

Russian experience of the Great War and the problem of commemoration

*Assoc. Prof. Dr. Iaroslav Golubinov
Samara, Russia*

Conflict of 1914-1918 made a revolution in the lives of all Europeans, crushing the old empire, giving birth to new states, transforming the socio-economic and political spheres. These changes have been described many times in the historiography in the 1920-1930-ies. In the next decades historians began to be interested in gender issues, also in subjects related to minorities, refugees and the everyday life of the city and the countryside during the Great War etc. And it is possible now to state that the range of problems raised by the researchers of the First World War is very huge and could be resolved by using of interdisciplinary research methods. A number of authors in particular has been developing the researches in the humanitarian discourse which adjoin to history: the history of philosophy, philology, art history, cultural studies etc. But along with them they also appealed to such specific research areas as gender studies, urban studies, memory studies etc.

The latter seems to me as one of the most promising ways to study the problems of the First World War. And at the same time it raises new questions because of obscurity of the social “memorizing mechanism” which selects and remembers the various experiences which are forming the image of the War for contemporary and future generations.

The situation with public image of the First World War in Russia, really, is quite interesting because it is unclear and blurred¹. Repeatedly noted that the memory of the War poorly formed and rather vague. Modern American historian Karen Petrone suggested that “as the successor state to the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union was unique among the combatants in the virtual absence of public commemoration of World War I at the level of the state, community, and civic organizations, or even individual mourning”². And it seems to be correct that “the Soviet government generally ignored the war and instead poured its energies into creating a myth of the revolution, constructing “Sovietness” through a conscious process of forgetting imperial Russia’s last war”³.

However, “absence of official commemoration did not mean the absence of war memory itself” and professionals “have often overlooked the considerable attention to World War I that emerged on the margins of Soviet culture”⁴. USSR could not officially recognize the First World War as part of its “myth of foundation”, but in the 1920s. undoubtedly took part in the pan-European intellectual movement that reinterpreted the war and coped with its heritage. It is

¹ Орловски, Дэниел. Великая война и российская память // Россия и Первая мировая война.

² Petrone, Karen. *The Great War in Russian memory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. P.5.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Petrone, Karen. *The Great War in Russian memory*. P.6.

curious that although the Soviet Union was defeated in the Great War but it did not have such specific social phenomenon (like Germany had) as the myth of the victim⁵. It can be stated that the Soviet society had no agreement about the war. In addition, the words of James Shotwell could be remembered, said on another occasion, but fully applicable to the situation with the memory of the War in Russia. Shotwell wrote that “in the case of Russia, civil war and revolution followed so closely upon the World War that it is almost impossible for history to measure with any degree of accuracy the effects of the World War itself upon the economic and social life of the country. Those effects were so distorted by the forces let loose in the postwar years and so confused with the disturbances of the revolutionary era that the attempt to isolate the phenomena of the War from the data of civil war has been a task of unparalleled difficulty”⁶.

Taking into account all of the above, methinks that memory studies are now one the most interesting directions for thinking about the First World War and all the phenomena related to it. Therefore, this article aims to reach two goals: it is necessary, first, to define a group of commemorative experiences, i.e. such experiences that would have been important for the society and without any doubt influenced on the people’s perception of the war, and thus on the social “experience of war” and, second, to assess their importance for the subsequent construction of the image of war⁷. These two tasks bring us close to what Pierre Nora called problem of “lieu de memoire”⁸.

In this article an attempt of solving this problems is based mainly on the sources from few provincial Russian regions (provinces of Middle Volga – Samara, Simbirsk, Kazan and Penza), which give information about the “everyday survival”, included in the cycle of everyday practices. These practices can disappear, transform and appear because of changes in the conditions of life⁹. Practices operating in peaceful time undergo major deviations in the years of social catastrophes. A modification of the usual rhythms and forms of life most clearly and distinctly imprints in the memory of the society. It turns upside-down the old system, a comfortable and well-maintained (at least it is perceived after the military metamorphosis), and produces, apparently, the greatest impression on the members of the society. Shocks (military and political, socio-economic, cultural and ideological) caused by the war are transforming the perception of the war itself and the preceding period.

