A Review of SERGUEI OUSHAKINE, ALEXEY GOLUBEV (EDS.),
XX VEK: PISMA VOYNY. ANTOLOGIYA VOENNOY
KORRESPONDENTSII [20TH CENTURY: WAR LETTERS. ANTHOLOGY OF WAR CORRESPONDENCE].

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Abstract: The review is devoted to the anthology of war correspondence ‘20th Century: War Letters’ published under the editorship of Serguei Oushakine and Alexey Golubev and including both letters of Russian / Soviet soldiers and officers (from the Boer War to the conflict in the North Caucasus) and analytical articles that deal with the problems of front-line everyday life. The theoretical concept of the authors and editors of the collection is trying to combine the structural analysis of the epistolary narrative and the phenomenological description of the tactics of subjectivation of war experience.

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‘Documentary history’ is often characterised by two diametrically opposed tendencies: allowing the sources to ‘speak for themselves’, or accompanying the publication with a tediously exhaustive commentary on them. The first of these is typical of the majority of collections of war letters that have been published so far, which most often only include material from the Second World War [Dyachkov 2005; Eshan, Pudalova 2015; and others]. The second is typical of analytical works about the epistolary genre (a historiographical overview of which would require a separate discussion [Ivanov 2009] beyond the scope of a short review).

Against this background the *War Letters* anthology edited by Serguei Oushakine and Alexey Golubev possesses certain obvious merits. First, it includes letters by Russian and Soviet servicemen who took part in various wars during the twentieth century — the Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War, the First World War, the Second World War and the Afghan and Chechen campaigns, which allows them to be compared. Secondly, it contains not only letters that witness to the everyday (‘post-heroic’) aspect of war, but also analytical articles which delineate several promising vectors for analysing their ‘extra /
ordinariness’, which blurs the fine distinction between the exceptional and the usual [Wool 2015]. War correspondence here is not only a projection of the emergent ideology of the ‘fighting spirit’ [Markevich 2002; Agapov 2015], or a supplement to the traditional history of military events in which the emotion and subjectivity of letters traditionally ‘get in the way of’ an ‘unbiased’ researcher [Kazakovtsev 2006: 122]. On the one hand, they are defined by the specific structure of the epistolary narrative, and on the other by the subjective tactics of expression of war experience.

For this reason the first analytical strategy followed by the compilers of the anthology deals with the symbolic coding of experience at the front through the use of accepted narrative templates and clichés. As the editors note in their afterword ‘The Ex-Position of the Letter: On the Rules for Reading Other People’s Correspondence’, ‘being at one and the same time the impression and matrix of social relations, the letter is a clear example of a structuring structure: social connections here are preserved and modified in the process of (re)-producing the forms and formulae of the epistolary genre’ (p. 9). From this point of view letters from the front are a normalisation of the experience of war: they translate the realities of war into the accustomed language of peacetime and turn the extraordinary into the everyday.

The second, ‘post-structuralist’ line of analysis deals with the tactics of subjective survival in the conditions of a crisis of the former social structures and a chronic dislocation of the usual strategy of existence. This dislocation leads to constant pauses, avoidances, lacunae and mismatches of meaning in the letters, a break-up of the symbolic templates. Such lacunae and mismatches are an expression of affect: of the intensity of physical sensations that will not fit into the usual emotional regimes, but which break out in the letters in spite of their strivings towards normalisation.

Where these force fields meet there is a tension that is resolved in the process of both conscious and unconscious choice made by every writer of letters from the front. Most of the articles in the collection stress the cultural codification of emotions that takes place in the course of interpellation — the summons to the subject from the organs of the state, and the responses to that summons. As Jochen Hellbeck, the writer of one of the most interesting articles in the collection, remarks, ‘[a] foundational element in the formation of the soldier’s ego was the emotional component, to wit the fostering of a feeling of profound love for the homeland and extreme hatred of the German invaders. <…> The mobilisation of forces for the struggle was a most important moral imperative for Soviet people during the War, and was taken for granted by the majority of the writers whose writings make up this section. Their works served the purposes of mobilisation,
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and mobilisation in response furthered the recognition of new forms of perception and expression of one’s ego. Here self-expression becomes the key factor: “front-line soldier”, “man of Stalingrad”, “woman of Leningrad” were equal designations of active fighters on one of the many fronts of the war, of citizens who did not quail before the most serious wartime trials’ (pp. 416–8).

