A Negentropic Society?
Wartime and Postwar Soviet History

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In April 1975, in one of his first public statements after being blacklisted in the aftermath of the Soviet-led invasion, Vaclav Havel wrote a lengthy open letter to Gustav Husák, the general secretary of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party. In “Dear Dr. Husák,” as the letter became known, Havel broached several themes that would characterize his later writings: the alleged moral and spiritual crisis that beset Czechoslovakia after 1968; the role of culture as a means of individual and societal self-awareness; the dangers of “consumer bliss”; and the question, why so many Czechoslovakians acquiesced to the formation of an “impressive image of a totally united society.” Yet “Dear Dr. Husák” is atypical among Havel’s early writings for its premonitory character or, depending on one’s vantage point, its wishful thinking. Whereas Havel famously prescribed in “The Power of the Powerless” (1978) how Czechoslovakians might act to end communist rule by “living in truth,” he argued in “Dear Dr. Husák” that the system was doomed by its internal logic. “The entire political practice of the present regime,” Havel wrote, “… confirms that those concepts which were always crucial for its program—order, calm, consolidation, ‘guiding the nation out of its crisis,’ ‘halting disruption,’ ‘assuaging hot tempers’ and so on—have finally acquired the same lethal meaning that they have for every regime committed to entropy…. True enough, the country is calm. Calm as a morgue or a grave, would you not say?”

In Havel’s view, the rhetorical power of a “regime committed to entropy” lay in an implied teleology that gave critics of Czechoslovakian socialism cause for hope. A function of the second law of thermodynamics, entropy describes the universal propensity of matter to decay. It presupposes movement from a higher to a lower order or from differentiation to randomness. Although Havel did not elaborate on the other entropic regimes whose demise he invoked as a warning for Husák, his belief in the latent, inexorable decay of Czechoslovakian socialism anticipated a common mode of thinking about Soviet history in its final, postwar decades. This mode of thinking is characterized by the assumption that behind its seemingly immutable façade,

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Soviet rule was mortally compromised by flaws inherent to it. Martin Malia was a case in point when he asserted that the causes of the Soviet collapse stretched back to the moment Stalin’s heirs naively undertook the impossible task of fissioning Soviet socialism from Stalinism. In Malia’s formulation, the latter was the “peak towards which Soviet history had been building since October”; everything that followed was on the downward slope. Perceptions of decay can also be found in a growing number of studies that emphasize the limits or failures of reform in the 1950s and 1960s and the resulting chasm between an educated and consumption-oriented society, on the one hand, and the crude political tools and command economy that Soviet leaders had at their disposal to meet its demands, on the other. Latent decay is the backdrop for Alexei Yurchak’s influential study on the faltering of Soviet ideology after Stalin’s death. It figures in Iurii Aksiutin’s contention that Khrushchev’s “de-sacralization of the leader” at the 20th Party Congress led to a dangerous “de-sacralization of communist ideas” in subsequent decades. Decay is present in much of the recent literature on nationalism in the Soviet Union.

which highlights the central irony that the Soviet Union, an “incubator of new nations,” cultivated the centrifugal identities that wrenched the federal structure apart in 1991.\(^7\) Even Gorbachev’s cohort unwittingly contributed to the perception of decay by dismissing the preceding era—the Brezhnev years—as one of “stagnation.” On a stroll with Gorbachev in Pitsunda, Georgia, in 1984, Eduard Shevardnadze confided his view that everything was rotten.\(^8\)

It is not my intention to challenge Havel’s notion of the entropic regime, or its historiographical corollary in Soviet history, the long-chronology or inherent-flaw interpretation of collapse that many scholars have embraced. However, the new works on wartime and postwar Soviet history under review here suggest that these views need to be refined. Like temperature, entropy has no opposite in thermodynamics. The Soviet Union, however, was not similarly constrained. During its last decades, Soviet society often exhibited characteristics contrary to those Havel envisioned—a capacity for self-organization, resilience, regeneration, redefinition, and creation of new social forms and structures. To borrow a neologism used by the Soviet sociologist Eduard Markarian, these are the hallmarks of social negentropy.\(^9\) Taken together, the works reviewed here suggest that negentropy was a central characteristic of wartime and postwar Soviet society.

