

Drafting the Russian Nation Military Conscription, Total War and Mass Politics, 1905-1925

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s the deft pun in the title reminds us, one of the ways in which nations were both imagined and institutionalised in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was through the conscripting of young men into the army. The ways in which they were called up, selected, trained and led, and the arrangements made for their families left behind deeply affected the nature of nationhood. More than most nations Russia has depended on its army, yet Sanborn's book is the first to put the issue of conscription squarely at the centre of a consideration of Russian nationhood. It concentrates on the late Tsarist and early Soviet experience, the period when the crucial changes took place.

Sanborn examines the way in which Russia gradually phased out a recruitment system based on paternalism, social hierarchy and the decisions of local elites, and instead created an egalitarian, fraternal army raised in uniform manner throughout the country. In the 1870s the legacy of serfdom, only recently abolished, still hung heavily over the army. Dmitrii Miliutin was the first war minister to set himself the goal of establishing an army not of serfs but of Russian citizens, in order to inculcate conscious patriotism in Russians and non-Russians alike. His view was that 'General obligatory participation in military service, uniting in the ranks of the army men of all estates and all parts of Russia, presents the best means for the weakening of tribal differences among the people and the correct unification [‘effective coordination’ might be a better translation] of all the forces of the state.' (quoted on p. 12)

It was to be a long time before this ideal was even approximately achieved. Although Miliutin was responsible for a universal conscription law promulgated in 1874, the Tsarist state did not actually create an

army drawn from the entire young adult male population until the first world war, and then only in a manner which provoked strongly felt grievances. In some parts of Russia there were conscription riots and, even worse, a massive rebellion in Central Asia in 1916. For those actually in the army, though, the new fraternal propaganda, projecting Russia as an immense family of diverse origins, proved quite successful. The regime's great failure, as Sanborn sees it, was that it did not encourage an equivalent spirit in civilian life: it did not complement its achievement in army-building with the kind of nation-building civic institutions which might have saved it.

What most worried potential conscripts and serving soldiers was the plight of their families back at home. The tsarist regime tried to solve the problem from 1912 by guaranteeing the families of serving soldiers a basic ration or *paek*. As Sanborn points out, this guarantee marked a new stage in the relationship between state and subject: the subject henceforth had the duty of military service, but in return the state had the duty to support his family. In 1918 the Soviet regime found that without such a guarantee it was impossible to recruit a volunteer army, as it had originally intended to do, or to avoid mass desertions even after it introduced conscription. So the Soviet authorities offered soldiers' families privileged access to housing, social security benefits and education for their children. For two decades to have served in the Red Army during the civil war was to have a head start on the ladder to the ever scarcer good things of life in Soviet society.

Once a recruit joined the armed forces, he found the nation being 'drafted' in other ways too, notably through rituals of small group masculinity involving hatred and violence directed against 'others'. Already the Tsarist army had claimed that the Russian soldier enjoyed higher morale and greater attacking spirit than any of his adversaries, and trained its men accordingly. The Bolsheviks continued these practices, 'breaking down' new recruits by subjection to authoritarian, even brutal, discipline and then imbuing them with the idea that controlled violence against enemies was glorious, especially when practised in the name of the formerly oppressed classes against their oppressors. As the Handbook of the Red Army Soldier proclaimed, 'The colour of our banner is the colour of blood.' (quoted on p. 175)

Virility was an ideal that could readily be used to integrate non-Russian recruits and make them feel at home in a military community embracing all the ethnic groups of the USSR. 'Even if a soldier did not accept the political claims of the Bolsheviks, he might nevertheless fight in the Red Army because he bought the claim that deserters were cowards and cowards were not real men.' (p. 163) Women were then seen either as 'Madonnas' – the nurses and volunteers of the auxiliary services – or as whores, the objects of front-line pornographic jokes and songs.

This spirit, once inculcated, proved tenacious; and it fed into the rest of society. Extending Sanborn's insights, one could say that male small-group cohesion cemented by violence against enemies was what held the party-state apparatus together for most of the Soviet decades. Generated in the civil war, this spirit was renewed and intensified in the second World War and remained dominant right through to the 1980s. As ethnic relations deteriorated from the 1960s, the army faced the growing problem of *dedovshchina*, the brutal hazing of new recruits that sometimes resulted in serious injury or even death. The most vicious incidents were inter-ethnic, often directed by Russians or Ukrainians against Balts or Central Asians. Outside the army, among the less privileged strata of Soviet society, brawling, hooliganism and heavy drinking remained serious problems throughout the Soviet period. Sanborn's account helps us to understand why all this was so.

Even so, I find his claim that nations are necessarily based on violence exaggerated: 'At the centre of the nation stands the sociable killer' (p. 166); 'The central national practice is the performance of violence.' (p. 206). These are splendid Hobbesian phrases, but they are very one-sided. I should declare an interest here, since on pp 201-2 Sanborn accurately summarises the account I gave of the development of Russian nationhood in *Russia: People and Empire 1552-1917* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), but then questions my assumption that 'the key to the phenomenon of the nation lies in the realm of social and cultural solidarity.' (1) While no-one who has observed twentieth-century history could possibly deny the appalling brutality and carnage generated by nationalism, that is not the same as saying that *nations* necessarily beget violence. It is probably true that nation-building nearly always involves violence, but that is because national identity is

still uncertain and contested. The examples he quotes – Gettysburg, Belfast, Kampala, Delhi, San Salvador as well as St Petersburg – all involve the gestation of nations, not the politics of stable, formed nations. So it does not follow that, as Sanborn puts it, ‘the nation is fundamentally and unavoidably unstable as a political form, since it is centred upon a civic act that cannot be effectively disciplined.’ (p. 207)

The problem, I think, is that Sanborn identifies the nation too closely with the power system. Actually one of the great strengths of nationhood is that it replaces naked power with the shared sentiments which make easy communication and social solidarity possible. Nation-building involves not just military activity, but also education, the cultivation of shared myths and memories, the creation of social security systems, of representative institutions and many other things. Vertical power is reinforced by horizontal relationships and can thus afford to be both less ferocious and less restrictive. The civic and the ethnic (a distinction Sanborn dismisses) work together, not in conflict.

In any case, was the Soviet Union really a nation, as Sanborn asserts? The Red Army probably came closer to making it one than any other institution, but in the end it too failed, as *dedovshchina* revealed. Soviet nationality policy was intended to create not nations, but rather an international proletarian community. On the way to that goal it ensured that every ethnic group had its own named territory as a potential homeland, and in practice most of them (though not the Russians) identified with it more closely than with the Union as a whole. Besides, from the 1930s to the early 1950s the Soviet authorities routinely employed massive violence against certain ethnic groups. The Ukrainian famine of 1932-4, the deportations of Baltic peoples, Ukrainians, north Caucasians and others left an indelible bitterness and resentment which eventually helped to precipitate the disintegration of the USSR and has fuelled the Russian Federation’s worst conflicts since. In other words, violence was a sign of the failure of nation-building, not of its success.

In spite of these reservations, Sanborn’s sharp and disciplined focus on military conscription does add a new dimension to our understanding of the way in which power, identity and sense of community operated in late imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Even if not all its conclusions are accepted, it will be essential reading.

Notes

1. To read a review of *Russia: People and Empire* on these pages, please click [here](#) [2]. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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