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## **Elena Seniavskaia, Protivniki Rossii v voinakh XX veka. Evoliutsiia « obraza vruga » v soznanii armii i obshchestva Moskva, ROSSPEN, 2006, 287 s.**

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## Elena Seniavskaia, Protivniki Rossii v voynakh XX veka. Evoliutsiia « obraza vruga » v soznanii armii i obshchestva

Moskva, ROSSPEN, 2006, 287 s.

- 1 The myth of the Great Patriotic War, once at the center of Soviet claims to legitimacy, has taken some serious battering since Perestroika. Of the many voices of younger intellectuals amidst the resulting cacophony, Elena Seniavskaia has established herself as a commentator with a clear and undisturbed vision of good and evil. In her first two books, devoted to the frontline generation and the psychology of war, respectively, she made it her mission to write this war back into her country's useful past<sup>1</sup>. Her latest book continues this quest and broadens it, as the second had done, to a history of all wars "Russia" had to fight in the past century. An exploration of the changing images of Russia's enemies throughout the twentieth century, the German foe remains at the center of her analysis, filling the largest chapter (with 62 pages, compared to 35 devoted to Japan, 38 to Finland, and 82 for all other enemies combined). This overbearing presence of the "Fritzes" has historical reasons – they really were "the main enemy", as the title of chapter two suggests. But there are also historiographical motives: once widened beyond the German-Soviet clash of 1941-1945, the history of "Russia's" wars is relatively resistant to the imposition of a black-and-white pattern.
- 2 This ambiguity enforces some interesting dialectics in Seniavskaia's account. Chechnya, for example, is mentioned in passing only (p. 245); the fight against nationalist guerrillas in the Baltics and the newly incorporated, formerly Polish regions of Ukraine and Belorussia after World War II does not figure at all; the Winter War of 1939-1940 is represented as a defensive military action against Finnish imperialism; and the Civil War of 1918-1921 is told as a tale of foreign intervention, not an Armageddon where different "Russias" (Whites, Reds, and Greens) slaughtered each other. In fact, according to Seniavskaia's account which closely follows Lenin's polemics, this internal bloodletting would not have happened at all, were it not for the foreign imperialists manufacturing it (p. 196, p. 198). "Russia" is always the victim and negative reactions of "the West" against the "liberation" of Western Ukraine, Western Belorussia, and the Baltics at the outset of World War II is puzzling at best (cf. e.g. p. 199). In her attempt to make history fit clear moral guidelines, Seniavskaia even goes as far as relativizing the Katyn massacres – a "tragedy" rather than a crime (p. 214, p. 215) – by weighing the "15 000" victims of this killing operation of 1940 against the "more than 80 000 Red Army POWs" who perished in Polish camps between 1919 and the early 1920s (p. 212)<sup>2</sup>. Instead of harking back to such minor incidents, the Polish nation "should ... understand and not forget" that the Red Army liberated it from fascism (p. 231).
- 3 This is a very Russian book, indeed. The intended audience is Russian, the Russian side is frequently referred to as "ours" (*nash*), Seniavskaia quotes only Russian language sources, with a smattering of translations of "foreign" works. This mono-lingualism becomes a problem in particular where she ventures into the histories of countries other than her own. While able to read Russian sources with great subtlety, her discussion of German or Japanese accounts quickly slide into clichéd and polemical caricature. For example, she quickly declares the right-wing reaction against the Goldhagen debate and the Crimes of the Wehrmacht exhibition in Germany to be the German mainstream. It is as if the enthusiastic reception of Hitler's Willing Executioners and the widespread affirmation of debunking the myth of the "clean hands" of the German army never happened<sup>3</sup>. The "German intellectual elite as a whole,"

we are told, including "professional historians" are attempting to forget about the war of 1941-1945 and revise history (p. 113).

- 4 This book is thus only peripherally integrated into the international conversation about Russian history which has developed since perestroika. There is no engagement with the growing literature on patriotism, nationalism, and cultural representations of self and other, which has flowered in "the West" (as Seniavskaia likes to call the world outside of "Russia") ever since New Cultural History became an intellectual force. Instead, Seniavskaia is defensive about what she perceives to be the overwhelming interpretation of Russian history abroad: "All the responsibility for the wars of the twentieth century", she writes, "are laid on Russia". She is explicit about the remedy as well: "Russian [*state*] power (*Rossiiskaia vlast'*) should not remain neutral towards these growing tendencies. Likewise, Russian historical science should defend the truth (*istina*) and illuminate the events of the past in an adequate manner" (p. 254). With the historian thus serving the *raison d'état*, the book does not simply analyze the changing representations of the enemy. It also creates such representations itself. Russia, it turns out, was always surrounded by bloodthirsty enemies and treacherous allies only waiting to stab her in the back.
- 5 It is a shame that the impulse to defend the actions of "ours" overwhelms everything else over long passages of this book, because historians of "images" and "imaginaries" might well take some methodological cues from Seniavskaia's approach. She is less interested than many of her colleagues in the cultural construction of the enemy and more in direct and – as she sees it – unmediated interaction with the actual foe. She thus privileges diaries, memoirs and intelligence reports over propaganda media. This belief in the power of perception, or real experience, is refreshing, given the over-reliance on official discourse in much of the English-language literature. Seniavskaia's soldiers are not brainwashed and they come to differentiated images of the enemy based on experience and discourse alike. This approach has a lot to recommend itself, as war is always more than just cultural projection and counter-projection. That *Protivniki Rossii* constantly teeters on the brink of literalism – the own side's image of the enemy often appears as a truthful representation – should probably be seen as a result of the polemical edge of the book rather than of the method itself.
- 6 Specialists in Soviet cultural history should thus read this book. Everybody working on the Russian military and Russian foreign policy should do so as well – not necessarily as a secondary source about Russian history, but as an expression of a widely held view within today's Russian elite, that sector of the elite, indeed, which outsiders are less likely to encounter than the cosmopolitan intellectuals who have become part of the international academic discourse and conference circuit. Policy makers as well as analysts should be aware of the deep resentment many Russians harbor with regard to the allegedly longstanding history of constant unfair treatment by friends and foes alike. Decision makers in NATO countries in particular should be conscious that their actions will be perceived through the prism of this model of world history.

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### Endnotes

1 E. S. Seniavskaia, 1941-1945. Frontovoe pokolenie. Istoriko-psikhologicheskoe issledovanie, Moscow, RAN Institut Rossiiskoi istorii, 1995; id., Psikhologiiia voiny v XX veke. Istoricheskii opyt Rossii, Moscow, Rosspen, 1999.

2 The number of victims of the killing operations in Katyn and other camps and prisons in 1940, according to archival sources, was indeed higher – 21,857. See Shelepyin to Khrushchev, 3 March 1959, reprinted in: A.M. Cienciala, N.S. Lebedeva, and W. Materski, eds, Katyn. A Crime Without Punishment, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007, 332 pages.

3 See, for example, Landeshauptstadt München (ed.), Bilanz einer Ausstellung: Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Ausstellung "Vernichtungskrieg – Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944" in

München, Galerie im Rathaus, 25.2.-6.4. 1997 (Munich: Knauer, 1998); G. Eley (ed.), *The “Goldhagen effect”: history, memory, Nazism –facing the German past*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2000.

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