In view of the fact that the Soviet Union outlasted both Stalinism and the war, its capacity for negentropy may be self-evident. Much of the archive-based literature on the social history of the 1930s concerns activities and behaviors that were clearly negentropic in effect, such as patronage, blat, and mutual protection circles.\(^10\) These were individual and collective efforts to mitigate, often with admirable creativity and persistence, the ordinary and mortal challenges of Stalinism. As Sheila Fitzpatrick concluded in her social history of urban life in the 1930s, Homo Sovieticus was, above all else, a survivor.\(^11\) Yet the Eastern Front of World War II was a destructive event like no other. Tens of thousands of square kilometers of Soviet territory—


\(^11\) Sheila Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 227. There is substantial evidence suggesting that some of these behaviors persisted to the end of the Soviet period and beyond.
including its industrial heartland, where more than 40 percent of its prewar population lived—were occupied, or threatened with occupation, by the Wehrmacht and its allies. Tens of thousands of settlements were devastated. And the human toll was immense, perhaps as high as 27 million dead in the Soviet Union alone, with several million more permanently disabled. Even the Holocaust left an indelible Soviet imprint. Including territories annexed in 1939, nearly half of all Holocaust victims were Soviet citizens. In Timothy Snyder’s memorable description, the lands of the Soviet Union’s western frontier were part of the “bloodlands” of Europe. Accounting for survival—of both citizen and state—amid this unprecedented bloodletting sheds light not only on the novel turns of late Stalinism, such as the popular hopes and expectations that characterized those first halcyon months after 9 May, but also on long-term developments that indicate that decay and collapse were not the sum of Soviet history after Stalin.

How the Soviet government and its citizens responded to the existential threat of war is the subject of Rebecca Manley’s To the Tashkent Station and Anna Krylova’s Soviet Women in Combat. Manley’s book details the evacuation of some 16.5 million Soviet citizens to the east. If evacuees were fortunate, they were able to settle somewhere reasonably safe and only mildly uncomfortable for the duration of the war. But often this was not the case. Manley describes how Stalingrad was both a major transit and reception point for evacuees in 1941, before becoming subject to its own chaotic evacuation in 1942, as German armies advanced in the south. Even Tashkent, the primary destination in Central Asia for evacuees, witnessed extreme deprivation. While in transit to that city, many evacuees whiled away their time dreaming about the “city of bread,” the title of Alexander Neverov’s popular novel about Tashkent. On arrival there, they instead faced family separation, homelessness, disease, and starvation. The hubristic imprudence of settling displaced persons in Stalingrad and the reality of life in Tashkent illustrate the contradiction that is Manley’s central concern. Soviet authorities had been drawing up evacuation plans for the western frontier since at least 1928. They were hypervigilant of the dangers of uncontrolled, spontaneous population movement (hence the propiska system for urban residency, the long delay in granting peasants internal passports, and so on). And they operated within


a political framework that sought, in myriad ways, to make the population “legible.” Nonetheless, the evacuation went as no one had planned; in fact, in many cases that Manley describes, the evacuation proceeded despite state planning.

To a large extent, this chaos reflected the speed of Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union. Frontier defenses were so quickly overwhelmed that communities thought to be safe had only days or weeks to pack their belongings and depart for destinations in the east. During the first year of the war, when Soviet forces were in retreat across the broad swath of the Eastern Front, evacuees vied with military and industrial resources for limited space on trains, trucks, airplanes, automobiles, and carts. Many simply walked. It quickly became apparent that more than a decade of evacuation planning had been for naught. One high-ranking official in the Commissariat of Transportation later observed, with some diplomacy, that he acquired evacuation experience on the job, “during the course of the war” (30). Contrary to the claims of later Soviet scholarship, it was impossible in this context to honor, in their entirety, the humanitarian aspects of prewar evacuation plans, particularly the privileging of the “non-able-bodied” population—women, children, disabled persons, and the elderly. Manley shows that this catchall was gradually winnowed in the first months of the war so that it corresponded with Soviet priorities. Children, youth approaching the age of military service, family members of soldiers and state employees, women with children, and the intelligentsia were privileged; women without children and the elderly were not. According to Manley, wartime evacuations thus “reflected not only the priorities of the regime but also a particular vision of Soviet society—one that was urban, composed of youth, workers and employees, the party and the state, the army, the NKVD, and leading teachers, scientists, and cultural figures” (38). Finally, while many Soviet Jews were objects of evacuation, it was not by virtue of an official acknowledgment that they were subject to almost certain death if they remained behind. Rather, Jews were evacuated as they qualified under the occupational and family categories that Soviet authorities prioritized. The same ethnic impartiality was not applied to Crimean Germans and Karelian Finns, whose deportations, for reasons that remain puzzling, occurred via evacuation policy. The latter cases, according to Manley, were emblematic of the growing conflation of evacuation and deportation, both of which sought to “achieve an organized transfer of people … a unified model of population displacement based on state regulation and planned distribution” (42).

