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## **Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War, the Red Army 1939-1945*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, 396 pages.**

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## **Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War, the Red Army 1939-1945*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, 396 pages.**

- 1 Catherine Merridale's first well reviewed and much appraised book "Night of Stone, Death and Memory in Russia" (Granta, 2000) examined the culture of suffering in Russia during the Soviet period. One key chapter in this previous book detailed the ordeals undergone by the Russian Armed Forces and the people at large, during the Great Patriotic War. Five years later, the British historian brings her expertise to this topic in *Ivan's War*.
- 2 At first glance, the topic of suffering and endurance of the Russian narod might appear to be well-covered territory. Yet Merridale's achievement is the way in which she brings the necessary empathy to the subject, whilst at the same time managing to keep the objective distance needed for an reliable historical analysis.
- 3 The main accomplishment of *Ivan's War* is to compare the soldiers as they really acted on the battlefield during WWII with the idealised version of the Russian soldier propagated by the Soviet state. Such idealizations were powerful concepts which retain some of their force even today. Merridale's anthropological research showed that the Russian soldiers honoured somewhat selective and biased accounts of their war-time behaviour (and still do so). A number of ugly and unacceptable elements of the actual behaviour of the soldiers has tended to be omitted (consciously or unconsciously) from the record of the war and the collective and public memories.
- 4 Her confrontation of the soldier's reality with the soldier's myth is largely in the period when World War II raged most heavily on the Eastern front. The book covers operation Barbarossa and the debacle of the Soviet troops in Belarus, Ukraine, Western Russia and south-western Russia; the battle of Stalingrad is seen by Merridale as the first turning point of the war; the battle of Kursk, which gave a definite blow to the image of invincibility of the German troops; operation Bagration (the second turning point of the war) which turned the Soviet military endeavour from a war of liberation into a war of revenge; and finally, the end game, the battle of Berlin. Yet she chooses not to focus simply on the purely military - strategic and tactical aspects of these events but also to concentrate on the experiences of the Russian soldier in the frontline, the so-called frontovniki. Hence she arrives at a social-cultural history of the Russian soldier.
- 5 To explain the behaviour of the Russian soldiers in the first chaotic months of the war, Merridale refers to the political and sociological context of the 1930's: the massive collectivization of agricultural life in the Soviet Union, the Great Purges, the State-organized famine in Ukraine, and the Finnish war. In other words, the author shows the effects of the politics of Stalinism on the military fabric of the Soviet State at the end of the 1930's. The massive number of cases of desertion, self-mutilation, collaboration, theft and random violence during the first year of the war are explained by the fact that many soldiers were discouraged, even enraged by the criminal behaviour of the Soviet State. Time and again, 'disloyal' behaviour of the soldier was exhibited as soon as State control degenerated into chaos. As a result, the soldiers' loyalty could only be called conditional and uncertain. This anti-Soviet conduct exhibited by the soldiers (and the rural Ukrainian and Belarusian population at large) could only be countered by even more cruel and harsh counter measures by the State. One of these harsh counter measures to install loyalty and order on the front was the famous order Nr 270, signed by Stalin in August 1941, which gave every Commanding Officer, Political Officer or NKVD Officer the right to execute on the spot any Officer who

showed disloyal or cowardly behaviour. Families of deserters could be arrested by this order as well. The Soviet State had to keep the pressure high on its own soldiers (and population) in order to motivate them to fight and to avoid the total collapse of the Soviet State. The Soviet soldiers' conduct was thus arguably induced by the inhumane measures taken by the State. In this sense, the Soviet soldier did not suffer only from the atrocities committed by the German enemy, but also from the terror organized by its own State. Hence, Merridale shows the impact of a totalitarian regime on the conduct of the soldier and how a vicious circle (a constant build up) of violence and counter-violence was created. One example may illustrate this observation: Merridale postulates that the function of the Soviet Partisan movement was not only to fight behind the lines in occupied territory and to destabilize the lines of communication of the German army, but also to control the Soviet population under German occupation. Any kind of 'disloyal' behaviour of the Ukraine or Belarusian population was punished by the Partisans.

This not only explains the sometimes cruel behaviour of the Partisans against their own people, but also shows that the major concern of the Stalinist regime was to keep control over its population.

6 What is particularly interesting in Merridale's book is her focus on a largely forgotten story, namely of what happened to many soldiers after May 1945, after the official ending of the Second World War. The euphoria of the victory over the Fascist regime was, indeed, for many soldiers very short. Many of the Soviet legion were sent to the Asian front just a few weeks after the violent battle of Berlin, to fight against Japan in Manchuria. Others, rather than being demobilised were assigned to various tasks aimed at rebuilding the Soviet State into a super power, if they indeed escaped being sent to the Gulag. Once again, the soldier-citizen of the Soviet State, notwithstanding his enormous contribution to the survival of the Soviet State, could not count on any compassion from the Soviet authorities: 27 million people lost their life during the Great Patriotic War; 25 million people became homeless; 8,6 million soldiers died; and 90% of the men that were born in the year 1921 were erased. However, the Soviet authorities, more in particular Stalin and his entourage, decided that this was not enough. The Soviet people, we would say, suffered beyond the point of death.