⁵ Petrone, Karen. *The Great War in Russian memory*. P.7.

⁶ Shotwell, James. Preface // Struve, P. B., Zaitsev, K. I., Dolinsky, N. V., and Demosthenov, S. S. *Food Supply in Russia during the War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930. P. IX-X.

⁷ See e.g. the books Поршнева «Рабочие, крестьяне и солдаты в годы Первой мировой войны» и Суховой «Десять мифов крестьянского сознания».

⁸ Франция – память / П. Нора, М. Озуф, Ж. де Пюимеж, М. Винок; Пер. с фр. Д. Хапаевой; Научн. конс. пер. Н. Копосов. СПб.: Изд-во С.-Петербур. ун-та, 1999. С. 40.

⁹ Серто, Мишель де. Изобретение повседневности. 1. Искусство делать / пер. с фр. Д. Калугина, Н. Мовниной. СПб.: Издательство Европейского университета в Санкт-Петербурге, 2013. С. 39-40.

Experience of war – the special (sacred as Roger Caillois noticed) state of human beings¹⁰. Men are alienated from themselves and their family (mobilization of conscripts and industrial workers). Some of them are close to the Other who wants to kill them (the daily situation at the front). Some live in a constant voltage (frustration) because of economic difficulties (life in the rear). And the only thing that people can rely on – absolute faith (in God, monarch or/and military chief). No matter how long these situations last, but they certainly leave a deep imprint in the memory and create a special memorial relationship to the past and present. Aleida Assman wrote that “the general discourse of historiography now finds itself in collocation with a great variety of often contradictory memories” and the latter “have become a vital and controversial element of modern culture”¹¹.

Therefore the space of practices in which a person lives in the war, has special properties. “The practices of survival” became the main processes of life (e.g. work and food production, fighting those who want to interfere with survival, as well as special tricks to deceive those who are stronger or have more resources). Most closely this set of practices could be associated with such social phenomena as food supply problem. And all belonging to last (the queues, the pogroms of shops, ration cards, requisition, special local and central facilities for the distribution of products) turned into “lieu de memoire” for those who was a contemporary of the Great War.

Renowned sociologist and a contemporary of the First World War Pitirim Sorokin noted that there are different forms of hunger (deficient and non-deficient, relative)¹². Both of these forms and caused by them changes in nutrition tolerated in all strata of the population of Russia in different ways. And because of that it seems to be partly true that food riots during the war were a “manifestation of mass hysteria” and “essentially a specific form of protection from a long stay in a state of frustration: the outbreaks of social activity countervailed the awareness of the impossibility of satisfaction of basic human needs because awareness posed a mortal danger to the functioning of the human mind”¹³.

In the villages of the Middle Volga regions, for example, the food situation was not as serious as in some other regions of Russia. The peasants’ families got the special allowances (food and money) over their relatives which joined the colours and were departed to war and this pension always exceeded the family

¹⁰ Кайуа, Роже. Миф и человек. Человек и сакральное / Пер. с фр. и вступ. ст. С.Н. Зенкина. М.: ОГИ, 2003. С. 279-280.

¹¹ Assman, Aleida. Cultural memory and Western civilization: Functions, media, archives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. P. 7.

¹² Сорокин П.А. Голод как фактор. Влияние голода на поведение людей, социальную организацию и общественную жизнь. М.: Academia & LVS, 2003. С. 15, 20.