Manley’s focus on the high politics of evacuation constitutes less than half of her book. The remainder describes, in compelling detail, the experiences of evacuees themselves: why some persons decided to leave and others to remain; the elaborate plans that families laid to reconnect should they become separated; the perceived injustices of evacuation priorities; the generosity, heroism, and occasional selfishness of evacuees; the ubiquity of connections and favors in the distribution of departure tickets; the difficult journey east on blacked-out trains and ships; and daily survival on the “Tashkent front,” which contrary to the widespread antisemitic allegations of the postwar period was neither Jewish nor easy. Through it all, Manley is attentive to what evacuees lost when they left home, and what they had to reconstruct—the personal and professional networks to get food, housing, and employment—until their return. Because evacuation occurred in territories “defined not only by the enemy’s advance but also by the spatial hierarchies that informed the way Soviet authorities dealt with … inhabitants” (5), the most immediate result was disorientation. Provisioning and privilege in the Soviet Union always had a spatial component: large cities were favored in the consumption hierarchy; elites resided in comfortable buildings, often in single-family apartments, and had access to special shops and commissaries provided by their employers; nonelites got by through informal networks of friends, family, coworkers, and acquaintances based in the neighborhood and workplace. For most evacuees, these spatially inscribed networks were not easily transferrable, if at all. “Self-evacuees,” persons whom official evacuation channels could not or did not accommodate, were in an even more precarious position, since their decision to leave “effected a breach in the dense web of institutional networks that mediated relations between citizens and state” (149). In view of this, it is perhaps not a coincidence that “attachment to place” (100) was a commonly cited reason to remain behind. For these persons, home meant much more than a familiar streetscape and toponymy. It was the habitat in which they had learned to survive.

Manley’s book illustrates the critical importance of self-organization and the re-creation of personal and professional networks amid the unanticipated chaos of evacuation. Krylova’s Soviet Women in Combat, which draws on memoirs and contemporary press accounts to tell the stories of Soviet women who experienced combat during World War II, emphasizes another negentropic phenomenon: the creation of a notion of Soviet femininity that was consonant with a

combatant identity. Between 800,000 and 900,000 Soviet women volunteered for or were conscripted into regular military and home-front units between 1941 and 1945. A much smaller number, which Krylova estimates with some statistical finesse and admitted imprecision to be about 120,000, “fought in the Soviet armed forces through the mediums of mechanized, highly specialized, and high-tech combat: as machine gunners, mortar operators, snipers, frontline combat engineers, antiaircraft field fighters, artillery women, pilots, tankers, and junior combat officers” (169). Because these women actively sought to destroy the enemy, they were, in Krylova’s formulation, combatants. To this cohort, we can perhaps add many of the 200,000 women who experienced frontline combat as medics. Whatever the final tally, it is indisputable that comparatively large numbers of Soviet women served in the military and saw combat during World War II. The question at the center of Krylova’s book is why the Soviet Union was unusual in this regard.

Krylova’s answer is not a straightforward one. She argues that Soviet female combatants (who, judging by names, were mainly Russian by ethnic origin) were carriers of a “nonoppositional though still binary concept of gender” (13). In the context of the Eastern Front, gender was nonoppositional because the identities of woman and soldier were not mutually exclusive. It remained binary because combat experience, that famous destroyer of atheism, never did the same thing for notions of femininity. In fact, female combatants often took steps to emphasize their femininity. Zoia Medvedeva, who participated in the defense of Sevastopol, decorated her machine gun with red poppies during lulls in the action. (She was apparently unfamiliar with “In Flanders Fields.”) Other female combatants painted flowers on the warplanes they flew, or maintained their long hair amid the filth of frontline service. Krylova argues that such femininity on the front was possible because female soldiers had absorbed prewar Stalinist discourses that emphasized female heroism and the obligation of the first Soviet generation to prepare itself for war. The former involved the popular fascination with a number of Soviet counterparts to Amelia Earhart. The latter included various coeducational paramilitary activities, which presented war technology as a leveler of gender difference. Krylova’s argument is thus retrospective, in that it uses wartime events as a pretext for reevaluating the prewar period. Her principal target is not an allegedly sexist historiography of the Eastern Front, but a rich body of literature, best exemplified by the works of Wendy Goldman and Karen Petrone, which sees in prewar Stalinist gender politics a re-emphasis on conventional gender roles and mores. In Krylova’s view, the

latter was present in prewar gender politics, but so too were discourses that made possible widespread female combat participation.

One critic has written that Krylova’s interpretive framework has “no historical roots,” because she does not acknowledge precedents for female military service and combat involvement in the Civil War, World War I, and earlier. This assertion needs to be qualified in two ways. First, Krylova acknowledges that her book does not seek “to explain the intricate, deep genealogy of this unconventional take on the gendered organization of wartime society” (14). Such an endeavor, in Krylova’s view, would start with the unique origins of female radicalism in tsarist Russia. Second, Krylova’s interpretive framework does not gloss over precedent entirely. Anka the machine gunner, who was immortalized in the 1934 film *Chapaev*, was an almost ubiquitous point of reference for female combatants in Krylova’s study. Anka is an unusual sort of precedent, since her historicity is questionable. According to Chapaev’s great-granddaughter, Anka was a composite character, inserted into the film on Stalin’s orders to personify the heroism of women during the Civil War. (Indeed, it was Anka’s embodiment of Stalinist virtues that made her a popular butt of sexually explicit jokes.) Nonetheless, Krylova shows that many female combatants perceived Anka as a precedent. While serving in the trenches in 1942, Nina Onilova wrote a letter to Varvara Miasnikova, the actress who played Anka in the film. “I know that you are not the real Anka, not the woman machine gunner from the Chapaev Division … [but] I dreamed about becoming a woman machine gunner and fighting as courageously as you did” (68). Thus, an ahistorical Anka was a causal factor in history, because she inspired women to serve in combat; her real-life counterparts in World War I and Civil War were precedents, although it does not appear that they were understood as such by Krylova’s female combatants. My point here is that precedent and cause need to be carefully disaggregated. That Krylova does not acknowledge all precedents does not mean that she botches the primary cause of the comparatively large numbers of Soviet women combatants in World War II.

