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Introduction

War has been no stranger to Russian life in modern times. Three violent cataclysmic events—World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the Russian Civil War—devastated the country in the early twentieth century, and Russian people suffered incredible hardships during the horrific years of World War II. In the Soviet Union, military culture, values, and imagery came to pervade official public language, while countless novels, paintings, and films extolled Soviet military deeds. This militarized culture stood in stark contrast to pre-revolutionary Russian traditions, for war played only a minor role in the achievements of the artists and intellectuals who made Imperial Russia a center of European culture before 1917. Military conflict was something that happened long ago or far away for most people in the Russian Empire, and warfare, on the whole, was not a prominent theme in the country's intellectual life. The great exception was World War I (1914–18), which forced artists in Russia to grapple with the consequences of modern war, transformed the way they understood the artist's place in society, and patterned the invention of one of the most important Russian contributions to modern culture: the non-objective art of Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, and other avant-garde artists. War was more important in Russian cultural life during the Great War than at any other time in the half century before 1914, and World War I, in important ways, had a more profound influence on the politics and aesthetics of Russian visual culture than even the revolution.

One reason for this book is to help restore the Russian ordeal of the First World War to Russian and European history. For modern historical memory, as Pierre Nora has pointed out, is not what individual people remember; rather, it consists of sites of memory, those public symbols about the past that focus collective identity: the people and events, monuments and buildings, institutions and concepts, and books and works of art that represent the past in everyday social, cultural, and political life.¹ After 1917 the Bolsheviks determined the public memory of the Russian past and set the agenda, both explicitly and implicitly, for the study of Russian history.² Soviet leaders thus memorialized their conception of their history, a vision based on the thoughts and lives of Marx and Lenin, the Russian and European revolutionary traditions, and the revolutionary leadership of the Bolshevik Party, and they celebrated their military victories over their enemies in the revolution, the Civil War, and World War II. With no positive place in the Bolshevik understanding of the revolution, World War I, for the most part, “sank into silence” after 1917.³ There were no public monuments to the war, no great cemeteries for its fallen, and no Armistice Day or Remembrance Day in the Soviet Union. The First World War seemed to be a “forgotten” war, a “blank spot” in Russia’s twentieth century.⁴

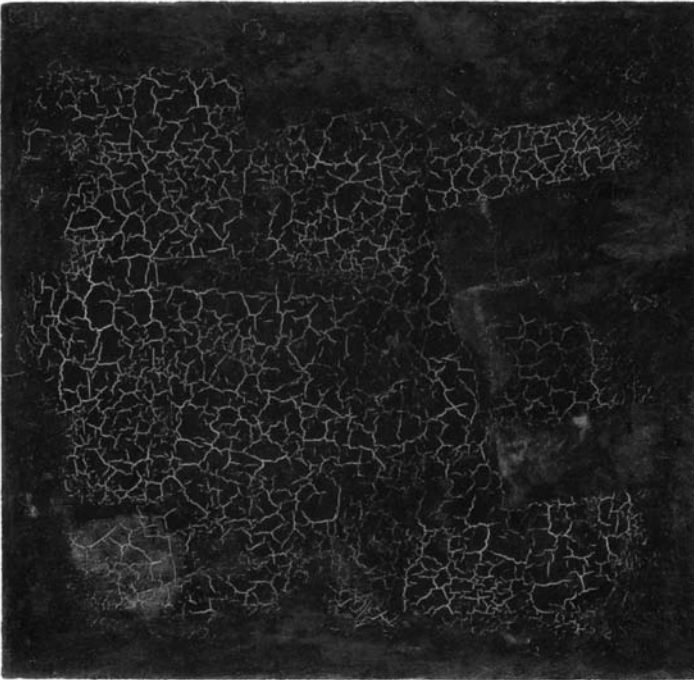
Imperial Russia has therefore remained peripheral, if not missing, as historians of Europe debate the impact of World War I on the society and culture of the twentieth century. Was the Great War a decisive break in European history and culture? How extensive was mass mobilization among intellectuals and the general population? Were the war’s cultural effects reactionary or revolutionary? Did it strengthen modernism or traditional aesthetics? For years historians have been debating the nature of these issues in wartime Britain, France, and Germany.⁵ Yet European public culture continues to exclude Russia from the common war experience, even when European historians are conscious of its absence.⁶ The war’s weak historical memory in the Soviet Union certainly contributed to this isolation, as did the compartmentalization of academic fields during the cold war,

which decoupled the study of the Soviet Union from Western Europe. But the Russians are also omitted because present-day political needs heavily inform the memory of World War I in the European Union, where public commemoration and cooperative academic scholarship can be used to reconcile the divisions of the past. Specialists from former allies and former enemies, for example, worked together to create the Museum of the Great War (*L'Historial de la Grande Guerre*) in Péronne (Somme), which has a mission to explain the war “through the parallel histories of the three main protagonists, France, Germany and Great Britain.”⁷ The Great War killed some two million people from Russia, brought large-scale dislocations to Russian life, and dragged on for three and a half difficult years, but it still belongs to the West in our popular and professional minds.⁸ The wartime voices of Imperial Russia’s writers, poets, and artists remain lost.⁹

