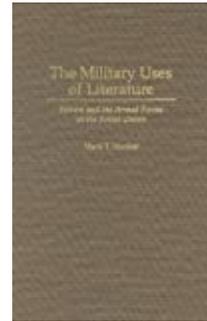




Mark T. Hooker. *The Military Uses of Literature: Fiction and the Armed Forces in the Soviet Union.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996. x + 242 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95563-2.



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A Glimpse into Soviet Military Culture

Many scholars have explored the interrelationship between culture and the military. Indeed, historian John Keegan has recently suggested that warfare itself is primarily a cultural construct. In the Soviet Union, military leaders recognized the power of culture in military affairs and undertook a concerted effort to instill desired attitudes and values in its soldiers and sailors through literary works. In *The Military Uses of Literature: Fiction and the Armed Forces in the Soviet Union*, Mark T. Hooker examines the body of official Soviet military literature and the rationale behind it.

Hooker begins with a chapter on the administrative history of Soviet military fiction. He quotes Soviet leaders who characterized fiction as “one of the most powerful tools for the organization and education of the masses” (p. 2). Military fiction fell under the authority of the Main Political Directorate of the Army and Navy (MPD). From the days of Lenin to the termination of the MPD in 1991, Soviet leaders identified suitable topics for the troops to read and guided writers in the production of appropriate works. This literature fit squarely into the socialist-realist style, according to Hooker. The goal of

this literature was not to provide entertainment for the troops as much as it was to promote socialism, increase military readiness, and build morale in the ranks.

In subsequent chapters, the author discusses the major themes in Soviet military fiction. He begins by describing the legacy of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. In one chapter, he outlines the changing image of the Germans from enemies to allies. In another, he describes the retirement of World War II veterans and its impact on the Soviet military. Several chapters cover the responsibilities of a Soviet soldier, and include topics like the place of the individual in the command structure, the role of military wives, and the purpose of training exercises. Literature also helped prepare soldiers for some of the hardships of military service, and Hooker devotes chapters to subjects such as life on remote posts and the “Dear Ivan” letters that sometimes came to soldiers after they left yhome. The work concludes with a chapter on the fiction of the war in Afghanistan.

Hooker astutely identifies the major themes in Soviet military fiction and provides a good narrative of what these works contain. Unfortunately, he does not go be-

yond this groundwork to explore the genre more thoroughly. For example, the author gives no indication of how widely this literature was read, or how well the soldiers and sailors received it. Were these works required reading for inductees and veteran soldiers? Which works were most popular and why? In the introduction Hooker mentions that MPD leaders constantly sought to have writers portray military life realistically, but in the subsequent chapters he does not indicate how well they did so. In fact, the author does not place military fiction into the context of Soviet literature generally or discuss the artistic merit of the works. In short, Hooker's narrative suggests some fundamental questions which he leaves undressed.

When Hooker does approach larger questions, the results often seem incomplete. For example, he notes that the restrictions on military literature began to loosen with the advent of *glasnost* in the late 1980s. To illustrate his point he provides cogent passages that show a growing tolerance for critical portraits of Soviet military life. However, he might have said more about the nature of this change. What were the limits of this openness? Did some works diverge from the socialist-realist camp altogether and resemble the military fiction found in the West? In what is perhaps the work's most glaring omission, Hooker says virtually nothing about military literature before the Great Patriotic War. Though his administrative history covers the years before 1941, the topical chapters begin with the aftermath of World War II, even though by the author's own admission the effort to control military literature dated to the Russian Revolution. Without some discussion of the pre-World War II years, Hooker cannot assess fully the impact of the greatest war in Soviet history on that nation's military literature.

Two notable stylistic problems stand out. First, some passages suggest that the text was originally written long before its 1996 publication date, such as where the author claims that "criticism of military fiction remains a problem to this day" in the Soviet Union (p. 5), or where he

notes that "the Soviet military strives to create realistic training exercises" (p. 170). Readers will also note the frequent use of American military terminology. For example, American military acronyms march across the pages: FTX, BOQ, TDY, EM, SOP, ROTC, etc. Slang terms, such as "vill" for village and "short-timer" for a soldier about to be discharged, also pepper the work. The author uses American terms even when he supplies the Soviet equivalents. He even goes so far as to refer to a Soviet soldier as a "GI" (p. 142) and a field ration as a "K ration" (p. 189). American terms appear not only in Hooker's own prose but also in quoted translations from Russian. Hooker's military style sometimes forced this reviewer to refer back to his own brief military career; readers not familiar with the language of the American armed forces may find Hooker difficult to follow at times.

The subject of military literature might reveal much about Soviet Cold War behavior, and at times Hooker taps into this potential. For example, the book contains a chapter on the duties and expectations of a Soviet sentry. He notes that sentries were expected to fire at possible intruders on the slightest of pretexts. He connects this tendency to two incidents from the 1980s that outraged Americans at the time: the 1983 attack on a Korean Air Lines jet in Soviet air space and the 1985 shooting of an American military attache in East Germany, suggesting that these incidents should not have been quite as surprising as they seemed.

The Military Uses of Literature is an original, thought-provoking work on a little-known aspect of the Soviet military. Mark T. Hooker has brought the subject to the attention of scholars and outlined its basic tenets. However, it will be up to other scholars to explore the implications of what Hooker has unearthed.

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