

Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia

Review Number:

229

Publish date:

Wednesday, 31 October, 2001

Author:

Catherine Merridale

ISBN:

9781862073740

Date of Publication:

2000

Publisher:

Granta

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Geoffrey Hosking

'What could be more universal than death?' asks an anthropologist quoted by Merridale. [58] Death is a major aspect of the history of any society, and one which brings out its members' deepest beliefs. But in twentieth century Russia it has been peculiarly dominant, because so many deaths have been premature or violent. We are sometimes tempted to believe that Russians have become inured to death, feel it less intensely than we do. Indeed this illusion has become part of a widespread myth about the 'fatalism' and 'passivity' of Russians.

Merridale will not have any of this. She begins with an account of the traditional peasant culture of death, with its mixture of Orthodox and pagan elements, of the grand and macabre obsequies of official Russia, and then of the civic funerals of the intelligentsia and the revolutionaries, designed to glorify the dead as a symbol of resistance to despotism. When the Communists came to power, they tried to change the culture of death, for instance by introducing crematoria and new forms of civil ceremony. But the innovations were accepted only reluctantly, and when it came to the death of their own founder and leader, Lenin, they reverted to the Orthodox custom of preserving relics. So at least Merridale argues, though in fact the Orthodox never embalmed a whole corpse. That was left to secular myth-makers: the Red Square mausoleum is actually more reminiscent of our own relic in University College London, Jeremy Bentham. Still, the discrepancy between Communist theory and practice was remarkable. The real problem was that the Communist religion was resolutely this-worldly and so had great difficulty in finding rituals to mark the passage to another world. There the Orthodox believers and popular folklore had an unassailable advantage. Even today, Merridale remarks, when you talk to Russians 'you will learn that death is still a bird, the extinction of a star, the flight of a winged and vulnerable soul.' [432]

The problem was not just ideological. In the Soviet Union only certain deaths could be remembered, and then only in certain ways. The Red victims of the 1917 revolution and civil war, the glorious dead of the Great Fatherland War: for them apotheosis was guaranteed. But not for the dekulakised, the victims of the 1932-4 famine, those who died of exhaustion and malnutrition in labour camps or were shot in the cellars of

the Lubianka. Even the official heroes of the regime could only be commemorated in certain ways. For decades after 1945, memoirs about the war were either forbidden or had to be written according to certain tightly prescribed formulae.

Perhaps the most damaging effect of this official miserliness about the past was that it forced people to suppress their own personal memories and their own grief.

Our memories are corroborated and validated by those around us, by the narratives which fill the public media and which underlie conversation. Without such validation they fragment and become insubstantial. Kazakhstan was probably the most traumatised region of the Soviet Union during the collectivisation of agriculture, since the process of settling nomads was superimposed on that of creating collective farms. Some thing like a third of the population died or emigrated. Yet public memory has retained very little of this. As Merridale puts it, 'The survivors scattered, changing their identities'. [199] Like the few survivors of Carthage after the Romans had finished with the place. In Russia too many simply put memories behind them. One of Merridale's interlocutors remembered being dekulakised in childhood, her father being led away, her mother and brothers being locked into barracks and abandoned. Yet she was far more interested in talking about her successes in the Komsomol and her experiences in the war, for those were memories which had been fostered and upheld by everyone around her. [223-231]

So people suppressed, dismembered or distorted their memories and their grief where these did not fit the approved image, perhaps because they were Jews, perhaps because they had been on enemy territory, perhaps because of atrocities they had witnessed or even participated in. Recounted spontaneously, those memories might bring trouble to themselves or to relatives. Many people had no families or trusted friends with whom they could share memories privately, and the communal apartments of the rapidly expanding Soviet cities were no places in which to unbutton oneself and expatiate frankly on one's wartime experience: there were always people listening, ready to report to the 'appropriate authorities'. So for many people trauma and grief simply became suppressed. As the writer Varlam Shalamov once said, 'A human being survives by his ability to forget'. People got on with their lives: mere survival required energy and time enough. Many of Merridale's respondents told her 'We were too busy, there was no time to think about the past.' They joined in collective, sanctioned celebrations and mourning, trying to force their own memories and feelings into officially approved moulds, and otherwise remained silent. They preferred to see themselves as heroes rather than as victims, and as part of the collective rather than as stigmatised outsiders. Those for whom the strain was too great took to drink.

Clearly in such circumstances the sense of community was weakened, and the collective celebration of national identity became at best stunted and distorted. Neither genuine ethnic nor civic solidarity could flourish in such a climate. Since collective mourning is a very important component of community feeling, especially after a destructive war, such distortion could only undermine social cohesion.