The place of World War I in Russian history has also been obscured by the Soviet experience. Long focused on the history of the Bolsheviks and their state, historians of Russia have often overlooked the war, and those who did study the conflict understood its significance only in its relationship to the revolution.¹⁰ Today, most historians view the revolutionary era as the product of long-term political or social problems, and they have, perhaps naturally, minimized the role of World War I in shaping subsequent events. Richard Stites, for example, has recently written that the war was responsible for little, if anything, new in Russian culture, that high and low culture remained divided, and that “nothing like mass mobilization or nationalization of the arts took place.”¹¹ Peter Gatrell, however, has shown how effects of the war created a new social category, refugedom, while Eric Lohr suggests that the war was a distinctive “nationalizing event” that marked the abandonment of prewar attempts to assimilate minorities.¹² But few others have suggested that Russia’s war introduced new institutions or ideas into public life, including the émigrés and historians who once considered it the main reason for the fall of the empire and the Bolshevik rise to power. Peter Holquist has thus made a powerful

and convincing plea for us to reconsider the importance of the war experience for postwar Russian and European history, but even he devotes just one chapter to World War I in his recent book.¹³ Today it is not uncommon for academic studies of Imperial Russia to end in 1914 and histories of the Soviet Union to begin in 1917. The very existence of this gap, perhaps, tells us that something happened between 1914 and 1917 that does not fit into conventional conceptions of twentieth-century Russian history. Years after the end of the Soviet Union, we still look at Imperial Russia through the prism of the revolution.¹⁴

I look at Russian history from a different perspective, as a history without the revolution, to argue that there were significant developments in wartime life that the memory of the revolution should not obscure. World War I, in this view, was more than the final indignity of a falling empire, a simple prologue to revolution, or a blank spot in a view of Russian history dominated by the Soviet experience; it changed Russian culture and ought to be considered an important event in its own right.¹⁵ I show, for example, how many Russians reevaluated their prewar attitudes toward politics, social engagement, and public activity in response to the material and intellectual disruptions of mass mobilization after 1914. New institutions, new public behaviors, and new cultural forms emerged from this new engagement with war, some of which continued, some of which were reinterpreted, and some of which were destroyed in the revolutionary period. Such changes were striking in the Russian art world, where one can trace, through specific institutions, ideas, and images, how a rapidly shifting wartime public culture could destabilize conventional patterns in cultural politics and aesthetics. Out of this re-imagining came an art culture with more room for individual artists, a broader definition of Russian art, and a non-objective ideal that revolutionized modern thinking about art. Without the revolution, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) (figure 1) would still rank with Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), which broke the picture plane and redefined modern vision, as one of the most important paintings of the twentieth century.



1. K. S. Malevich. *Black Square*. 1915. Oil on canvas, 79.5 x 79.5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

With this book I also aim to reaffirm the importance of the public sphere in our understanding of Russian history and culture. The experience of Russian painters in World War I suggests that the war was important because it brought new mobilization conditions to an already existing, self-mobilized civil society. On the one hand, the war accelerated historical trends already present in prewar society, especially the expansion of public institution-building, intensification of market relations, and destabilization of traditional social identities that characterized life in late Imperial Russia. On the other, World War I sent Russian life onto new trajectories. The country's isolation from international trading partners and Polish industrial areas distorted the economy, while military conscription, massive battles, and economic changes caused population movements, demographic shifts, and social disruption. Warfare was suddenly an important topic in educated society after decades of sporadic interest and benign

neglect, the entertainment industry and the information media became militarized, and patriotism, altruism, and civic activism bloomed as never before in Russian history. Before August 1914, individuals and groups mobilized themselves to achieve a variety of public goals in different ways, for particular purposes, and at different paces. After August 1914, a culture of war suffused with mass mobilization aligned the less focused, more chaotic civic activism of peacetime in ways that had profound effects on public behavior and attitudes. Civil society, not the state, remained the most important factor in shaping the broad public culture even as the country and its people faced the economic, political, and psychological stresses of war and revolution.

