This article outlines the corpus and characteristics of Russian literature during the First World War. It will discuss the reasons why this body of texts – in contrast to the literature of other belligerent nations – could be marginalised and to a large extent even ignored for decades. The aim of this study is to show the inner context of literary development in the first third of the 20th century.

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Introduction

Well into the 20th century, Russian literature was an important forum for societal self-understanding. This function, however, was lost during the First World War. Revolution and civil war completed the transformation of the literary establishment, although another brief flowering followed in the 1920s. The chronological pattern of Russian literature at the beginning of the 20th century is mostly oriented towards the diverse movements, groups, and schools. Although some structures persisted in part into the years after 1917, they did not prove resistant to the political, social, economic, and cultural upheavals triggered by the war. Analogously, the authors changed not only their view of the world, but also their subjects and means of expression. For this reason, the war as an historical context of literary creation (with the decisive years of 1904/05, 1913/14 to 1917/18, and 1921/22) moves to the centre, including its interrelationship with the global revolutionary undercurrent of the time.

When the First World War broke out, merely four years had passed since Lev Tolstoj (1828-1910) died and with him the Russian literature of the 19th century had been laid to rest. With his main work, the novel War and Peace about the Patriotic War of 1812, the Sevastopol Tales about the time of the Crimean War (1853-1856) as well as numerous journalistic articles and pamphlets, he had set a standard in Russia for the artistic discussion of the war. Any public debate regarding the influence of war on the individual, the family and society had to refer to Tolstoj. Radical pacifists who rejected any form of military service invoked his influence. Tolstoj had questioned the spiritual authority of the Orthodox Church, which, according to his conviction, did not preach pacifism but declared war service a patriotic duty and even blessed weapons. Yet, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) already produced images of the destructiveness of modern war that went beyond anything previously known. This memory was still fresh when Russia was surprised by the “German War” in 1914.

By contrast, the literary establishment of the Tsarist empire was well prepared to take on the challenge of the modern war to the
In the course of expanding the industry, the advance of new technologies in agriculture, and the growing social pressure to adapt, the scope of activities for publishers and authors had expanded considerably. The illiteracy rate had dropped rapidly, especially in the cities. Knowledge and expertise became parameters of progress, and state institutions found it increasingly difficult to meet the growing demand and regulate the countless independent educational initiatives. Formerly almost unrestrained regulatory institutions such as censorship could hardly keep up with the flood of publications on perpetually changing fields of knowledge. In 1904/05, the preliminary censorship was abolished, but an important part of its powers was transferred to the criminal courts. “Serious” literature was still cultivated in salons and circles and distributed in the large (“thick”) journals. At the same time, “light” genres such as the adventure novel, the detective story, or the secular graphic narrative (Lubok) conquered growing shares of the market for books, pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers. Increasingly, a sophisticated popular culture and a differentiated, opinionated news system with high circulations aimed at the “mass reader.” Railways and telegraphs shortened the distribution channels and enlarged the resonance space for a “public” that wanted to be kept up to date. Domestic politics and international relations, economics and science, religion and culture were being reported on and discussed more controversially than ever before.

Initially, established writers also benefited from this boom in the printed word. Nevertheless, the growing competition from popular genres, but above all from the emerging humanities and social sciences, endangered the exclusive claim of the established literary figures to interpretative sovereignty in questions of everyday life and world view. Compared to the preceding decades, the impact of “serious” literature gradually diminished. The large form and the individual author became relative. In this respect, it was not the First World War that fundamentally changed the literary world. Rather, it accelerated what the previous explosion of the literary culture had already triggered. Regardless of the increasingly strict military censorship, the aesthetic and thematic spectrum of prose and poetry continued to expand and paved the way for self-taught writers to enter the literary world. These were welcomed as rising stars “from among the people,” who thereby gained their own voice and emancipated themselves from intellectual paternalism. Whilst the “Silver Age” seemed to continue beyond 1914, a fundamental cultural change was taking place, which in turn the revolutions of 1917 took up and tried to steer “in a democratic direction.” Even before the war, literary critics had observed a tendency that was then massively intensifying: the focus of literary creation shifted noticeably in favour of journalism under the new exceptional circumstances of the state of emergency.