Forcing memory and perception could have unexpected and grotesque results. A Jewish woman Merridale talked to, whose parents had been murdered by the Germans during the war, said in all seriousness: 'I know now that the Jews were responsible for killing Jesus Christ. And their religion says you must take an eye for an eye. That is why I am an Orthodox now.' [323-4]

Nadezhda Mandelstam, the widow of the poet, once remarked that 'In our sort of life people had to shut their eyes to their surroundings. [That] is not easy and requires a great effort... Soviet citizens have achieved a high degree of mental blindness, with devastating consequences for their whole psychological make-up.' [248] Merridale raises the possibility that Russians are all suffering from mental illness, something like 'post-traumatic stress disorder' She rejects it, though: she believes that forms of suffering are tailored by the culture in which they operate, and so also are the narratives fashioned to explain that suffering. Our western narratives are moulded by a specific culture of personhood, in which the freedom and creativity of the individual are seen as possessing supreme value. By contrast, Russian victimhood and suffering are moulded to the experience of lasting aspiration to universal empire. 'To speak as a former Soviet citizen and a Russian is to speak... from a culture of endurance and heroism; it is to use the language of historical destiny,

to talk (however ironically) of the audacity involved in leading the collective struggle for human liberation.' [416] That is why Merridale's respondents insisted that they could not afford the luxury of grieving and that psychotherapy was pointless self-indulgence. 'Dear girl, this isn't your England!... Of course it was terrible, but we had to rebuild our town. We were carrying everything ourselves, there was no other way. We had defeated the Fascists, and now we were building socialism, right there in Kiev.' [417] Collectivism and a common purpose, even just waving the red flag, really did help, though they did not assuage all suffering, and some individuals could never fit into them.

It is for the same reason that many people suppressed their suspicions and doubts during the terror of the 1930s. The idealist young Komsomol activist Lev Kopelev did not believe Bukharin or Trotsky were foreign agents; he knew there was something wrong about the purges. But he supported Stalin, for 'We were a besieged fortress; we had to be united, knowing neither vacillation nor doubt.' [256]

Sometimes even community was not enough. The greatest imperative of all was sheer survival, in a milieu where human beings were constantly at risk. A realist in a terrible world, a Russian could learn to steal, lie and kill 'despite his poetry and the letters in the pocket of his soldier's coat'. Russians also learned to hang on to whatever they could for spiritual strength: thoughts of family, of homeland, of God. The war generated a religious revival so strong that the atheist regime had to compromise with it. Even non-Russians were caught up in the Russian-led fight to defend the homeland.

This book raises fundamental questions about oral history, indeed about any attempt to penetrate to the reality of what people from a different culture and a different time think and feel. Merridale was fearless in questioning her interlocutors. Or at least, if she was not fearless, she pressed on in spite of her fears. She broached issues which I, in more than thirty years of talking to Russians, have tended to leave unspoken, for fear of stirring precisely the traumas she needed to revive to do her self-appointed job. She admits that some found her questions intrusive. They thought she had come to ask about 'repressions' - a Russian word denoting a terrible reality of arrests and executions, but by now tamed and domesticated into everyone's accepted vocabulary - but actually they found she had come to talk about death. She often found she had to talk about all kinds of unexpected and irrelevant matters in order to retain her respondents' willingness to talk about what really concerned her. The result is a richly woven tapestry which conveys more of the complexity of Soviet and post-Soviet life than even the book's title would lead us to expect.

This book is a courageous exercise in trying to penetrate the mental and spiritual world of another people during the most terrible ordeals of their history, while also endeavouring to retain some detachment and balance. Merridale does not always achieve both at the same time. As she confesses at the very end, 'I do not think I have come home'.

I have only one or two complaints. Writing of the famine of 1891 Merridale claims that 'upwards of thirty million' peasants starved [69]. This is presumably a misprint, but even three million would be higher than the usual estimates of mortality. The evocation of Tsarist Russia's 'death row, where "hundreds and more than hundreds" daily awaited execution' [86] is inappropriate. 'Death row' is a product of a quite different culture. Tsarist Russia did not have a death penalty, let alone the protracted legal wrangling which condemns hundreds of American prisoners to long waits for execution. Mass judicial execution in Russia was carried out only for a few months in 1906-7, under Stolypin, and was usually administered summarily, after a brief court-martial hearing. At other times, Russia's harsh penal system caused many deaths, but in casual, extra-legal fashion. Brutal undoubtedly, but in a wholly different way from the USA.

These points are not insignificant in a book about death. They pale, however, beside the achievement. This is a revealing and challenging work which forces us to reconsider fundamental issues of death, memory and the way we understand the past. The research project which generated it was courageous and humane, and the result throws a profound and searching light on the spiritual condition of the Russian people over several tumultuous decades. The book is, moreover, written in a compassionate, undogmatic and jargon-free style, appropriate to its purpose, which makes it a pleasure to read.

Other reviews:

Google Books

<http://books.google.co.uk/books> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/229>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1271>

[2] <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=m6TWAAAAMAAJ&sitesec=reviews>