelevant” and even “closed” or redundant issues. The events of the past were examined in the light of their importance in the formation of socialism and communism. According to the historian Vladimir Mal’kov, the study of the First World War “didn’t carry a systematic character and was even considered as having lost its significance”.<sup>2</sup> Which begs the question of why this happened.

The attitude towards the First World War in Soviet society and therefore

in Soviet historical studies was very tendentious. The war and its aims were considered imperialistic, and Lenin’s comment “about changing the imperialistic war into a civil war” took predominance when characterising the conflict. The war was understood as a defence of the monarchy and the bourgeoisie. It therefore did not have real heroes – they had all protected tsarism, after all, and in the Soviet way of thinking, heroes were only those that defended the revolution. Many of the heroes and eminent commanders of the First World War later were the ones that fought against the Bolsheviks during the civil war, which also left its mark on the attitude of Soviet sciences towards the events of 1914-1918.

Moreover, Russia actually did not gain any striking victory that could be used for political and ideological purposes. Of crucial importance is the fact that Russia dropped out of the war by concluding the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk before Germany was defeated, which meant that Russia had lost to the defeated country. This to my mind also had an impact on the attitude of historians towards the First World War.

However, this does not mean that during the Soviet era the historiography did not appeal to the First World War. The subject, of course, could not be avoided – after all the two revolutions (in February and October 1917) had taken place during the war. Thus, some

of the topics, such as the actual events of the war, foreign policy, the history of the labour and socialist movements, and the history of the European countries received a certain amount of coverage during the war. The history of Russia at the same time was analysed in the light of preconditions for carrying out the October Revolution. That is, numerous studies had been carried out, but they were solely of a tendentious nature and were devoted mostly to social, economic and political problems. Furthermore, when the Second World War broke out in 1939, this particular subject matter became even less of a priority.

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The centenary of WWI no doubt has had an influence on the growth of interest in research regarding the war – at the state level, we notice an attempt to revive the historical memory of events that happened a century ago.

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Recently, even outwardly, attitudes towards the First World War have changed noticeably, and it should be noted this is not only connected to the centenary of the outbreak of the war. Since the collapse of the USSR, interest in this field has continued to grow. In different regions of the country, various events are held, including, conferences,

seminars and “roundtables”. The number of academic publications has increased exponentially, memorials to the participants of the war have been opened (there is an impressive monument in the city of Kaliningrad for example), and films about the war and historical personalities have been produced (the recent premiere in Moscow of the film “Unnoticed Heroes of an Unknown War” about the participation of the Volga Tatars in the war, garnered great interest not only in Tatarstan but beyond). Many academic events are held by the Russian Association of the First World War Historians. The centenary of the outbreak of the war was also a reason behind the creation in the State Duma of the Russian Federation of a special commission that oversaw preparations for the centenary of the outbreak of war. Thus, it can be seen that the study of the history of the First World War is now supported at the national/federal level. The basis of this change is the awareness of the need for more in-depth studies of the past, and the desire to understand the meaning and the place of the First World War as one of the greatest events of the twentieth century, which changed the face of the world and Russia in particular. This was also demonstrated by a recent representative conference in Moscow, dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the war, in which I had

the opportunity to participate –the list of the section names alone confirmed the increased interest in Russia in the First World War.

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It is clear that over the past two decades historians have had the opportunity to analyse these events without any government regulation or interference; in other words, more objectively and more comprehensively than ever before. This has resulted in numerous studies on a wide variety of aspects of the history of the war. Unfortunately it is nigh on impossible to describe them all in one article of limited length.

It should be noted here that the desire to be rid of the ideological dogmas of the Bolshevik past sometimes plays a cruel joke in the estimations of history: some historians and journalists now stand for the diametrically opposite position – the opponents of the war for them are now traitors, and the generals, officers and soldiers are the only true patriots and defenders of the monarchy. In fact, we can see the continuation of this one-sided approach when considering the question of who is to be blamed for the outbreak of the war. The

Romanov dynasty in this interpretation is idealized, and Germany and Austria-Hungary are considered the guilty parties. Subjectivity in historical works clearly continues to exist.