**“War Literature”**

There is no established term in Russian for the literature of the First World War. This may be surprising for several reasons. On the one hand, military subjects, officers as modern heroes, and extended campaigns as peripeties of history have been an integral part of Russian literature since the 18th century. From the victory odes of Gavriil R. Derzhavin (1743-1816), to Mikhail IU. Lermontov’s (1814-1841) poeticisation of the decades-long Caucasian War and Tolstoj’s epic depiction of the war against Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) as a test of an entire society, to Vsevolod M. Garshin’s (1855-1888) harrowing tales from the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 and Leonid N. Andreev’s (1871-1919) and Vikentij V. Veresaev’s (1867-1945) perception of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 as a prelude to coming catastrophes, the war was always present amongst the educated elites, yet also increasingly to the mass reader, even in times of peace. On the other hand, in almost all national literature of the countries involved in the First World War, a branch of literary studies emerged that collected the literary heritage, categorised it according to genres, themes or social contexts, and ultimately examined it.

The reason for the absence of Russia in this series is the result of a historical-political drama. For the Bolsheviks, it was considered a foregone conclusion that the revolutionary events of 1917 and the subsequent civil war were sufficient to remove the three devastating years of the World War from historical memory. Not until the rediscovery of the “Great War,” which began before the commemorative year of 2014, was the “loss” of the political and social epochal break before the revolution called to mind. Meanwhile, the methods employed to conceal the gap between 1913, the threshold year of this cultural break, and 1918, had already been developed during the war. It was a matter, as one military censor characterised the informational practice of the general staff, of “systematically denying” facts, texts, and memories or “interpreting them extremely arbitrarily.” In Soviet Russia, the ideological conflict was openly played out. Instead of the Great War, the “Red October” was established as the epochal turning point. Military virtues, heroisation, and patriotic sentiments passed to the victors in the civil war, which was described as a revolutionary “decisive battle.” From then on, all the resources of history and literature were devoted to this reconstruction and repetition. “War literature,” as it developed in the countries of the former Entente and the Central Powers, was thus deprived of the opportunity to develop in the Soviet Union.
The literary response to the experience of the World War and its consequences was preserved, as it were, in the state left behind by contemporaries. That this legacy represents more than a disorganised archive is attributable to the writers, literary critics, and publicists who, immediately after the war began, began to discuss the characteristics of a literature that faced an unrequited challenge. Under the impression of the mass deaths at the very beginning of the conflict, the question was raised as to the role of each individual author, how the events could be appropriately captured linguistically and formally and, last but not least, what “duty” (dolg) and what “responsibility” (otvetstvennost') the intellectuals should assume as citizens of the state. Over were the days when battles seemed to be conducted according to fixed rules and the duel, a relic of the declining aristocratic culture, epitomised by the possibility of duels at the front, which could be fought face to face.

Any attempt to explore the Russian literature of the First World War must be directly linked to this heritage, which has been preserved but not newly appropriated for the respective generation through transmission. This literary resource has a scope and quality that calls for theoretical exploration and conceptual order. Following the genre of “war art” (batal’nyj zhar, batal’naia zhivopis’), it has recently been suggested to speak of “artistic” or “literary war literature” khudozhestvennaia or literaturnaia batalistika. The fluid transitions to authors of “the second and third tier,” but above all to trivial literature andkitsch, are not always clearly discernible. This is especially true when – due to a lack of current theoretical development – interpretive patterns of Soviet provenance are resorted to. In these, educational, didactic, ideological, and moral evaluations of the work and author are often given more weight than aesthetic or scientific criteria. Notwithstanding this, approaches that examine the interrelationship between historiography and fiction and take up suggestions from international research are productive. This also applies to parts of recent military historiography.

The revision of literary creation of the years 1914 to 1917/18 had thus begun. Its aim was to recognise the war as the dominant creative impulse. In addition, a wealth of forgotten works and unknown biographical evidence was being made accessible. Both the renowned authors of these years and those familiar only to contemporaries were much more directly involved in the events of the war than Soviet literary scholarship would have us believe. Large sections of international research follow this distorted portrayal in part up to the present day. One of the few exceptions, Ben Hellman’s thorough study of symbolism in the war years, did not appear until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, international historiography has shifted the epochal break from 1917 back to 1914. It was the war that shook world views, disrupted social relations, and ultimately led to revolutions. Accordingly, the war dictated themes and motifs also in literature. In the disintegrating political order, authors sought orientation; social barriers fell; women seized new rights; peasants and workers made their way into literature.