The law of parsimony might be a more useful tool for judging how Krylova explains these large numbers. The most straightforward reason for the abundance of Soviet women on the Eastern Front was necessity: Soviet forces suffered such

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gargantuan losses that military and government leaders had no choice but to call on Soviet women. Krylova is attentive to this argument. She points out that even at the end of 1941, when the Wehrmacht was entrenched at the gates of Moscow and Leningrad, and Soviet forces had suffered four million casualties, “the Soviet military had not prepared for an en masse intake of women into the armed forces and still did not count on women as an available resource” (115). Consequently, most female volunteers were politely told that their help was not needed, or were relegated to kitchen duty or clerical work once they were in the military. Likewise, in October 1941, when Stalin signed Order no. 0099 authorizing the organization of female volunteers for air combat, it was not specified as an “emergency measure” (124). This was detrimental to the war effort. Krylova writes that because of the high demand for such positions, female pilots tended to be better educated and trained than their male counterparts. However, at other moments it is clear that necessity played a central role. Contrary to other combatant nations, the Soviet government never precluded, by legal statute, female participation in combat. Thus, during the darkest months of the war in 1942, when the Red Army ran out of reserves, it “chose to take advantage of the resources that female volunteers had been offering since June 1941” (146). Similar to Manley, who describes the reconstruction of personal and professional networks among evacuees, Krylova hints at Soviet society’s underlying flexibility and regenerative capacity at moments of crisis. During the precarious months before the Battle of Stalingrad, tens of thousands of women, inspired by Anka the machine-gunner and skilled in the arts of war, took up positions alongside their male counterparts in the trenches of the Eastern Front.

The challenges of wartime and postwar reconstruction and the widespread poverty of late-Stalinism are the focus of Donald Filtzer’s *The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia* and Jeffrey Jones’s *Everyday Life and the “Reconstruction” of Soviet Russia during and after the Great Patriotic War, 1943–1948*. Of the two, Filtzer casts a wider geographical net. Drawing largely on statistics gathered by the State Sanitary Inspectorate and the federal and republic-level ministries of public health, Filtzer paints a stomach-churning portrait of health and welfare in the urban “hinterlands,” cities that were east of the zone of occupation. Although Filtzer describes *Hazards* as a sequel to his earlier book on workers in the late Stalinist years, in its use of comparative historical analysis and in its willingness to cross the thematic boundaries between environmental and quantitative varieties of urban and social history, it has no parallels in the field of Russian and Soviet history.19

The gist of Filtzer’s book is easy to summarize: Soviet cities of all sizes were exceedingly unhealthy, unsafe, and uncomfortable places to live during the war and postwar years. They were inundated with trash and excrement. Drinking water was fouled by fecal material and industrial waste. Filth-borne diseases like typhus, which is transmitted by human lice, and dysentery, a scourge for infants, were rife. There were grossly insufficient numbers of bathhouses, toilets, and laundry facilities for urban residents to maintain even a modicum of cleanliness. Diets were almost uniformly bad, lacking sufficient calories and protein, poor in fresh fruits and vegetables. Filtzer shows that these factors had a marked effect on human wellness and mortality. Amid the sobering figures on public health and numerous synonyms for feces, is Filtzer’s important argument: the hazards of urban life were not manifestations of wartime devastation, Filtzer writes, but “of the economic and social system that Stalinism had created, which produced a natural tendency toward a hypertrophy of heavy industry and underinvestment in those goods and services that would have improved the welfare of the population” (21). The hazards of urban life were not uncommon in rapidly industrializing cities; unusual was the extreme “time lag” before Soviet authorities undertook “comprehensive sanitary reform” (25). In Filtzer’s formulation, Soviet economic growth was thus “self-negating.” Extraordinary gains in production came only by gouging the consumption side of the ledger, via the systematic disregard for the health, safety, and welfare of the population. This helped demoralize and atomize urban residents, which kept the elites in power, but it also “sent the system into a period of long-term contraction, ending in its collapse” (351).