¹³ Сухова, О.А. Погромное движение в России в годы Первой мировой войны: социально-психологический аспект (по материалам Среднего Поволжья) / О.А. Сухова // Исторические записки: Межвузовский сборник научных трудов / Пензенский государственный педагогический университет им. В.Г. Белинского. Пенза, 2003. С. 167.

monthly income¹⁴. So the peasants even managed to improve their farm and they did not have an extraordinary lack of agricultural products¹⁵. And local police authorities have noted this phenomenon: "... cost of living because of the war had little effect on the village, most changes serve in favor of the peasants, as all rural products are greatly increased in price, just bringing them profit"¹⁶. The peasantry also sought to hold the main stocks of grain for the establishment of more favorable prices and maintained reserves for a "rainy day" and for the years of war accumulated significant surpluses¹⁷. All this enabled the country-dwellers to increase their own life situation: first of all to diversify the nutrition by including the usually inaccessible products – dishes of high-grade flour, tea, sweets (sugar and candies). Interesting, the most striking demonstrations against the authorities or traders were related exactly to the lack of sugar (i.e. this was, according to the classification of Sorokin, a relative starvation because the requiring product was not important for the survival). So in Samara villages Krasny Kut (June 24, 1916) and Dergachy (July 9, 1916) the instigators of civil riot were the soldiers' wives (without the criminal element) who also took part in the destruction of shops. The main desire of the looters were establishing the "fair" price for the products they needed. Such small riots usually resulted in the equal sugar distribution for each family of the village from shops of the owners which were suspected in profiteering. Interesting that soldiers' wives abode by the previously established tariffs and paid for sugar. Local authorities remarked in their reports that traders had caused such crowd behavior because of too frequent increasing of the price¹⁸.

In the cities, on the contrary, the crowd never showed a desire to pay for stolen goods. The relationship between the traders and the city crowd was sharply negative. This was due to rapidly rising prices and food scarcity. For example, in November 1915 gendarmes from Samara were sending report that "flexible to all event urban element of the province seized this new scourge of war – exorbitant rise in the price of life because of the palpable flaws of most needed things of life, as well as the question of the refugees... [and] the local press..., state institutions and private conversations are based almost solely on obviously these two issues"¹⁹.

¹⁴ Булгакова Л.И. Привилегированные бедняки: помощь солдатским семьям в годы Первой мировой войны / Л.И. Булгакова // На пути к революционным потрясениям. Из истории России второй половины XIX – начала XX века. Материалы конференции памяти В.С. Дякина. СПб. – Кишинев, 2001. С. 483.

¹⁵ Прокопович С.Н. Война и народное хозяйство. М., 1917. С. 131-133.

¹⁶ Из рапорта помощника начальника Самарского ГЖУ в Самарском и Бузулукском уездах подполковника Еманова №797 от 21 октября 1915 г. Начальнику Самарского ГЖУ о настроении населения городов и уездов в октябре 1915 г. // Семенова Е.Ю. Социально-экономическое и общественно-политические условия жизни горожан Поволжья в Первую мировую войну (1914 – начало 1918 гг.): Сборник документов и материалов. Самара: АНО «Издательство СНЦ РАН», 2011. С. 41.

¹⁷ Волобуев, П.В. Хлебные ресурсы России в 1917 г. // Вопросы истории сельского хозяйства, крестьянства и революционного движения в России. М., 1961. С. 410.

¹⁸ Архив Самарской области (ГБУСО ЦГАСО). Ф.3. Оп.132. Д.12. Л.2об, 3.

¹⁹ Из рапорта Начальника Самарского ГЖУ от [ноября] 1915 г. в Департамент Полиции о настроении населения Самарской губернии. // Семенова Е.Ю. Социально-экономическое и общественно-политические условия жизни... С. 49.

From the nearby Kazan province officials denounced that “the population is not afraid of war as of imminent day by day increasing cost of living”²⁰, but it was noted that the special needs of peasants were not reported.