In a similar manner, in her article ‘Wrath, Horror, Malice: On the Chronology and Sociography of Wartime Hatred’, Olga Nikonova examines how hatred of the enemy grew during the course of the war: ‘A most important role in “teaching”, in the appearance of feelings of hatred and malice towards the enemy was played by the “totalisation” and medialisation of the war’ (p. 542). In a similar key Elena Rozhdestvenskaya analyses the metaphor of the war as ‘work’, which was inculcated by state propaganda on the one hand, but on the other became a means of normalising the chaos of war for many of the individuals involved in it.

However, this sort of crossover of meanings is always unstable and hard to interpret. ‘You can of course get a general idea of my life and activity from these events. There’s not much to be said about it. Our life is completely subordinated to the war. War has become our profession, and indeed our life. And you know that life better than anyone. Uninterrupted heavy fighting with temporary and very short breaks, long marches, and in bad weather too — that is the contents of my life. And you can add to this severe, constant stress at work. I am working a lot,’ writes Captain Mikhail Savchenko to his brother Nikolay (p. 87). Is this utterance determined by an ‘ideological summons’ from above, an attempt to normalise and reinforce his social status, or the practice of everyday speech? Or can it be treated as a way of disciplining pain in the manner of Elaine Scarry [Scarry 1985]? It may be that there is no sense in opposing these components to each other: the tactics of subjectivation attempt to bring these meanings together, to use the existing set of clichés flexibly and modify them for a particular situation. As Irina Sandomirskaya remarks in the introductory article to the section on ‘War Losses’, ‘[p]rofoundly personal feelings, which are addressed profoundly personally and for profoundly personal motives, are also written according to the curved rulers of discourse. <…> Complex existential movements are expressed in a manner that is no less hackneyed than the clichés of an official burial notification’ (p. 781). The very inclusion in a text of a particular phrase is important (for example, very imprecise indicators of time and place — ‘still’, ‘already’, ‘here’ and ‘there’), as is its connection with the surrounding affects. This may be why not all the authors of the collection distinguish concepts of emotions and affect that theoretical research considers it proper to keep separate [Yampolskaya 2013; Kobylin 2017]. For example, in the article ‘In This Mortal World We May at Least Be Well Fed: War
Letters about Going Hungry and Having Enough’ Polina Barskova practically equates them: ‘When it is about food here, it is really about love, madness, shame and fear — all those complex, historically conditioned affects are realised in a piece of ersatz bread’ (p. 357).

Very interesting in this context is Elena Gapova’s article on the inclusion of letters in the range of material and symbolic exchanges by means of postal orders, parcels, postcards and news. ‘In these everyday epistolary exchanges money is a means of “materialising” the relationships between people <...> — ties of kinship and relations of care’ (pp. 109–10). The mutual exchange of care implies the standardisation (and countability) of symbolic forms. In a similar way Maria Litovskaya examines the romantic emotional ties which are forced into code when translated from the spoken word into written form: ‘In this text living feeling throbs inside the accumulation of words. The woman cannot burst into tears, scream, turn away, look into his eyes — her husband is far away, and she is not very good at expressing her warring emotions in words, still less in a letter. The poor woman lurches from “I send you my ardent greetings” to “write back at once, if you consider me your wife, and still I shall await your reply with impatience.” At first sight her letter looks like speech written down with a large number of mistakes. But this speech has clearly been given the structure of a written text by means of the regulators that are markers of the letter as a genre, of which the writer’s ideas were formed in a society where until recently separation, if it implied a correspondence at all, since the people separated were illiterate, implied it via a go-between. The text itself contained the standard beginnings and endings which, firstly, helped to fill up the body of the letter, and, secondly, offered a ready language for a restrained — but, from the point of view of the recipient, adequate — expression of the writer’s feelings’ (p. 637).