Most historians have judged the significance of Russian civil society by the effectiveness of its political opposition to the authoritarian state, an approach rooted in the ideas of the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas.¹⁶ For Habermas, intellectuals in eighteenth-century civil society gathered in a space of autonomy outside the state, bound together through the ideas of the Enlightenment in institutions such as literary salons, periodicals, and voluntary associations like the Freemasons. In this public sphere, civic activists formed a critical public opinion that tried to influence or guide the exercise of absolutist state power. Habermas's political understanding of the importance of civil society and the public sphere seemed plausible as communism crumbled in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s, and some historians adopted it to argue that the emergence of a mass-circulation press, an urban civic life, and an educated public formed the foundation for a functional democracy in Imperial Russia.¹⁷ Many, however, remain skeptical that Russian civil society could ever have effectively opposed authoritarianism, noting the country's lack of a cohesive middle class, the seriousness of its social divisions, and the weakness of its public institutions and democratic traditions vis-à-vis the state. The view among many historians today is that

the Imperial Russian public was too frail to support a stable democracy, and the failure of civil society remains a major explanation for the coming of the revolution and the victory of Bolshevism.¹⁸

Yet civil society did not falter in wartime Russia; it continued to mobilize until economic and political events began to undermine it late in the war, a phenomenon that contradicts today's apparent consensus about the frailty of Russian public life.¹⁹ In my mind, historical debates about the political failures of Russian civil society, with the outcome already known, have more to do with judging the historical inevitability of the Soviet Union than with understanding Imperial Russia. Civil society, after all, should be understood as one historical phenomenon among many, not as the deciding factor in the success or failure of democracy, and its essential quality is public self-mobilization, not political opposition to absolutism.²⁰ Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, for example, take a broader, more institutional view of civil society than Habermas, defining it as "a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication," all social practices that are "created through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilization."²¹ Social action in civil society, in this view, emerges from its constituent parts, not from the initiative of a hegemonic directive organization, be it a state, church, political party, or other institution with a monopoly over media and public discourse. From such a perspective, one cannot deny that Imperial Russia had a functioning civil society mobilized to conduct tasks in a public sphere made up of mass media, commercial culture, and nongovernmental institutions by the early twentieth century. Joseph Bradley has therefore proposed that we change our emphasis from what did not happen in Russia (a successful struggle of liberal democracy against authoritarianism) to what did happen, a change that allows us to see how Russian civil society emerged to help develop the country alongside a modern state bureaucracy.²²

I believe that a broader, less determined concept of “public culture” can help us better explore the links between politics and culture in wartime Imperial Russia. In this context, a public is not a specific group of people or institutions but a “relation among strangers” self-organized through discourse; it is created by people who seek to address an indefinite and impersonal audience outside themselves.²³ Public culture is the institutional and ideological nexus that structures the real and imaginary space between individuals and public inside modern society; it consists of the institutions, ideas, and customs people use to perceive the world, communicate with others, and act outside the immediate environment of face-to-face communication and action. Modern states with socially heterogeneous and large, anonymous populations have an overarching public culture that is usually bounded by language, law, and media institutions: pluralist publics include many audiences, public ideas, and centers of cultural production, while authoritarian or totalitarian publics contain fewer available audiences, more limits on public ideas, and stronger central institutions. Smaller publics or subcultures, moreover, develop within the shared geographic, linguistic, or social space of this broad public culture as individuals interact with different audiences in the course of their work, leisure activities, religious practice, family life, and other life experiences. Whether open or restricted, large or small, public culture sets the parameters for public action: it governs the acceptability of public behavior, the individual’s access to public institutions, and the content of public ideas. Since such boundaries vary through time and space as material conditions and human agency interact, public culture becomes a contested forum “where power in its various forms, including meaning and aesthetics, is elaborated and made authoritative.”²⁴ Any successful public action thus has a role for both individual and public: individuals must have the ability and willingness to engage the public culture, and public institutions must be able to accept the individual’s action. An individual’s public behavior and speech therefore may or may not reflect his or her per-

sonal values; people often present different faces to different publics in order to meet the expectations of others.

Public culture mattered in the cultural life of late Imperial Russia because it framed the relationship between the individual artist and the public. I do not want to deny the importance of individual political ideology, aesthetic theory, or any expression of class, ethnic, or gender identity for our understanding of Russian culture. But Russia's art history, and by extension its cultural history, should also be understood in the context of an expanding public sphere that provided the institutions, language conventions, and cultural practices that enabled artists and other public figures to engage various audiences. Artistic connections to society were made through professional institutions, and the public activity of Imperial Russian artists was focused almost exclusively on resolving material problems and achieving professional aims, even when they or others assigned specific political positions or generalized aesthetic theories to their art. Painting thus became very political in an environment where artists competed for professional attention and status in a public culture that was changing, sometimes slowly over the course of a century, sometimes abruptly as in 1914 or 1917. The politics of art in Imperial Russia, I suggest, were not so much about who was left or right but about who was (or was not) mobilized, for (or against) what cause, and with (or against) whom for access to the public and its institutions at any given time. Although historians often focus on the importance of national identity, citizenship, and formal political ideology in twentieth-century Russia, the war experience of artists shows that these are probably less important than material and professional concerns for understanding most people's public behavior.