There were also clashes between police and residents. For example, in Samara (November 5, 1916) riot began with insults of women-customers by the trader at Troitskii meat market. Officials wrote in the next days that “noise had begun in the crowd, shouting and hooting, young boys-hooligans had appeared and shops had been looted”²¹. Quickly arrived police was met by an unfriendly crowd, the guards were beaten by the stones and sticks. Policemen fired several times and some people were killed and wounded. The unrest spread to the surrounding streets and was suppressed only in the evening. As shown by later investigation of the gendarmerie – in the massacres of shops and stores (total number 56) the most active elements were local “cats” (thieves) and prostitutes²².

In Simbirsk (a few months before the unrest in Samara) the instigators were, apparently, the rank and file soldiers of the local garrison, they tried to take sugar out of turn in the shop. This caused a negative reaction of the crowd. Arrived during the pogrom military patrols, police, officials of provincial administration were met with stones. Then the great mass of the people (according to some estimates, up to 3,000 people, assuming onlookers) went to smash shops – in the first place looters searched and dragged the sugar. Only summoned for the aid the garrison troops that fired several shots into the crowd, managed to restore order²³.

In Kazan the chief of police in February 1917 noted with alarm that “rumors of the excitement and discontent based mainly on an economic origins, expressed displeasure at the lack of life's essential products, such as flour, bread etc. Someone speaks about displeasure on the disposal of the Mayor's Office and the Food Commissioner, the long wait at the shops and bakeries, grocery shopping queue. You hear sometimes in rare cases the threat about breaking windows and smashing shops”²⁴. This behavior was caused by a variety of gossips about an early collapse and famine. Moreover, local authorities claimed that “the province ... [is] strongly influenced by Petrograd, wherefrom the sound of constant news are heard

²⁰ Рапорт помощника начальника Казанского ГЖУ в Казанском, Лаишевском и Чистопольском уездах №26 от 8 марта 1916 г. Начальнику Казанского ГЖУ о жизни населения на подконтрольной территории // Семенова Е.Ю. Социально-экономическое и общественно-политические условия жизни... С. 72.

²¹ ГБУНО ЦГАСО. Ф.153. Оп.36. Д.1627. Л.7-9об.

²² Кирьянов, Ю.И. Массовые выступления на почве дороговизны в России // Отечественная история. М., 1993. № 3. С. 38.

²³ Архив Ульяновской области (ОГБУ ГАУО). Ф.76. Оп.7. Д.1496. Л.5.

²⁴ Рапорт Казанского полицмейстера №564 от 9 февраля 1917 г. Главнначальствующему Казанской губернии о настроении населения в январе 1917 г. // Семенова Е.Ю. Социально-экономическое и общественно-политические условия жизни... С. 116.

that there is the mood of melancholy and pessimism [and] that there nobody believe in turning the fortunes of war in our favor”²⁵.

The situation changed after February 1917, which just preceded the incredible rumors that “[wheat and rye] flour will be vanished away soon”²⁶. This was indicated in cases of Nikolayevsk and Penza in July-August 1917, when massacre occurred not due to random clashes in queue in a grocery or a bakery, but because of targeted actions of city residents and garrison soldiers. The citizens voluntarily examined the warehouses and mansions in search of not only sugar or cotton goods, but, above all, bread (i.e. this is the main element of the diet, urgently needed for survival)²⁷. And the local food committees were forced to authorize the searches, because it was not possible to calm the crowd otherwise. They were able to stop them only after the persistent requests of being searched to authorities²⁸. Searches gave no results – the local merchants at that time had no hidden reserves.

Penza events of July-August 1917 were repeated in Samara, in September (though without special effects). Soldiers stormed straight to the room of the Provincial Food Committee and demanded a massive door-to-door searches²⁹. In addition, urban residents of all provinces have been actively started to become the bag people (“мешочники”) what was not observed before February 1917³⁰. In the second half of 1917 representatives of urban food committees directly suggested the need for armed requisitioning food from the peasants’ reserves. Representatives claimed the urge to entrust “mixed armed detachments of soldiers and conscious city dwellers” with the bread delivering³¹. Anger of city began to address to the villagers. The village withdrew into itself and ceased to give bread to the city. The latter was regarded as a thief of the huge reserves, which were prepared and could be sent to the front, also the peasants were firm in the belief that the bread went to Germany instead of the Russian army³².