The letter-writer is always limited by the censorship, the canons and the standard clichés. But by repeating the normative acts of utterance, ritually reproducing the existing symbolic frameworks, and combining them into a ramshackle structure, (s)he gives shape to his / her ego. Thus at the meeting-point of affects and symbolically encoded emotions, the ideological summons from above and the search for suitable models for self-identification from below, conventional family frameworks and the shifting practices of relations between comrades, a polyphony of letters from the front is formed, to which the editors of the collection maintain and exceedingly careful and cautious attitude, ‘[s]o as not to interrupt these voices, but, on the contrary, to create the conditions that allow them to speak as completely as possible’ (p. 20).

It goes without saying that the format of an anthology presupposes a limited number of sections, so that a range of possible subjects have
In this connection the question of the collective practices of letter-writing is particularly interesting. Unexpected evidence about this is encountered in interviews with veterans of regional wars.¹ Igor (military psychologist, senior lieutenant, Chechnya, 1999–2000): ‘I ordered the soldiers to write to their parents to stop them from worrying. Many of them said “But what do we write? We don’t know how.” So I sat the whole platoon down, dictated the first two paragraphs to them, and then they finished them by themselves’ (interview of 22.03.2017). Dmitriy (private, Chechnya, 2000–4): ‘A lot of the lads would come up to me and say, “You’ve been to university, write to my girl for me so it comes out nicer.” People usually wrote to their parents that all was well, but to their girlfriends they had to hint at something heroic, put some emotion in it’ (interview of 5.02.2017). Konstantin (lieutenant-colonel, Afghanistan, 1983–5): ‘The CO used to send for me as his political deputy and say “Send for that joker and give it to him straight, he hasn’t written to his mother for two months and she’s going out of her mind.” Then you’d send for the soldier and tell him exactly what you thought of him, and you wouldn’t let him go till he’d written the letter and sealed it. That was also part of a political deputy’s duties’ (interview of 16.03.2017). Here the tactics of subjective expression, the interpellation from above and the strategies of (collective) survival are inextricably interlinked. Letter-writing is a collective and not

¹ In 2013–8 I conducted about seventy semiformal interviews with veterans of regional military conflicts for the project on ‘Oral history and memory of regional conflicts in Russia’. The interviews are preserved in the digital archive of the ‘Research into Cultural Memory and Historical Anthropology’ laboratory at the K. Minin Nizhny Novgorod State Pedagogical University.
altogether voluntary act, and presupposes a correspondence to a certain normative canon, or frame of interaction.

The authors of the collection note significant differences between letters from the Second World War and from regional wars. People engaged in the latter often concealed the truth from their families: ‘If my relations find out, they’ll go mad, I haven’t written to them about that, and I don’t intend to’ (from a letter from V. Badma-Goryaev, p. 236); ‘It’s a long time since there have been any letters from home; and you don’t feel like writing home either. You always write the same: “I’m alive and well, and so on, and so forth”’ (p. 241). However, there are different tactics of ‘care for those close to you’. Some people do not write home at all. Boris (ensign, Chechnya, 1995, 1999–2000): ‘I didn’t write to my mother at all. Why should I upset her? If there were a letter it would just be another reason for worrying. But this way she knows that I’m serving somewhere, running to and fro, and that after a while I’ll come home’ (interview of 22.03.2017). Others simply avoid mentioning the war. Valera (sergeant, Chechnya, 1995): ‘When I went to Chechnya, I left a packet of letters to my parents with my friend, so that every two or three weeks he could send one from Moscow’ (interview of 18.04.2016). Others create an imaginary field of service. Aleksandr (sergeant, Afghanistan, 1983–5): ‘I used to write to my parents that I was serving in Germany. My neighbour had served there, so I used to re-tell his stories, and made up something of my own’ (interview of 8.12.2016). Avoiding talking about it like that is not connected with the soldiers’ ‘not having the opportunity to talk about real events’, as Elena Gapova points out (p. 111). It is rather that the strategies of letter-writing in letters to different recipients do not coincide. In regard to parents they are maximally conventional (they are intended to ‘calm them’), but in regard to girlfriends and friends they may include open social questions, contain provocations so as to ‘check up on their feelings’ or experiment with the possibilities of audio and video media (‘audio letters’ with guitar accompaniment, recorded on cassette, etc.). As noted above, the main purpose of the letters was to turn the extraordinary into the ordinary and everyday, but this does not mean that normalisation always goes the same way. There are different regimes for controlling the emotions or encoding the affect. Letters to parents are only one of the vectors of normalisation, admittedly the one that ‘authoritative discourse’ (political deputies and military psychologists) most requires, as being the most conventional and passive, one that converts feelings into fatalism and outward calm (‘courage’). However, such a strategy does not exclude other regimes for articulating the emotions, and these are most often expressed in letters to friends and lovers.

