

REVIEWS

Nataliya Danilova. *The Politics of War Commemoration in the UK and Russia*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 2015. xv, 280 pp.

In this ambitious comparative work, Nataliya Danilova, Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Aberdeen, explores the ways in which war commemorations in the contemporary United Kingdom and Russia “potentially evoke nationalistic sentiments, normalise warfare and militarise societies at the cultural level” (xi). She argues that those who participate in national commemorations for the dead should also take political responsibility for the current conflicts in which the nation’s soldiers fight. If commemorations provide comfort for families and support for soldiers alone, they become “depoliticised”—detached from the political conditions that create and sustain war—and also “decontextualised,”—as they omit discussion and debate about the specific military conflicts in which the nation participates. Such commemorations allow a “remembrance without politics” that serves as a “justification of future conflicts” (xi-xii). By showing similarities between war commemorations in Britain, a society with strong democratic traditions, and the authoritarian Soviet Union and increasingly anti-democratic Russia, Danilova provocatively suggests that, despite these ideological differences, “in both countries, the politics of war commemoration is capable of subverting political debate and limiting the scope of public deliberation over modern wars and the role of the national armed forces” (218).

Danilova considers the commemoration of British soldiers in the Falklands War of 1982, the Gulf War of 1990-91, the Iraq War of 2003-2009, and the Afghanistan War of 2001-2014. On the Soviet/Russian side, she explores the remembrance of Russian soldiers in the Soviet Afghan War of 1979-89 and the two Chechen Wars of 1994-96 and 1999-2009. Danilova’s book is extremely well researched and her careful analysis is sensitive to the many particularities of both societies. She underlines the strong similarities in the

ways commemorations function without minimizing the distinct characteristics of each case.

A great strength of the work is the broad spectrum of commemorations that Danilova explores in both the British and Soviet/Russian cases. She investigates the British media in general, war memorials and the National Memorial Arboretum, internet memorials, and commemorative events on Armistice Day and Remembrance Day. The Russian section contains a parallel analysis of commemoration of the war dead in the Soviet and then Russian media, of war memorials and the Serafimovskoe Cemetery in St. Petersburg (an example of patterns of local commemoration), of internet memorials, and of Victory Day celebrations.

Danilova points out that contemporary British soldiers are “the successors of the ‘glorious dead’” (208) of the First World War. While this is certainly the case, it is important to remember that the commemoration of the First World War in Britain is itself contested terrain in which narratives of national honor compete with other persistent narratives about the futility of a war where “lions” (British troops) were led by “donkeys,” callous generals who sent tens of thousands to the slaughter needlessly. Danilova’s work is at its best when she includes analysis of resistance to the dominant narratives of war commemoration such as the white poppy peace movement in Britain, or when British shoppers completely ignore the two minutes of silence on Armistice Day. While I agree that decontextualized and military-centered support for the soldiers as heroes or venerated victims of war can undercut these oppositional currents, it is important not to flatten the uneven texture of popular responses to commemoration into uniform support for military endeavors.

Recent events in Russia bolster Danilova’s arguments about the use of commemoration of the Second World War to mobilize patriotic sentiments in contemporary Russia while skipping over the messy Afghan and Chechen conflicts. Her book went to press before the 9 May 2015, “Immortal Regiment” (*Bessmertnyi Polk*) parades, in which purportedly millions of Russian citizens marched with pictures of their relatives who had served in the Second World War, creating direct personal relationships with the war dead and veter-

ans of the war that ended seventy years ago, instead of with the living veterans of the Afghan and Chechen wars. Danilova also effectively shows the ways in which the private commemorations of the families of Afghan and Chechen war dead simultaneously challenge and support the current government. While on the one hand, the relatives, most notably led by committees of soldiers' mothers, confront the authorities and demand recognition for the sacrifice of their sons, this "patriotism of despair" as Serguei Oushakine calls it, seeks for the lost and unrecognized soldiers to be incorporated into the national narrative, thus upholding the nation. Yet, here too, it is important to underline, perhaps even more than Danilova does, that despite the growing overall ideological consent to the militarization of the Russian nation, if draft dodging and passive resistance to cooperation with the military persist, this consent will not translate into effective military action or state legitimacy.

The Politics of War Commemoration is a timely book that demonstrates the ways in which modern states use the commemoration of the war dead to promote and support messy, ambiguous, and conflict-ridden military campaigns. Yet, as the American example of anti-Vietnam protest and the Soviet example of the collapse of support for the war in Afghanistan in the mid-1980s show, what seems to be a powerful pro-war consensus can sometimes collapse under the weight of new political circumstances and social formations. Danilova's outstanding work allows us to see the building blocks of military ideology at work as they are arranged and rearranged by states and social forces to build (or destroy) consensus.

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Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 417 pp.

"In Afghanistan", recalls Ruslan Aushev, a former Soviet officer in Afghanistan, "we did not have the task, as many say, of defeating