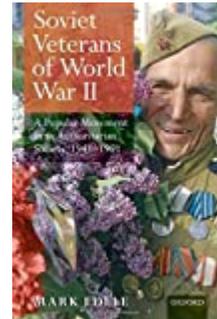


Mark Edele. *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. XII, 334 S. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-923756-2.



Reviewed by Franziska Exeler (PhD candidate, Princeton University)

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2010)

M. Edele: Soviet Veterans

At the end of the Second World War, the Red Army was one of the largest armies in history. Between 1941 and 1945, approximately 34.5 million people served at some point in the Soviet forces. Roughly 20 percent of them died, but up to 25.3 million soldiers returned home. It is the story of these World War II participants that Mark Edele investigates in his book. Based on his dissertation at the University of Chicago, "Soviet Veterans of the Second World War" tells us about these men and women (and how they tried to find a place in one of the harshest social and political environments of Europe (p. 6). Despite the immense importance of World War II for the political legitimacy of the Soviet system, the road to official recognition, organization, and an institutionalized system of benefits was difficult for the veterans. Still, they emerged as a new social and political force in the post-war Soviet Union and it is this development that Edele analyzes. His study represents a much-needed contribution to a topic that has received surprisingly little scholarly attention.

The book is divided into three main parts, each consisting of two to four chapters: Reintegration (I), Victors

and Victims (II), and Movement (III). Part I investigates the chaotic mass-demobilization process and the most pressing question that the former soldiers had to deal with upon their return: how to make a livelihood. Food and housing were scarce, and the Soviet bureaucracy was overburdened with the reintegration of the veterans. As the former soldiers waited for hours in line and wrote countless letters to the authorities to obtain legal documentation, resident permits, or jobs, their frustration grew. Despite all their efforts, few of them could rely on state aid. Due to fiscal concerns, whatever few privileges the veterans had been granted (such as income tax exemptions, pension benefits, free tram transport in cities) were by and large abolished in 1947/48. Thus, the individual process of becoming a civilian depended heavily on the support that veterans could get from their families (in particular from women, i.e. wives, mothers, sisters) and the extent to which they could rely on broader pre-existing or newly established social networks. As a result, the material conditions of veterans varied considerably, and a social hierarchy developed among them. In part II, Edele analyzes this process of group disintegration and differentiation. At the top of the social hierar-

chy stood those former soldiers that managed to use their wartime service to their advantage and rise into leading positions in the party, government, and economy. At the lower end were war invalids who could often only survive as beggars and former Prisoners of War, who carried the stigma of having fallen into German captivity and who faced discrimination and in some cases also outright repression.

Reintegration into civilian life thus played out very differently for the veterans, and their different social and economic positions pulled an already diverse group further apart. Still, what these millions of people had in common was their sense of entitlement, the feeling that the state owed them a better life and they were not willing to put up with the way they were treated. To be clear, the veterans were not in opposition to the regime, and in contrast to the veterans depicted in Elena Zubkova's "Russia After the War", internal political reform was not high on their agenda. Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War. Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*, Armonk 1998. Rather, the former soldiers in Edele's study were mostly concerned with material benefits. Thus, the post-war decades witnessed the growth of a veterans' movement that continuously claimed economic privileges. In the end, it succeeded: By the mid-1980s, veterans had been transformed from a rather weakly integrated entitlement community into a Soviet corporate group with a high degree of organization, legal status, and integration into the political system.

It is this process of institutionalization that Edele investigates in part III of his book but as he shows, it was not as straightforward as one might assume. First and foremost, the success of the veterans' movement was contingent on shifts in state policy and ultimately on the regime's support. Still, the countless complaint letters written by former soldiers exerted constant pressure on the state. The Soviet leadership could put breaks on the movement, but it couldn't completely ignore its claims. Tactical concessions made by the regime in turn opened up space for the veterans to take advantage of the new circumstances. The history of the all-Union Soviet Committee of War Veterans (SKVV) illustrates this dynamic: In 1956, the regime created it for international propaganda purposes only; it was explicitly not meant to be an interest group for veterans. However, the veterans soon challenged the goals of the SKVV, thus pushing its leadership to lobby the party on their behalf. In the following years, self-proclaimed Soviet Committees of War Veterans sprang up in factories, enterprises, and military

schools. The regime counteracted this development by curtailing the organizational structure of the SKVV in 1976, but the organization continued to provide the basis for the movement. Nevertheless, without a major policy shift from above, a real mass organization wouldn't have come into existence. With the creation of the All-Union Organization of Veterans of War and Labor in 1986, Gorbachev released the breaks that Brezhnev had put on the movement. A representative body for both front and home front veterans was now established. Its officially declared role was to lobby state and societal organizations on behalf of the veterans and their privileges.

As Edele thus shows, the veterans' movement came about neither in a planned nor controlled fashion. Rather, the interplay between state policy and veterans' actions gave rise to a specific dynamic that shaped the way in which this popular movement grew. One of the strengths of Edele's book lies precisely in his analysis of this dynamic. In doing so, he successfully moves beyond a simple above/below dichotomy that for a long time has characterized studies of totalitarian societies. His study also provides valuable insights into the workings of the Soviet system, and the many unintentional consequences that state action often had.

"Soviet Veterans of the Second World War" is a social history in the sense that it focuses on processes of group formation and elements of group differentiation, such as economic and social status. One learns much about the material hardships that many veterans faced after the war but while those certainly posed obstacles to a quick reintegration into civilian life, the reader learns little about the psychological and mental legacies of war that each former soldier must have grappled with. Edele sees his study as an investigation into the unintended, long-term, socio-psychological, and political consequences of waging war (p. 19), but makes little mention of traumata and the marks those left on individual soldiers' post-war lives. The psychological impact that World War II had on the millions of returning Soviet soldiers still needs to be researched.

To be sure, Edele is writing about a movement that claimed to represent millions of veterans throughout the Soviet Union (although the actual activists formed a minority among the former soldiers), which is not necessarily conducive to a focus on individual life stories. Still, his study lacks at times a solid basis in a specific locality. While he quotes veterans' own voices, it is often not clear who these people were, where they lived etc. One wonders, though, if it didn't make a difference whether a sol-

dier returned to war-ravaged Minsk (or any other place that had been under German occupation) or to Novosibirsk (or any other town in the rear). In his study of Ukraine, Amir Weiner has argued that during the first postwar years, regional party politics were dominated by a fierce power struggle between former soldiers and former partisans. Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War. The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revo-*

lution, Princeton 2001. Because Edele doesn't explicitly focus on the western borderlands, his study cannot touch on this aspect. Nevertheless, Edele's book is an important contribution to the history of the later Soviet Union, in particular the immediate postwar years. It deepens our understanding of how Soviet state and society interacted and provides critical insights into the development of the veterans' movement.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Franziska Exeler. Review of Edele, Mark, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29476>

Copyright © 2010 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.