The extent to which the widespread network of publishers, journals and distribution channels, libraries, associations, and private and public meeting places were affected by the restrictions imposed by the conversion to wartime economy can be reliably reconstructed in broad outlines. Individual studies substantiate this knowledge. Yet numerous questions remain unanswered. How did literary trends change and which emerged anew? What influence did cultural authorities have on the literary establishment? For a long time, there was more conjecture than fact about military censorship. In many respects, however, it seems to have been weaker than in England or France, for example. One sweeping accusation concerned the quality of literary works. Contemporary critics lamented that there were mainly nationalistic devotional writings, mediocrity, and rubbish. There is no doubt that the tabloid press, with its sensational reporting, achieved even greater attention than before 1914. At the same time, however, it offered authors a modest livelihood in difficult times. Reviews were not infrequently characterised by the heated atmosphere. In order to learn more about the social discourses, it is necessary to find out more about the actual tastes of the public. In itself, the place of publication said nothing about the significance of the stories, essays, and articles. On the one hand, the development of the war polarised the literary scene. On the other hand, the organisational and personnel shifts in journalism were not always transparent and therefore increased mutual distrust. Harsh criticism was widespread. Nevertheless, many intellectuals were united by the desire to preserve serious literature. It becomes apparent that the image of the public sphere of the Tsarist empire during the war is now viewed in a thoroughly differentiated way. The cultural life of the war years as a whole now appears wholly diverse and contradictory.

The aforementioned stereotypes of Soviet literary studies had a twofold disparaging effect. On the one hand, trends or groups such as Akmeism and Symbolism were widely suspected of aestheticising and idealising the war. On the other hand, Vladimir...
Lenin's (1870-1924) dogmatic term of "imperialist war" served to politically discredit writers who perceived the events rather
as a complex anthropological state of emergency. Terms such as "on the eve of the revolution" (instead of "before the war") or
"after the revolution" (instead of "after the war" or "after the empire") linguistically fixed the change of perspective. It was not
individual experience, emotional involvement, or moral evaluation that was to characterise the "man at war," but political
conviction. Accordingly, authors were judged according to criteria that dominated the political discourse of the radical parties:
they were distinguished as "militarists" or "pacificists," as "defenders of the fatherland" (oborontsy) or "defeatists" (porazhentsy),
"nationalists," "chauvinists," or "internationalists." The degree of deviation from the party line determined whether these were
merely temporary or fundamental "errors" (zabluzhdenia) that – with Lenin's help – could be "overcome" or alternatively
abandoned thanks to insight into post-revolutionary realities.[25] Individual creative profiles, however, show how diverse and at
times contradictory authors responded to the impending catastrophe.

Soldier-Writers and Civilian-Writers

On 28 September 1914, the newspaper Russkie vedomosti published the proclamation "On the Occasion of War" written by Ivan
A. Bunin (1870-1953). More than seventy renowned writers, artists, and actors, as well as a large number of other signatories,
protested against the barbaric destruction of irreplaceable cultural assets as a result of the German troops.[26] Not only was this
example emulated throughout Russia itself, but comparable appeals from the fields of science, literature, and art appeared in
other countries as well. Though it was not clear in every case whether they were intended more for self-assurance or merely to
fend off external reproaches.[27] Contemporary witness-bearing knew many forms, among which that of the literary figures was
only one, albeit one that could hardly be overestimated for the collective memory. The journeys of writers through the war were
only in rare cases straightforward.[28] This is probably the reason as to why only very few later had an interest in reprinting their
works from this period or in revealing their supposedly disreputable biographical details. Vladimir V. Maiakovskyi (1893-1930), for
example, volunteered after war broke out, but was rejected for being politically "unreliable." In October 1915, however, he did
eventually receive a draft notice. He served in an automobile school as a technical draughtsman in uniform. Along the way he
developed his extraordinary artistic talent, drawing illustrations (lubki) with satirical verses. After the revolution, when
Maiakovskyi placed his popular poster art in the service of the Bolsheviks, the photography of those mobilised for the Tsar's
army disappeared into the archives, while he suppressed the genesis of his famous ROSTA posters.[29] While some of the
authors served at arms or in hospitals, others worked to provide for the soldiers and the general population, solicited solidarity
on behalf of the Imperial Army, or took part in the propaganda against enemy states, and advocated peace for personal or
political reasons. These experiences, whether personal or mediated, found expression in stories and novellas, poems and
poetry, feuilletons and pamphlets, and diaries and letters, resulting in a multi-layered panorama of realistic scenes, fictional
dialogues, intellectual experiences, rational deductions, and emotional empathy. This underlines the importance of literature for
the image that the contemporary public formed of the experiential space of "world war."