7 Another fine aspect of the book is that Merridale is never satisfied with a one-dimensional and therefore simplified explanation of the Soviet soldiers' behaviour. She often shows how extremes of human behaviour are usually caused by a complex cluster of factors. For example: when she touches upon the merciless behaviour of the Soviet soldiers against the German population in East Prussia. The deplorable behaviour of the Soviet soldier on German territory included widespread rape and looting. The rape warfare, in which even children and elderly people were not safe, was especially atrocious. Many thousands of female victims ended up severely internally wounded by broken bottles when the Red wave swept over their doomed homeland. Some authors explain such brutality by the one-dimensional motivation of the sexual frustration of the soldiers. Others attribute it the battle stress of the soldiers. Merridale gives a combination of factors to account for this explosion of brutality. Rape and looting were thus tolerated and even encouraged by the Soviet authorities. There was, for instance, propaganda encouraging the men to give free rein to revenge and cruelty (the Political Officer and writer Ehrenburg played an important role in this campaign). Stalin's Speech of 1 May, 1944 encouraged the Soviet Soldiers to conquer Germany with the outcry: 'To berlog' (To the Beast). Besides State propaganda, there was group pressure. Soldiers who refused to take part to these rape orgies were treated at best with suspicion, and at worst could be shot by their drunken comrades. There was, needless to say, also the influence of alcohol, that was abundantly available in East Germany. Also there was naturally the sexual frustration of the frontovnik which added to the excitement as the Soviet soldier saw for the first time in their life the way that Western women dressed. There was also psychological stress caused by the bloody battles and atrocities and that changed the ugly face of thanatos into an even

more heartless face of eros. There was also fear of the capitalist state, a fear that turned very quickly into anger and fury after they saw the richness of the capitalist farmers and city dwellers. Many soldiers were also frustrated by the massive occurrence of the so-called postal divorces, as Soviet women could not handle the loneliness and the harshness of their life when their husbands were so long away from home. The resulting frustration of the soldiers produced a fury against any woman they might meet. As a result, many Soviet soldiers negatively released this pressure against many thousands of German women in East Prussia, a fact that has been censored by the official accounts and subjected to selective amnesia with the soldiers themselves. What is valuable here is Merridale's analysis of how war crimes of this order may result, when the State fails to manage the inevitable negative psychological and sociological stress of soldiers in wartime. Not to mention what might happen when such stresses are politically abused, as in the propaganda campaign mentioned above.

8 Merridale's book is also full of interesting data, although she candidly admits that precise figures were difficult to locate amid the unimaginable chaos and state-protected myths. Some of this data is already well known fact which is still used by the Russian authorities today. We are, for instance, regularly reminded during Vladimir Putin's official speeches of the impossibility of conceiving the reality of the 27 million deaths during the Great Patriotic War. It is as if he wants to continue the state of victim hood and to promote suffering as an ideology, as was done during the Soviet period. What the President of the Russian Federation does not mention, however, is the responsibility of the Soviet authorities (the NKVD especially) for killing many of their own people, as well as the responsibility of the military authorities for heedlessly wasting human life during military campaigns. Minefields, for instance, were 'attacked' by waves of infantry soldiers in order to clear them. The Battle of Berlin cost 360,000 soldiers their lives. The Bagration operation cost was 300,000 lives in twelve days of battle. Of the 403,000 tank crew men who participated in the battle of Kursk, 310,000 would die, to name but a few.

9 Merridale also includes some other data on aspects of the frontline life of the soldiers which is not that well known by the public at large. She notes, for instance, the psychological suffering by the soldiers and the non-existence of any help in this field. Only 100,000 Soviet soldiers of the 20 million active soldiers who participated in the war would be counted as permanently mentally scarred. She also shed some light on the participation of women in the Soviet Armed Forces during the Second World War. Contrary to what we would think, women who participated in combat were actually very poorly regarded as opposed to the nurses and typists who had a very good image. Just after the war, for instance, women who received decorations were seen as 'whores', as if they had earned these decorations by compromising themselves sexually with the officers. The author also sheds some light on social groups such as orphans, Shtrafniki, zapadniki, Vlasovites, etc. Cultural aspects such as the influence of songs, literature, poems and rhymes on the life of the soldiers also receive the attention of Merridale. In sum, Merridale has provided a richly informative and empathetic book that anyone interested in Soviet and Russian warfare, past or present, should read.

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