At this juncture, it is worth highlighting the major themes and issues that are of particular interest to modern Russian historians, and to highlight the most important trends in the development of Russian historiography of the First World War.

In recent years, there have been two notable global trends. First of all, much attention has been given to the source base, primarily to the publication of documents and memoirs; secondly, the subject area has expanded significantly. Many different kinds of documents,<sup>3</sup> memoirs and diaries of contemporary witnesses of the war – the memoirs of Nikolay Astrov, Pjotr Badmaev, Aleksei Brusilov, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Ivan Grygorovich, Alexander Rediger and Grand Duke Andrei Vladimirovich<sup>4</sup> for instance – have been published. Works by emigrant historians (Nikolai Golovin, Victor Kobylin, Melgunov) have also been published,<sup>5</sup> and books (including some of the new studies by foreign authors such as William Fuller, Eric Lor, Giles Macdono and Norman Stone) have been translated.<sup>6</sup>

There are a large variety of themes in the works on the history of the First World War. General works<sup>7</sup> and

works about battles at different fronts, including the Caucasian and Persian fronts,<sup>8</sup> have been issued.

Another fact worth noting is that fundamental studies on the generals and officers of the Russian army have also been published, the most striking example being the two-volume work by S.V. Volkov entitled *The Generals and Staff Officers of the Russian Army: A Martyrology's Experience*,<sup>9</sup> which provides an account and description of some of the generals and officers that participated in the First World War, some of whom then died during the Civil War or in exile, or were subject to repression in the 1920s and 1930s. This reference work also gives the estimate of the number of Russian casualties during the war at 9,347,300.

The problem of captivity – one of the more recent and more significant important topics of the last decade – has also generated much attention from the modern historian.<sup>10</sup> Here it is important to mention a work by Oksana Nagornaya titled *Another Military Experience: Russian Prisoners of the First World War in Germany*, published in 2010. This study, in my opinion, is an example of a qualitative analysis of almost all of the aspects of the history of Russian prisoners of war (POW) in Germany, in which Nagornaya explores the history of Russian prisoners of the First World War in terms of everyday history, in

that she considers and conceptualises captivity as an experience of the “small person”, or the “common person”. Of particular note is the fact that in her monograph, Nagornaya brings to light topics that had previously been little studied in Russian historiography, such as the feelings experienced by prisoners of war when coming into contact with a foreign culture, their everyday lives, the relationships within the POW community, and their reactions to the political turmoil in Europe. The camp is seen as a symbol of the twentieth century, as by the beginning of the First World War it had become “an integral means of warfare”.<sup>11</sup> Nagornaya considers Russian prisoners of war in German camps not as objects/victims of violence, as was previously the case in historiography, but mostly as “involved subjects that influenced the character of the camp system and the experience of detention.”<sup>12</sup>

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The history of Russia at the same time was analysed in the light of preconditions for carrying out the October Revolution.

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It should also be noted that historians have not only undertaken studies of Russian prisoners of war but also the fate of German prisoners of war and those of its allies – including the Ottoman Empire– held captive on

Russian territory. A research project currently being undertaken by the author of this article and a group of researchers at Kazan University seeks to describe and analyse the fate of Turkish prisoners held in the province of Kazan and other provinces of the Middle Volga.

Historical research quite often appeals to the history of the home front; here, such problems as the military potential of Russia, its economic development and the state of its finances are raised.<sup>13</sup> Historians pay much attention to studying the influence of war on Russian society, with a number of new works devoted to the study of the various problems that arose as a result of war in the regions.<sup>14</sup>

The research into the history of the First World War in recent times has acquired an increasing diversity in Russian historiography. As an example of this, we can consider some of the research trends in the Republic of Tatarstan, one of the regions of the Russian Federation. We should first of all note that the Middle Volga region is a multinational territory with a multi-confessional/multi-religious population. As the Muslim factor played a considerable role during the war but was also somewhat difficult to study during the Soviet period, historians are now particularly active in addressing this imbalance. Thus, Dilyara Usmanova in her publications

has investigated the experience of the Duma and the factional and non-parliamentary activities of the Muslim deputies, as well as the influence of the national-religious movement of the Muslim peoples of the Empire over these activities. In many ways she has succeeded in analysing the position, characteristics and significance of the Muslim representatives in the process of forming the parliamentary system of the country, including the period of the First World War.<sup>15</sup>