Among the writers who wrote about the war during or shortly after it, those who fought at the front as ordinary soldiers or officers
with weapons or were on medical duty near the front were a small minority. Nikolai S. Gumilev (1886-1921), Sergei M.
Gorodetsky (1884-1967), Valentin P. Kataev (1897-1986), Benedikt K. Lifshits (1886-1938) and Mikhail L. Slonimskij (1897-
1972), for example, had volunteered, while Fedor A. Stepun (1884-1965), Boris A. Timofeev, Vsevolod Ivanov (1895-1963),
Nikolai N. Aseeev (1889-1963), Aleksandr A. Blok (1880-1921), Efim A. Pridvorov (1883-1945), better known by his pen-name
Dem'ian Bednyi, and Nikolai S. Tikhonov (1896-1979) had been drafted. Sofia Z. Fedorchenco (1888-1957) and Nadezhda A.
Lokhitovskaja (1872-1952), known as "Teffi," served as medical nurses (sestry miloserdia). Somewhat more numerous were
those who, such as Valerij Ia. Briusov (1873-1924), Fedor D. Kriukov (1879-1920), Evgenii N. Chirikov (1864-1932), Viktor V.
Mujžhel (1880-1932) and Aleksej N. Tolstoj were active as war correspondents. They often served close to the battlefields or in
the trenches. They had an insider's view of the battlefield or the everyday life of the soldiers. That which they documented often
formed the material basis for future literary adaptations. Aleksandr S. Serafimovich Popov (1863-1949) also tried to reach the
front as a war correspondent. However, he only succeeded when he volunteered for the medical service. On the other hand, Ilia
G. Erenburg (1891-1967) wanted to fight at the front, was not taken, but eventually managed to reach the front as a war

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mobilised as a doctor, Georgij D. Grebenschchikov (1882-1964) as a medic, who also reported for a newspaper. Finally, the strongest group comprised those who lived in the rear or far away from the fighting, though sometimes also abroad, but who formed their own impressions on the basis of the changes in life “on the home front” as well as on the basis of the available news, personal reports, or rumours. These included Anna A. Akhmatova (1889-1966), Boris N. Bugaev (1880-1934), known as Andrej Belyj, Ivan A. Bunin (1870-1953), Maksimilian A. Voloshin (1877-1932), Maiakovskij, Osip Mandel'shtam (1891-1938), Igor’ Severianin (1887-1941), Dmitrij S. Merezhkovskij (1865-1941), and Zinaida N. Gippius (1869-1945).

Only elaborate biographical analyses of an author’s work can prove how well informed he or she actually was when reporting, writing poetry, narrating, or writing an essay about the war. They determine how reliable, credible, and “authentic” the reports or fictional texts are. The few cases in which this has already been done in the necessary breadth and depth give an indication as to the complexity of the task.[30] So far, the focus has been mainly on authors who were already well-known before 1914, followed by those who made a name for themselves after the revolution. The latter usually had a greater impact on the chaotic year of war and revolution, 1917, than on that of the ominous August 1914. What happened in between then easily becomes an episode, a vague prelude, or an interlude. Little attention is paid to authors whose creative period ended during the years of war or who only made their artistic appearance during this time and then perished in the civil war, for example.