The latter observation is Filtzer’s fullest elaboration of an idea present in his earlier works: the peculiarity of Soviet production relations as they developed under Stalin—namely, the bureaucratic elite’s reliance on political tools to extract surplus value from the working class—provoked “defensive strategies” among workers that were ultimately destabilizing because they limited economic growth.20 In this respect, Filtzer’s analysis bears some resemblance to Havel’s entropic regime. Yet even amid the filth and degradation of urban life were signs of Soviet society’s regenerative capacity. Especially important were public health workers, whose efforts to prevent pandemics, in conditions that were inauspicious at best, were often heroic and undoubtedly saved lives. The archival trove of unvarnished statistics on health and hygiene that Filtzer mined might also be seen as a sign of public health workers’ prodigious efforts. In a previous review of an anthology on

the late-Stalin period, I noted that Filtzer’s contribution, which is excerpted from *Hazards of Urban Life*, forced historians to question the sincerity of the Stalinist civilizing project, which was concerned, as David L. Hoffmann put it, with “labor efficiency, hygiene, sobriety, and a more general rational and aesthetic ordering of everyday life.”21 A retraction is in order, at least in regard to Filtzer’s public health workers. Those incessant campaigns to encourage Soviet citizens to wash their hands, cook all food, and use the toilet in a “civilized” manner (58) were no less sincere because of official neglect of urban infrastructure. Instead, their sincerity was premised entirely on this neglect.

*Everyday Life and the “Reconstruction” of Soviet Russia*, the title of Jones’s study of the reconstruction of Rostov-on-Don, requires explanation. Jones sets reconstruction (восстановление) apart with quotation marks to underscore his contention that the word meant more than a process of rebuilding from wartime devastation. “Imbued with tones of sacrifice and heroism and couched in terms of collective unity and the family, ‘reconstruction’ amounted to a discursive myth based on party ideology’s configuration of social classes, gender, and national identity” (2). The myth of reconstruction was a “master narrative of a population working as one with great heroism and sacrifice, overcoming all difficulties to rebuild their beloved city” (81). It was honed by self-serving elites, who wanted to obscure “‘reality’ in all its multifaceted complexities,” and suppress “other, conflicting (or more complex) and nuanced interpretations” (2). Yet this myth, as Jones conceives of it, was never hermetic; through its cracks, Jones attempts to extricate a different picture of reality, one that was characterized by “tension between state and society,” and thus “presages de-Stalinization and the reforms of the post-Stalin era” (3). In this regard, Jones is in good company, since a number of recent works on the postwar and post-Stalin periods emphasize continuities across the 1953 caesura.22 After an introductory chapter that surveys Rostov’s prewar and wartime history as a cosmopolitan manufacturing center on the southern steppe, seven thematically organized chapters examine living conditions, industrial politics, gender and national identities, collaboration, the black market, elections, and party politics. All chapters are organized by


source: Jones begins with the public discussions, then moves on to internal party documents, and concludes with popular perceptions, as recorded by public mood svodki, memoirs, and oral interviews.

Jones’s book succeeds in highlighting the sharp divergences between the official face of reconstruction and the reality of wartime and postwar Rostov. Like Manley’s work, it also helps underscore the importance of individual and collective initiative in the face of official neglect or disarray. Motivated by some combination of envy and need, workers seized apartments in downtown Rostov. They ignored or reinterpreted labor laws they thought unfair or inconvenient. They managed to feed themselves (amply, it appears) with fish from the Don, despite widespread privation elsewhere. And in the most pioneering section of the book, Jones shows that popular perceptions of real or alleged collaboration with the enemy were never quite as Manichaean as party leaders wanted. Residents who lived through the occupation, which lasted ten days in November 1941, and then again from July 1942 to February 1943, knew all too well that its moral universe belied the official postwar bifurcation between heroic resistance and treasonous collaboration. Yet it is not clear whether these antagonisms reflected a “separate class consciousness” (76), as Jones contends, or a variation on the old “us and them” theme that characterized the prewar period. 23 This ambiguity is reinforced by Jones’s penchant for conflating nonelite and proletarian voices. Nonetheless, in Jones’s view, the experience of reconstruction belies the myth that surrounded it.

It is important to ask, however, whether there was truly a myth to belie. Recent scholarship has underscored the extent to which Soviet political life was animated and sustained by myths surrounding the revolution and World War II. 24 Comprising a set of widely and uncritically accepted assumptions, these myths lent political purpose and meaning, often in highly stylized ways, to difficult, morally ambiguous, and painful events. Moreover, their provenance typically postdated the events they narrated. 25 This is how Jones intends the myth of reconstruction to be understood. Yet it is not certain whether these characteristics accurately describe the phenomenon that is Jones’s central concern. Above all, Jones shows that the discourse on reconstruction lacked currency among nonelites, who knew all too well its many inadequacies. That

is not to say there were no instances of overlap, where official and popular views of reconstruction coincided. Jones shows, for instance, that “workers and others were largely receptive to the portrayal of professional speculators as a social nemesis” (204). But in a book that is primarily concerned with highlighting growing antagonisms between workers and elites, these and similar cases of overlap are the exception. If reconstruction was a myth, it was one with few adherents outside of party headquarters. Empowered by their survival during occupation, and confident in their own capacity to interpret the deprivation and inequality that surrounded them, nonelites in Rostov-on-Don killed in the cradle faith in the myth of reconstruction. Among the books under review here, there is no clearer depiction of how the forces of postwar decay—in this case, the breakdown of elites’ ability to mobilize nonelites—were intertwined with the emergence, after 22 June 1941, of a necessarily and increasingly autonomous, self-organizing society.