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Rustem Ciunchuk uses a new methodological approach to study the history of national relations in the early twentieth century, a period that includes the First World War. He deals with a complex of ethno-confessional and regional issues through the prism of the first Russian Parliament, the election campaign and parliamentary activities of non-Russian deputies of the State Duma and the newly formed national political elite.<sup>16</sup> This perspective makes it possible also to demonstrate the

reflection in parliamentary discussions of certain specific national and religious issues, including those pertaining to Muslims.<sup>17</sup> In a summarizing article entitled “The national question in the State Duma on the eve and during the First World War,” R. Ciunchuk shows that the Duma was the only legal site during the First World War to discuss national issues and was where a parliamentary struggle against xenophobia and intolerance took place, a forum in which Polish, Russian, Muslim, German, Jewish, Ukrainian, Armenian, Baltic and other issues were keenly discussed. However, despite the political loyalty of the national elites of Duma, the authorities, even during the extreme conditions of war, refused to admit the equal rights of peoples, which served only to deepen already existing divisions and thus hasten the disintegration of the Empire.<sup>18</sup>

An international conference titled ‘Tatar People and the Peoples of the Volga Region during the First World War’ was held in October 2014 at The Institute of History of the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences. The participants presented regional historians’ newest and most interesting research trends, which included topics as diverse as but not limited to ethnicity and religion, regional economy; public moods and everyday life in the rear; the state of prisoners of war, refugees and internees; the socio-cultural development of the

Volga region during the war; the First World War in the lives of the famous in the Volga region; the memory of war: source studies and the culturological aspects; the consequences of war from a “human perspective” and the problems of demography, family and childhood.<sup>19</sup>

Historians have also drawn attention to topics connected with the role of Islam and Muslims in the First World War. The Muslim subjects of the Russian Empire were at that time in an extremely difficult situation – the state authorities openly expressed their suspicions and their distrust, believing that the Muslims at any moment were ready to support the Ottoman Empire and the Sultan’s call for jihad against the Entente.<sup>20</sup> A monograph by Iskander Gilyazov and Leila Gataullina, published in Kazan in 2014,<sup>21</sup> for the first time in Russian historiography deals with the topic of Muslim prisoners of war held in German captivity during the war and examines German attempts to use the Islamic factor as leverage. The monograph refers to the history of the two so-called “special” camps built to house and detain Muslim prisoners of war: Halbmondlager and Weinberglager. It also shows the various elements of German propaganda that sought to convince the Muslim POWs to join the ‘holy war’ on the side of Germany and the Ottoman Empire. The history of the First World War had not yet attracted



the attention of Russian historians from this perspective, in that they used to examine the events of the war primarily from the Russian side, with little reference to sources from foreign archives. In referring substantially to a considerable bulk of material from the German archives, this monograph can be considered one of the new trends in Russian historiography.

Interestingly, in the historical literature we may find new interpretations of the causes of the revolutionary crisis in Russia in 1917, which was often presented as the result of a conspiracy, and of the activities of certain external forces and Russian revolutionaries. Such interpretations had been studied specifically until recently,<sup>22</sup> but now a number of researchers believe that the collapse of Tsarist Russia was the result, amongst various reasons, of corruption, a weakened Russian economy, and lack of talent amongst many military commanders. This assessment, for example, was supported by many of the participants at various international conferences held on the anniversary of the First World War in September 2004, November 2013 and September

2014.<sup>23</sup> During these conferences, participants paid much attention to the political outcomes and consequences of the Great War. They also affirmed that a great number of Russian historians consider the period between 1914 and 1945 as an integral historical period of the world wars, local conflicts and revolutionary upheavals, that paved the way for human progress towards industrial modernization.

## Conclusion

It should be noted that the literature that has been published in the last 10-15 years on the history of the First World War is very extensive. In this article, the most important accomplishments of Russian historiography have been underscored. It is possible that some aspects may have been overlooked. Nevertheless, this clearly shows the diversity of interests amongst modern Russian historians with regards to some of the newest and more novel issues pertaining to the history of what is arguably the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century.

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