Looking – Recognising – Understanding

The Great War, the fourth and largest “modern” war that Russia experienced after the Crimean War, the Russo-Turkish War, and the Russo-Japanese War, left no part of society untouched. Individually and collectively perceived and remembered, the war overwhelmed people with the scale and intensity of the fighting and the over-exertion of all resources. The event unleashed a range of intense emotions that usually remain under control in peacetime – from love and hate, to grief and pain, to the courage to fight and fear, panic and fatalism, intoxication and dejection.[31] Quasi-religious loyalty for “fatherland” and “homeland” coexisted with indifference, which was not infrequently interpreted by the patriotic press as “betrayal” or “fraternisation” with the enemy. Thousands may have died anonymously on the frontline and been buried in mass graves, but they returned to families on the home front as memories of individual fate. The war changed everything – everyday life in villages and towns and the perception of reality, as well as the lives of authors. Even after two years, there was no end in sight. For the writer Leonid Dobronravov (1887-1926), it seemed as if the country was “disfigured beyond recognition” and had produced “completely new people.”[32] For him, Russia was on the precipice of secular upheavals. Already in July 1914, but at the latest in looking back on the first year of the war, critics considered the ongoing theoretical dispute between “realists” and “symbolists” to be obsolete. The reality-oriented style of writing of the 19th century had long since entered into a synthesis with fantasy.[33] In poetry, on the other hand, entire “schools” merged almost unnoticed. A “fall of the old gods” was taking place. Ego-futurists, kubo-futurists and acmeists rebelled against tradition.[34] The “war in poetry” now existed in a double sense – as a literary motif and as a literary-historical metaphor.[35]

At the beginning of 1915, the publishing house A.S. Suvorin published an extensive anthology of poetry written during the first three months of the war.[36] It included Anna Akhmatova (with the poem “Solace” [Uteshenie]), Aleksandr Blok (“Antwerp”), “Téffi” (i.e. Nadezhda A. Lokhvitskaja) (“White Clothing” [Belaia odezhda]), Fëdor Sologub (“Stanzas for Poland” [Stansy Pol’she]), “God Against Him Who Begins” [Na nachainaushchego Bog], “To the Brothers” [Bra’tiam], “Belgium’s Consolation” [Uteshenie Bel’gi], “William the Second” [Vil’gel’m Vtoroj], Zinaida Gippius (“Three Crosses” [Tri kresta]), Valerij Briusov (“To Poland” [Pol’she], “The Last War” [Posledniaia voyna], “An Old Question” [Staryj vopros]), Konstantin Bal’mont (“Battle Bells” [Blagovest’ boia] and Igor’ Severianin (“Blessing” [Blagoslovenie]). Numerous other poems were written by lesser-known poets. The volume was arranged thematically, according to historical landscapes on the western periphery of the empire, which had now become the scenes of fierce fighting and occupation by the Central Powers, such as Galicia. This was followed by the Allied war powers Great Britain and France, as well as the Slavic “victim” nations Poland (the proceeds of the volume were to go to “Polish aid”), Serbia, and Bulgaria. Several poems were also dedicated to Belgium, which German troops had invaded at the beginning of the war. In the section “Enemies,” the focus was explicitly only on the German Reich, although individual works also addressed “Austria.” The majority of the other verses were assigned to keywords or differentiated according to external form. For example, the sections “Slavdom” (slavianstvo), “Home” (rodina), “Cossacks” (kazaki) and “Medical Nurses” (sëstry miloserdiia) can be found. These were popular motifs that were updated with reference to the war. In particular, the voluntary service of women in military hospitals occupies an exceptional position, in keeping with its place in state propaganda. Drastic
verses from the genres of “humour and satire” or folklore (narodnoe tvorchesto) follow at the end.

The extensive volume, which was produced under considerable time pressure, claimed to give poetic expression to the overwhelming feelings of the population at the beginning of the war. In this early phase, an optimistic patriotic mood prevailed despite the first defeats that resulted in heavy losses. Russia, it is said elsewhere, will stride to victory “in the whirl of battle” with “fire” and “iron” and thus end a war that it did not want but had to wage “to save its brothers.” Individual basic motifs recur in several variations: the unbreakable unity of “all the tribes” of the country with the Tsar, Russia’s willingness to sacrifice for the “Slavic brothers” beyond its imperial borders, the “innocent blood spilt” in repelling the aggressor, the grief of women and children over the loss of their husbands and fathers, the lonely death of the hero and the deaths en masse, war captivity, the war atrocities of the Germans on the Western Front, the return of the Old Slavic warriors (pogatvï), and the protection of the saints, especially St. George, for the faithful sons of Russia. It is precisely the religious motivation that is omnipresent, whether in the image of God’s avenging fist in Sologub’s work, in the victorious pose of the resurrected Christ in Têffi’s work, or in the consistent shaping of a poem as a prayer in Kopytkin’s work.