The final three books under review—Steven Barnes’s *Death and Redemption*, Mark Edele’s *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*, and Stephen Lovell’s *The Shadow of War*—grapple with long chronologies. Barnes’s work, a careful study of Gulag camps in the Karaganda region of Kazakhstan, is the outlier, because much of it concerns the prewar period. Karlag, as the network of Karaganda camps was called, was founded in 1930. The Gulag has often been relegated to polemists, memoirists, and popular historians; Barnes’s purpose—to conceptualize the role of the Gulag in Soviet society—diverges from these accounts and from earlier scholarly accounts that seek chiefly to bear witness to the suffering and death of camp life.26 Although the latter topics are present in Barnes’s work, so is an emphasis on the camps as sites of “reeducation, redemption, and mass release” (2). Barnes situates these functions amid recent scholarship that underscores the vision of individual and societal transformation that was at the core of Soviet ideology.27 While the Gulag was “an imprecise, crude tool for [this] transformation” (14), in


27 See, for instance, Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999); and Jochen Hellbeck,
Barnes’s view it was always undergirded by something more than exploitation. Referring to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s baffling account of the orchestra that ceremoniously played for new prisoners on their arrival in the port of Magadan (which, in Solzhenitsyn’s interpretation, was nothing more than a sadistic trick), Barnes writes, “Solzhenitsyn’s tale … is not a contradiction requiring explanation. Rather, in the Soviet ethos, the coexistence of violence and transformation—creation and destruction—was no contradiction at all. In fact, one was unimaginable without the other” (15).

So what was transformative about Soviet penal camps? Most important in Barnes’s view is that the camps were not primarily about economic production. Through much of the 1930s, for instance, the chief route to early release was the accrual of “accounted working days,” which meant that the best workers in camps were those most likely to win their freedom. Barnes notes that the formal linkage between labor and redemption was widely publicized in Karlag. Although the practice ended in 1938 on the orders of Stalin, who was sensitive to its impact on production, the early release of invalids—whose physical limitations meant the costs of their maintenance outweighed whatever value they produced—was reined in at the same time. Moreover, all prisoners were subject to propaganda and educational activities that presented camp life as a means of personal transformation. As one sign on Solovetskii Island read, “Through work we shall return to society” (59). It is tempting to dismiss such slogans as mockery, the Soviet equivalent of Arbeit macht frei. Barnes writes, however, that camp administrators spent considerable sums on these activities and ran afoul of superiors in Moscow if they neglected such work. Because not all prisoners would or could be redeemed—invererate class enemies had a particularly rough go of it—the transformational ethos of camp life bore some resemblance to the parable of the wedding feast: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” In the case of the Soviet Gulag, the few chosen were the 20–40 percent of the total camp population who, between 1934 and 1953, were released each year.28

Barnes argues persuasively that the Gulag sought to reforge rather than destroy. Whether it actually functioned in this manner is another matter, and Barnes acknowledges that the evidence is far from clear. Describing prisoner contributions to the Karlag newspaper, he writes, “We’ll never be certain that prisoners really wrote these articles … or if they did so, that they were sincere”

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(66). Nonetheless, some former prisoners wrote thank-you notes to camp administrators for their transformation, and many more fought bravely at the front. When prisoners rebelled, as nationalists and partisan guerillas from the western borderlands did in Kengir in 1954, they made demands that reflected “years of official Soviet propaganda in and out of the Gulag” (223). Kengir rebels asked to be treated like other Soviet citizens and expressed faith that benevolent leaders in Moscow would react positively to their struggle.

Barnes’s equivocation on this front is emblematic of a broader lack of scholarly consensus about the sincerity and motivations of what Stephen Kotkin called “speaking Bolshevik.”29 Should scholars take Soviet citizens at their own words? Or, acknowledging the many constraints on Soviet political discourse, should scholars attribute to Soviet citizens unspoken motivations? Borrowing a formulation from Jochen Hellbeck’s affirmative response to the first question, Barnes appears to come closer to an affirmative response to the second, at least in regards to Kengir: “Even if the nationalists had not begun to ‘think Bolshevik,’ the overwhelming power of the Soviet regime and its discourse had taught them the value of at least ‘speaking Bolshevik’” (212). I would propose a similar middle position: the Gulag was a powerful tool of socialization, but not always in ways intended by Soviet power. The unintended results of the Gulag are evident in Barnes’s attention to the axes of identification that defined a prisoner’s place in Gulag society: Soviet citizens and foreigners, men and women, veterans and nonveterans, and most important, criminals and politicals. There is no more prominent example of Soviet society’s ability to generate new social forms and networks in its final decades than the rise of the criminal organizations that were among the chief beneficiaries of the 1991 collapse. Because these networks—the so-called thieves in law and brotherhood (bratva) groups—were often rooted in shared experiences of incarceration, Barnes’s book may serve as a springboard for similar studies that push the analysis of Soviet prison and camp life and its effects to 1991 and beyond.30

29 Stephen Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Kotkin argues that “speaking Bolshevik” occurred independently of belief. Jochen Hellbeck, using the case of Stalin-era diaries, goes further than Kotkin by showing how speaking, thinking, and living Bolshevik were interrelated (Revolution on My Mind, 11).