With this book I seek to resurrect World War I as a significant event in Russian history, explain its influence on public culture, and show how one of the most radical innovations in modern painting, the non-objective art of the Russian avant-garde, emerged during the war, a topic that has not attracted the attention of historians or art historians.²⁵ Chapter 1

explores the aesthetic principles, art institutions, and artistic culture that artists in Russia developed in response to changes in the public sphere before 1914, while chapter 2 examines the emergence of a new public culture of war in 1914. Mass mobilization changed the structure of the public for art professionals, which in turn transformed the public attitude of artists toward each other as well as toward broader society and politics. Chapter 3 defines the impact of these changes on the culture of the art world: how wartime conditions in civil society induced artists to change the form of their art and their public activity in reaction to new material and psychological demands. Chapter 4 shows how artists around Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin tried to stabilize avant-garde culture through participation in mass mobilization and the invention of non-objective art, an art that no longer represented an object but simply was an object in itself. Chapter 5 discusses the politics of the art world as they developed inside Russian civil society and a mobilized wartime public culture, a mobilization that shifted with the revolution when a different public culture changed the focus of professional art activity.

Imagining the Unimaginable is in many ways a conventional cultural history, but it is also openly interdisciplinary and at times methodologically unorthodox. As a historian I use art and aesthetics, in the main, to answer historical questions, and I focus on artists not to valorize or criticize them but to observe how wartime disruptions in public life could have major implications for Russian intellectual and cultural history. Like historians and some art historians, I interpret quantitative data and primary written sources under the assumption that art practice was embedded in institutional, political, and cultural contexts, and I follow the history of the media, especially the press and the publishing industry, as a proxy for structural conditions in the public sphere. But unlike historians, who tend to use the content of visual culture to infer the author's intent or the viewer's reception, I sometimes consider formal changes in visual imagery as primary source evidence, a practice common in art history, and

I argue that we can find meaning in the forms of social institutions and public culture apart from the meanings that historical actors ascribed to individual actions. I do not claim to cover all significant aspects of the art world, supply the most authoritative readings of any work of art, or offer the only correct interpretation of the life of any artist, for there are many ways to find meaning in art, and I use reductive terms like *realist*, *aesthetic modernist*, and *avant-garde* as rhetorical conveniences that reflect Russian practice, not to define their essential meanings or to address theoretical debates about those concepts.²⁶ There are also many worthy topics that I do not treat at length, including the role of gender, ethnic, class, and regional identity. This book, in short, is not a comprehensive survey of Russian art or cultural politics; my purpose is to use art and the art world to trace changes that World War I brought to public culture so that we can begin to integrate Imperial Russia into our understanding of the shared European war experience.

Artists who lived through the dramatic time between 1914 and 1917, it turns out, lent that period significance even after the Russian Revolution had overshadowed the war experience. The revolution, of course, cannot be undone, and I do not want to minimize its importance in Russian history or argue that we should ignore its preconditions, causes, or consequences. But we should not limit our ability to understand late Imperial Russia by viewing its historical development only in relation to the emergence of the Soviet Union. Nikolai Punin, an avant-garde artist and early Soviet art critic, remembered World War I as an elemental force that acted upon artists quite independently of later events. “The war took its course,” he wrote, “tearing from us pieces of the past that should have belonged to us. It shortened some things and drew others out, as a candle shortens and lengthens the shadows on the wall, and having brought the world up to a new speed, the war placed an evil backdrop on all our lives, against which everything seemed at once tragic and meaningless.”²⁷ After 1914, avant-garde artists in Russia began to imagine many things that had

seemed unimaginable before the war: professional cooperation with aesthetic rivals, social and intellectual tolerance of the political and artistic establishment, and an exciting new definition of art. Years later, in far-off France, Marc Chagall still saw the First World War as an event that changed artistic life, and art and the war remained linked in his very speech. “Before the war of 1914,” he told a critic in 1924, “we sought a plastic ideal, a *Somme [sic]* of plastic problems. The war was another plastic work that totally absorbed us, which reformed our forms, destroyed the lines, and gave a new look to the universe.”²⁸ This book contains a story of that new look, the *Black Square*, at one time held up as the face of Bolshevism.²⁹ Pudin, though, remembered that war had come first and only continued in a different form. “The war slowly turned to revolution,” he wrote. “When the revolution began we don’t know: the war had no end.”³⁰