More than 300 almanacs and anthologies appeared between 1914 and 1917. Because of its diversity of content, this format was highly popular and can be read as a barometer of the respective moods in the army and the population, which depended decisively on the fickle fortunes of war and the supply situation. But poetry that was committed to a collective cause also aroused doubts as to whether art – despite its diversity – was not being sacrificed entirely to social engagement. “A genuine poetic deluge” had followed the outbreak of war, remarked one critic. Unknown poets felt called upon to “strum the battle lyre,” they based their rhymes on everyday knowledge, and in the end produced “pure newspaper style” (chista gazetnost’). This harsh judgement may have been true in many cases, especially when patriotism and national pathos “guided the pen.” The war upended the cultural scene and shook up the supposedly established concepts. How fickle and contradictory the judgement could turn out in individual cases can be studied in the case of Sologub, who was not infrequently reduced to a “chauvinist” poet, or Gumilëv, the “most unread” poet of the 20th century, who had the reputation of paying homage all too lightly to the “idea of aggression.” Critics also used the term lubochnost’ in a generalising and occasionally disparaging way when the widespread effort to be “close to the people” or to use accessible, pictorial, and lively language was criticised as vulgar, primitive, or banal.

Whilst some voices called for the defence of the “national culture,” which they seemed to become aware of only through the newfound external threat, others speculated that it could not be avoided that the ongoing struggles would bring irreplaceable losses of material and ideal values. Society had to be prepared to start completely anew after the war. In this sense, Blok and Voloshin saw poetry as a “seismograph” that not only indicated the coming destruction, but just as much the great expectations of reconstruction. Maiakovskyj, who had a thoroughly ambivalent relationship to the war, believed that it was not enough to merely “write about the war” (pisat’ o vojne), or about its “decorative side,” but that the poet must “write with the war” (pisat’ vojnoïu), now that “everything is war,” thereby giving it the opportunity to speak for itself.

Among the prose writers, Aleksej N. Tolstoj was one of the most renowned. He did not fight in battle, but reported from the front as a war correspondent. His articles and notes gave rise to stories and novels, most of which were published after the revolution. It is therefore important not to look at his view of the war solely in retrospect. A. Tolstoj was thirty-one years old at the beginning of the war. For a short time he had tried his hand at verse, but then switched to prose and achieved his first successes as a dramatist. In the story “An Ordinary Man” (Obyknovennyj chelovek), written in 1914, he brings the reader up close to the first battles. Like a mosaic, he put together snippets of conversations, everyday scenes in the fighting positions, and views of destroyed villages and towns. In the midst of dirt and stench, soldiers and officers give free rein to their feelings of hatred, contrasted with stylised descriptions of the landscape. A wounded officer, thrown to the ground and looking up at the stars, suffers a near-death experience. The episode is obviously based on a famous scene in Lev Tolstoj’s novel “War and Peace.” Vaguely, the injured man believes he sees a hidden meaning behind the façade of fighting, senses a majestic silence, sees familiar things and faces passing by, all bathed in bright light. A strange feeling of joy seizes him.

A. Tolstoj’s endeavour, not only to describe the war drastically, but also to interpret it from different points of view, is even more distinct in the “Narrative of a Man on the Road” (Rasskaz proezzhego cheloveka). It was published in the third year of the war, immediately before the October upheaval of 1917. The war as an event affecting the whole of society to varying degrees of intensity can already no longer be separated here from the revolutionary crisis that followed, which destabilised Russia after the
abduction of the Tsar in March of that year. In the midst of dramatic events, A. Tolstoj paints a fleeting portrait of a generation of self-sufficient intellectuals who had profited from modernisation, but who were increasingly shown to be incapable of action (without agency) during the Great War and Revolution. In the face of battles with heavy losses and an unprecedented tension of forces, they shift to thinking of the multi-ethnic empire as a “nation.” But the flight into patriotism proves contradictory and ultimately self-destructive. The author succeeds in making the experience of shock comprehensible to the first volunteers and draftees who moved to East Prussia in the summer of 1914. Stunned, yesterday’s civilians stare at a burning railway station as they pass by, wince at the first cannon thunder and see the first dead lying next to them. They have no time to comprehend the “dark magnitude” of what is happening and to orient themselves in the “fire and smoke.” They think they are in a game of chance: someone else’s death is the prize, but their own is the opponent’s trump card. Gradually they become accustomed to the horrifying images: “And the red puddles, the torn-off hands and heads – to hell with them, I don’t feel like it! Having become murderers, we, like the animals, had sensed life...”[46]