In this context it is a pity that the introductory articles to the different sections of the collection are only obliquely connected and rarely
include any systematic comparisons, in particular between filial love (‘The mother of one liable to military service’) and romantic love (‘War romances’). This also concerns the correspondence of different social groups (peasants, gentry, and the socially uncategorised at the beginning of the twentieth century), officers and other ranks, townsfolk and villagers, and also letters from men and letters from women. It would also be interesting to look for parallels with the correspondence of British, German or American soldiers — how different were their strategies of subjectivation? For example, it might be curious to compare the romantic correspondence between soldiers at the front and girls they did not know, using Komsomol rhetoric in the USSR and religious rhetoric in the USA [Litoff, Smith 1992]. In this sense the structuralist reduction of context that the authors postulated at the beginning (‘the general, structural and symbolic contexts, in which twentieth-century war correspondence was formed, remained surprisingly constant’, p. 10), is, on the one hand, very productive, but on the other it conceals a number of important differences in the tactics of subjectivation.

The only evident defect of the book being reviewed is the exclusion of letters from the Civil War, which is left completely unexplained by the editors. It is curious that there is hardly any revolutionary rhetoric or references to the Civil War in letters from the soldiers of the Second World War. Why did the first Soviet generation exclude it from its letters? This is an extremely important question, because, as Dieter Langewiesche rightly remarks, since 1945 there have clearly been more civil wars than conflicts between states [Langewiesche 2001]. And to impose the model of the description of the latter (especially world wars) on regional conflicts is not always promising.

Furthermore, a number of formulations appear excessively rectilinear and therefore not very successful. For example, Elena Baraban’s thesis that ‘[t]he manifestation of patriotism that is characteristic of the writers of a number of the letters in the section of letters from the time of the Great Patriotic War is completely lacking in letters written in other wars: the First World War, the Afghan War, or the Chechen War’ (p. 752) turns an important comparison into a not very correct cliché.

In conclusion, it seems important to touch on the question of why letters from the front are attracting the attention of a significant circle of researchers today and the widest possible audience. Above all, with the death of their writers and recipients they pass from private archives into the public space of memory, the centre of which, in Russia, is the Great Patriotic War. The letters (it would seem) allow family history to be easily connected with ‘big history’, the disappearance of which is currently provoking such powerful nostalgia, which is being exploited by state remembrance policy.
As Elena Zdravomyslova and Olga Tkach rightly remark, making such a linear connection risks, on the one hand, the privatisation of the ‘symbolic capital’ of the collective memory in private (money-making) interests, and on the other, creating mythologised macro-projections that distort the space of the public sphere [Zdravomyslova, Tkach 2004]. General questions are more and more often represented through private (family) subjects which are only obliquely connected with each other. The result is a sort of double metonymic link: the letters (addressed to family members) embody the whole war, and the phenomenology of the affects and sensations of the combatants turns out more important than their analysis and examination. In this context the collection under review is important in that it allows work with evidence from the past in different registers: not only does it set the vectors for phenomenological description, but it is a stimulus towards systematic comparisons, self-reflection and more subtle work with the memory. How did the configurations of the ethical and affective dimension of memory change in the twentieth century? What is the correlation between conventional family frameworks and the heterogeneous practices of solidarity (including comradeship at the front)? How do the modern strategies of commemoration work? War Letters may become a sort of ‘model for collection’ in answering these and other questions that are so extremely relevant today.

References


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