Thus, the food supply problem produced very negative impression on Russian society, entrenched in the minds of millions as pretty close to such a stable phenomena of the First World War, as rumors of a "German dominance" and

²⁵ Из рапорта начальника Казанского ГЖУ №872 от 20 января 1916 г. в Департамент полиции о настроении населения губернии // Семенова Е.Ю. Социально-экономическое и общественно-политические условия жизни... С. 60.

²⁶ Из статьи «В вихре слухов» о слухах в Сызрани, 18 января 1917 г. // Семенова Е.Ю. Социально-экономическое и общественно-политические условия жизни... С. 201.

²⁷ Архив Пензенской области (ГБУ ГАПО). Ф.206. Оп.1. Д.4. Л.329.

²⁸ ГБУ ГАПО. Там же. Л. 259 и сл.

²⁹ Перепись населения в Самаре в 1917 году. Самара, 1918. С. 5.

³⁰ See Данилов А.Ю. Нелегальное снабжение российского населения и власть 1917–1921 гг.: Мешочники. СПб.: Наука, 2002. С. 23–24.

³¹ ГБУ ГАПО. Ф.109. Оп.1. Д.1255. Л.383.

³² Бугульминский уездный Комитет народной власти. Доклады и постановления. 21-22 марта 1917 г. Б.м., б.г. С. 9.

"German betraying". The ambience of distrust to the emperor and his family, as well as senior officers and officials, also played a great role. Impossibility under the current state government (both before and after February 1917) to shape a normal supplying of the towns and villages pushed the society to the new totalitarian forms of social and economic life.

And the "lieu de memoire", which has the various manifestations of the food supply problem (in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres of society), is rather peculiar.

On the one hand, memory of the First World War appears in many ways as "an outcome of the relationship between a distinct representation of the past and the full spectrum of symbolic representations available in a given culture"³³. And as it can be seen state power took huge efforts in 1920-1930. to impose the image of the First World War as an imperialist war. For the new socialist state this conflict did not mean anything and was only a prologue (but very required) to the genuine struggle that brought the liberation of millions of proletarians – The Civil War. The food problem and everything associated with it became a powerful symbol inability of the tsarist and Provisional Government to cope with the difficulties of war. And most importantly, all the war prices (above all, the physical and mental stress associated with lack and high cost of some products) had been in vain in this case. Patriotic justification of the food deficiency did not work no longer. Discontent against bygone officials and traders were legitimized and turned, essentially, in a form of revolutionary activity. This gave a kind of justification of all that had been happened in the cities in 1914-1917. But this interpretation of the food problem and the urban memory of the alleged and meaningless deprivation conflicted with the peasant memories of relative prosperity and abundance. This confrontation of different memories, apparently, had not led to any compromise, thereby eroding the image of the First World War in social memory.

On the other hand, if we consider the food supply as the highest expression of "practices of survival", then we can talk about the folding and securing in the social memory a certain set of skills and habits, patterns of behavior that have emerged between urban and rural inhabitants, during the Great War, and that helped them to survive the years of great upheaval of 1920-1930s. In particular, these skills include cooperation to look for scarce goods (in the form of the legal cooperative or band of bag people), a harsh rejection of traders and resentment against the capitalists, and partly disappointment in the government and reliance on military force when searching for scarce products. Moreover, the signs of the Soviet era are clearly discernible in the years of the Great War – the queue to the shops, absence and/or hiding of products most in demand, food cards, flourishing of the "gray" and "black market". That is the true memorial that was left after the First World War in Russia.

³³ Confino, Alan. Collective Memory and Cultural History // American Historical Review. Vol. 102. №5. Dec. 1997. P.1391.