Just as poets wanted to capture the sounds at the front, the noise, the characteristic whistling sounds in onomatopoeia, prose writers tried to imitate in narrative what battle painters (khudozhniki-batalisty) strived for with colours in art. Scenes were reproduced as accurately as possible with words and concise details to give the reader an outsider’s perception. Compositional elements of tension served the inner experience and interpretive explanation. But there were doubts as to whether the common vocabulary was sufficient to convey the extraordinary in language. Stepun, who took part in the fighting in Galicia with the rank of an Ensign, had the impression that terms like “know” (znat) and “understand” (ponimat) lost their reliability in this war. It is no longer self-evident that one actually understands what one has seen. “The war is a strange and completely incomprehensible thing,” reads the first “Letter to Mother” in his epistolary novel. It was not the material damage that was the worst thing, but what it did to people’s consciousness.[47]

Conclusion: Literature as War Memory

Materials and narrative forms, motifs and themes, stylistics and use of metaphors reveal insight into this epochal break. The Russian avant-garde was closely intertwined with the European and global avant-garde. This raises the question of how far the thesis that there was a special Russian revolutionary path is still plausible. Without a doubt, the Great War era, including its pre-wars (Russo-Japanese War, Balkan Wars) and post-wars (Civil War, Polish-Soviet War), marked a no less profound biographical and creative historical turning point for most Russian authors than it did for their contemporaries in other belligerent countries. Nevertheless, it is not unjustified to say that Russia lacks a “great” novel (a collection of poems, a play), which, like the works of H.G. Wells (1866-1946) and Vera Mary Brittain (1893-1970) in Great Britain, Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) in France, Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) and John Dos Passos (1896-1970) in North America or Arnold Zweig (1887-1968), Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970), and Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) in Germany, are emblematically associated with the war and stand for a collective experience. This can be countered by the fact that literary critics ignored the relevant approaches. Moreover, the chaotic circumstances surrounding Russia’s withdrawal from the war and the following revolution contributed to marginalising war literature as a whole.[48] It is only today that war writers from other countries are compared with their Russian contemporaries.[49]

Against the background of the body of Russian literature of the years 1914 to 1917/18, which is only briefly outlined within this article, it becomes clear how great the efforts to suppress and “forget” were. Even in the 1920s, there were attempts to continue the thread of literature from the late Tsarist Empire to the early Soviet present. After that, there were only a few striking exceptions that stood out as literary beacons at different times. Worthy of mention in this regard are the novels “The Way of Suffering” (Khozhdenie po mukam) by Aleksjej N. Tolstoj,[50] “The Quiet Don” (Tikhij Don) by Mikhail A. Sholokhov (1905-1984), “The Life of Klim Samgin” (Zhizni Klima Samgina) by Maksim Gor‘kij (1868-1936), “Doktor Zhivago” (Doctor Zhivago) by Boris L. Pasternak (1890-1960) and “August 1914” (Avgust chetyrnadtsatogo) by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008). Valentijn S. Pikul’ (1928-1960), whose historical light novels were widely read in the late Soviet period but hardly considered by literary scholars, deserves special attention.[51] The theme of war and the Tsar’s army occupy a great deal of space in these novels. While on the one hand the author was allowed to cautiously revise some Soviet stereotypes about the world war, on the other hand his works quite blatantly promoted nationalist and anti-Semitic sentiments. Ultimately, within the small informal cultural scene, there has always been an interest in topics beyond the official Soviet canon.[52] The literary production of the Russian emigrants, in which many wartime authors found themselves after the post-revolutionary “exodus to the West,” still plays an
important role today. Here, the legacy of the “Silver Age” was cultivated, newspapers and journals continued, estates were administered, and archives created.\[53\] Post-Soviet literary studies took up this groundwork when they began in order to explore the First World War as a field of study, even before historians had. Herein lies the core of the renewed Russian commemorative culture: it takes up the example of the diaspora, concerns itself with the graves of the war, the mourning for the victims, and the cult for the fallen “heroes”.