Mark Edele’s *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War* details the efforts of the 20–25 million persons who survived military service during the war to gain formal recognition of and commensurate benefits for their sacrifices. Their campaign, which Edele couches as a popular movement, might thus be understood as a struggle to resist the sort of social leveling that Havel highlights in communist Czechoslovakia, since the Stalinist state’s goal after May 1945 was “to unmake veterans as a social group as fast as possible” (11). Indeed, in 1947–48, fearful of a “new privileged group of old soldiers resting on their wartime laurels” (193), the Soviet Union abolished most benefits for veterans. Even reclaiming property and jobs held before the war was no easy task. Yet by 1978, the Soviet Committee of War Veterans, with the help of a sizable letter-writing campaign, had succeeded in molding surviving veterans into an “entitlement community” (185) recognized by Soviet jurisprudence. As such, specific groups of veterans—namely, those who had fought in the “field army”—were eligible for an expanding list of perquisites, from low-interest loans for housing construction and income tax breaks, to the much coveted right to jump queues and guaranteed seating on public transportation. Although the real benefits never quite matched those that were promised, the list of eligible beneficiaries was lengthened during the final Soviet years until the distinction between frontline warriors and home-front toilers nearly disappeared. Both types of aged war hero—factory pensioner and veteran—were united in a single organization and eligible for many of the same benefits. Three decades after the Stalinist state determined that the threat of a Decembrist revolt had waned enough to curtail benefits for veterans, the post-Stalinist state found a modus vivendi with those who might have once rebelled.

Edele’s argument is two-pronged. First, he takes issue with Antoine Prost’s contention that veterans’ communities exist only as they are constructed by state legislation. Edele argues instead that Soviet veterans existed as a “socially relevant group,” or borrowing Benedict Anderson’s famous description of nations, as an “imagined community” (12), long before the Soviet state recognized them as such. Their cohesiveness stemmed from shared sacrifice in the trenches and from similar ages and life experiences. Edele distinguishes among three generations of *frontoviki*: “double-veterans” born between 1890 and 1904, who may have served in World War I or Civil War and about whom very little is known; the “middle generation” born between 1905 and 1922, comprising persons who were already established in adult life when the

war began and who appear to have suffered the greatest proportional losses; and the “frontline generation” born between 1923 and 1927, which came of age during the war. Second, Edele argues that the system of privileges institutionalized in 1978 reflected both a Soviet logic—since status was always defined by access to scarce resources—and broader developments associated with modernity that linked citizen and state in a reciprocal relationship of wartime service and bestowed privilege. In this regard, Edele envisions his work as “an investigation of unintended, long-term, socio-psychological, and political consequences of waging war” (19).

Edele’s work contributes to a growing body of scholarship on popular agenda movements during the late Soviet years. The veterans’ movement was one of several, including the environmental protection and historical preservation movements, that mobilized large numbers of persons.31 While the veterans’ movement claimed a larger number of beneficiaries, it was not unique in the number of activists who were central to its success and the tactics they employed. Edele notes, for instance, that the Soviet Committee of War Veterans received between 4,000 and 6,700 letters annually during its first full years of existence (1958–60). These are larger numbers than even the most controversial urban renewal projects in Moscow provoked, such as Dmitrii Chechulin’s much-despised Rossiia Hotel in the Zariad’ë district. Yet by the early 1980s, the veterans’ movement, with more than a million activists, had probably been eclipsed by the historical preservation movement, which claimed ten million members in the All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments (VOOPIK).32 Moreover, there was a great deal of overlap in strategy. Just as historical preservation activists kept the movement alive under the auspices of a handful of architectural, artistic, and kraevedenie (local studies) organizations prior to the founding of VOOPIK in 1966, veterans activists subverted the mission of the Soviet Committee of War Veterans, which was ostensibly founded to promote international peace and serve as a mouthpiece for Soviet propaganda. In Edele’s view, veterans activists accomplished nothing less than the “appropriation ‘from below’ of an institution which was created for fundamentally different purposes” (162). There is perhaps something to be gleaned from these cases about the specific mechanisms by which institutions, which are commonly associated with civil

32 The latter figure is drawn from www.voopik.ru/voopiik/history (accessed 8 March 2012).
society, were created during the late Soviet period. These included not only the state’s gradual retreat from spheres it had previously dominated but a popular commandeering of state institutions for the pursuit of private and collective agendas.33