Meanwhile, the discourse on “war literature” has been steadily gaining ground. Of course, it does not supersede the immense literature of the revolutionary era, but it does necessitate a revision of its presuppositions, selection criteria, and interpretive approaches. This work is in full swing. The artifice of placing the years 1914-1917/18 in the continuum of “before the revolution” is no longer valid. As an existential experience and at the same time a poetic challenge, the First and Second World Wars must go hand in hand. To what extent survival strategies, behavioural patterns, and ways of thinking or linguistic conventions, metaphors, and forms of expression, i.e. a phenomenology of literature under extraordinary conditions, were handed down here is an open question.\[54\] It is not unusual in history for bodies of knowledge to be left behind in their epoch.

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Reviewed by external referees on behalf of the General Editors

Translator: Joshua R. Kroeker

Notes


18. See, for example, Literaturumye ob”edineniia Moskvy i Peterburga 1890-1917. Slovar’ [Literary Associations of Moscow and St Petersburg, 1890-1917. A Dictionary], Moscow 2004; Bialik, B.A. (ed.): Russkaiia literatura i zhurnalista nachala XX veka, 1905-1917 [Russian Literature and Journalism of the Early 20th Century], Vol. 1-2, Moscow 1984.


21. Hellman, Poets of Hope and Dispair 1995, p. 3 also speaks of the “common knowledge that the First World War did not give birth to any great literature in Russia.”


25. Cf. the lines of development of such dichotomous models of value from the 1930s to the 1980s: TSekhnovitser, Orest V.: Literatura i mirovaia vojna 1914-1918 [Literature and the World War], Moscow 1938; Vl’chinskij, Vsevolod P.: Literatura 1914-1917 godov [Literature in the Years 1914-1917], in: Muratova, Kseniia D. (ed.): Sud’by russkogo realizma nachala XX veka [The Fate of Early Twentieth-Century Russian Realism], Leningrad 1972, pp. 228-277; Slivitskaia: Realisticheskia proza po 1910-ch godov [Realistic Prose from the 1910s].

26. Po povodu vojny. Ot pisatelej, khudozhnikov i artistov [About the War. From Writers, Artists, and Entertainers], in: Russkie vedomosti, 28. September 1914. Among the writers who signed were Maksim Gor’kij, Ivan Shmel’ev, and Aleksandr Serafimovich.

1. Ivanov: Pervaia mirovaia vojna [First World War], p. 415-455 lists in a biobibliographical index a total of 142 authors whose often unknown works form the basis of his study.


6. Andrej Belyj’s novel Peterburg was cited here as an example.

7. According to Evgenij G. Lundberg, the head of the literature department of the journal Sovremennik (Literatura i iskusstvo: Literaturnyj dnevnik [Literature and Art: Literary Diary], in: Sovremennik 1915, Nr. 1, January, p. 207-218, here p. 216) as well as the poet, literary critic, translator, and mathematician Sergej P. Bobrov in a contribution in the same volume (Rossiaiskaia poëziia v 1914 godu [Russian Poetry in 1914], in: ibid., p. 218-226, here p. 219).

8. See Khodasevich, Vladislav (ed.): Vojna v russkoj lirike [War in Russian Lyrics], Moscow 1915.

9. Giniškis, Boris B. (ed.): Sovremennaia vojna v russkoj poëzii [Modern Warfare in Russian Poetry], Sbornik, Petrograd 1915. The preface was dated 19 October 1915. Giniškis was an editor and publicist. During the First World War he turned to the “progressive nationalists.”


13. A censored version of the epistolary novel appeared in the journal Severnye zapiski (Nos. 7-9) in 1916.

14. See, for example, Stepun, Fëdor A.: Iz pisem praporshchika-artillerista [From the letters of an Ensign Artilleryman], Prague 1926, p. 6 ff., 71. A censored version of the epithet novel appeared in the journal Severnye zapisky (Nos. 7-9) in 1916.


17. Especially vol. 1, which was originally to be published as “Through Dust and Smoke” (Skvov’ pyl i dym), then came out as Sisters (Sěstry) before becoming part of the trilogy.
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