Finally, I conclude with a rare gem, a conceptually sophisticated and richly detailed survey of Russian and Soviet history after 1941, Stephen Lovell’s *The Shadow of War*. Drawing on much of the recent historical scholarship on the war and postwar periods, Lovell’s work transcends numerous chronological, historiographical, and scholarly divides: between Stalinist and post-Stalinist, Soviet and post-Soviet, and the archival-based historical scholarship that is now reasonably comprehensive through the 1960s and the Sovietological research that was largely conducted “from the other shore,” which still predominates among understandings of the 1970s and 1980s.34 Such an ambitious chronology presents a daunting task for any author. Lovell sustains it not only across the book as a whole but in each chapter, where topics range from high politics and social groups to the nationality question and geopolitical rivalries. In Lovell’s view, the war was such a transformative event, “the top of Russians’ list of defining historical moments” (1), that it and the nearly seven decades that have followed it might best be understood as a discrete period, distinct from what came before and what will eventually follow. Lovell’s work thus diverges from scholarship that sees in late Stalinism a “return to normalcy,” or a resumption of the policies and practices of the 1930s.35 But it also differs, albeit more modestly, from a contrary body of scholarship, exemplified by Jones’s book, that locates the roots of post-Stalinist reform in those first postwar years. In Lovell’s view, late Stalinism was a beginning, but of so much more than the policies of the Khrushchev years.

Given Lovell’s central argument, it is no surprise that issues of continuity across the postwar decades figure prominently in his analysis. For instance, in the highly orchestrated politics of the Putin years, Lovell sees the “lack of transparency and accountability in the political system, the enormous role of

33 This is similar to Steven Solnick’s observation that Soviet bureaucrats, in the late 1980s, manipulated “the formalized system of information flow to pursue private agendas.” See his *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6–7.
patron–client networks, and the cross-contamination of economic, political, security, and military elites” (66) that had been characteristic of Soviet-era politics. Likewise, Lovell questions the notion of transition from the socialist economy to the free market, which economists and political scientists have used to reference the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years. Transition “implies a direction of change that was rarely borne out by developments in Russia’s fin de siècle” (15). Instead, Lovell emphasizes the extent to which market mechanisms were already present in the Soviet Union, both on the periphery of the planned economy, where the so-called shadow economy thrived, and as a tacit component of the planned economy, which could not function without constant horizontal and vertical wheeling and dealing. As the journalist David Hoffman argued in his excellent study of the first generation of post-Soviet oligarchs, the Soviet economy, with its asymmetric flows of information and privileging of the huckster skill set, bore more than a passing resemblance to the post-Soviet economy, with its widespread cronyism. Even in realms where there was clear disjuncture, such as Russia’s sudden economic and military weakness in the 1990s vis-à-vis the West, Lovell sees underlying continuities. For instance, despite presiding over an economy that had shrunk from $360.2 billion US in 1991 to $211.8 billion US in 1997 (a decline of 41 percent, measured in constant year 2000 USD), Lovell argues that Russian leaders continued to behave—with considerable success—as if they presided over a great power. Thus, in 1997, when the Russian economy had shrunk to less than 5 percent of the size of its erstwhile Cold War rival’s, Russia joined the G-7 group of developed nations. Indeed, in this respect, Russian leaders’ confidence that their present predicament was only temporary proved to be justified, a fact that became increasingly evident after the August 1998 ruble devaluation and the subsequent rise of hydrocarbon prices. Between 1999 and 2010, the Russian economy nearly quintupled in size.

This is where Lovell’s argument comes full circle. World War II, as the sine qua non of Soviet myths, cast a long shadow over subsequent decades. Among the many things it obscured was “a story of national self-discovery” (319) in Russia. In Lovell’s view, the central development of the post-1941 era, which is typically associated with the apex of Soviet imperial power, was the creation of a “genuinely new kind of Russian state” (318), which would

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38 GNP figures are based on World Bank estimates and are available via Google’s collection of public data (http://google.com/publicdata/explore, accessed 16 March 2012).
become “post-imperial” (317) in 1991, and which was always dependent on memories and myths of the war for sustenance. Given the endurance of ethno-territorial units in the Russian Federation, as well as the simmering wars of secession in the Caucasus, Lovell’s characterization of present-day Russia is sure to raise eyebrows. Yet one needs look no further than Putin’s much-ridiculed disquisition on Russian literature, where he envisioned a “multietnic civilization with Russian culture at its core,” to find an attempt to create a more capacious sense of Russian-ness for the post-imperial epoch.\textsuperscript{39} Whether or not that endeavor will be successful remains to be seen, but Lovell is to be commended for describing what was created after 1941, as well as what was destroyed. His cardinal achievement is to show that there was a great deal more to the postwar and post-Stalinist periods than decay and collapse. Transversing those final Soviet decades were the roots of post-Soviet Russia.

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