

Project Group B6

National Hero and Folk Hero: Alexander Suvorov and Yemelyan Pugachev from the 18th to the Early 20th Century

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The project group studied two different heroic models in Russia: General Alexander Suvorov (1729-1800), who was a celebrated national hero during the czar era and in the Soviet Union, and Yemelyan Pugachev (1742–1775), who led a rebellion against Catherine the Great and was officially considered a non-person by the state until 1917, although he was heroized by peasants, Cossacks, and intellectuals. This occurred in a context in which traditions of the life of Cossacks were idealized and the idea of the return of a just ruler was celebrated (Pugachev claimed to be Peter III, who had been murdered in 1762). In the official version of history, Pugachev was not heroized until after 1917, when the communists adopted him as a leading figure of the proletariat. The project group thus compared the peaks of these heroizations and demonstrated how these two heroes were canonized within changing political constellations. Focus was also put on what functions they served in what contexts, and what social and cultural reach they developed as heroic models.

Due to the extensive heroization of Suvorov in today's Russia, the original period of research was expanded to avoid arbitrarily ending with the early Soviet Union in the monograph. The first wave of Suvorov's heroization occurred as early as 1799 after his victory over the French troops in Northern Italy. Czar Paul I named Suvorov "Prince of Italy" and Generalissimo. Russian poets wrote odes to sing his praises, and the first biography about him was published at this time. When he died, Suvorov was buried in a special grave in St. Petersburg. Only a few months after his death, a monument was erected in his honor on the Field of Mars in 1801, followed by many others in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Between 1801 and 1898, he lost some of his popularity, and it was not until the 100-year anniversary of his great campaigns and his death that Suvorov's heroization gained momentum. He was not only the first Russian to have a memorial museum dedicated to his name; islands, towns, streets, and buildings were named after him, as was the Warsaw cadet corps in 1899 and a battleship in 1904. Surprisingly, Suvorov did not play a major role in World War I. After 1917, he was even deheroized. During the patriotic turn under Stalin, however, Suvorov became relevant again in the second half of the 1930s, and he was reinstated in school books and a patriotic film was made about him in 1940. In 1942, the Medal of Suvorov was introduced, and Suvorov Military Schools were founded in 1943. The last approximately ten years have demonstrated a fourth heyday of his heroization (Nachtigal 2014). As a result, at least one film has been made, several biographies published, exhibitions organized, and much attention raised on the Internet. The Medal of Suvorov was also reintroduced in 2010. During the Ukrainian crisis of 2014-15, Suvorov was also regarded as the conqueror of "Novorossiya" (New Russia) and thus used against the Ukraine (Neutatz 2015).

When compared to each other, these various stages show significant changes. For example, around 1800, Suvorov was a European hero who was used in Russia to create a reference to antiquity and thus to European culture. At this time, Russia was striving to be regarded as being on equal footing with other European powers and as a torchbearer of western civilization. One hundred years later, Suvorov was designated as a Russian national hero. Pictorial representations depicted him as someone close to the common people in scenes with a Russian connotation, suggesting an idyllic collaboration between landowners and farmers – a

projection of wishful thinking in the legitimization crisis of the autocracy around 1900. From 1938 on, Suvorov became charged with new meaning in the context of Soviet patriotism.¹ Historical novels and a feature film, which is still popular to this day, presented a leader modeled on Stalin who was able to inspire his soldiers to achieve great things, while caring for them like a father. His heroism rubbed off on his soldiers, who became the actual heroes under his leadership (Neutatz 2015).

In the current wave of heroization today, Suvorov appears as a purely Russian national hero who in recent novels is even sent to suppress the American Revolution of 1776.² The backdrop for this is Russia's striving to reposition itself as a world power. Today, Suvorov is at the top of the hierarchy of national and patriotic heroic figures.³ More than ever, he has become the embodiment of Russia's territorial greatness and a source of national self-confidence. Suvorov is characterized as a loyal subject of his ungrateful sovereigns. With his self-discipline and ascetic life-style, he is presented as an antithesis to western consumerism and a corrupt Russian elite interested only in enriching themselves.

As to Pugachev, it became clear that he belongs to an ensemble of "Cossack popular heroes," which embody "Cossack freedoms" together with other leaders of rebellions like Stepan Razin and Yermak, the conqueror of Siberia. In popular legend, these three figures have been merged together to form a joint type that has been attributed different meanings. In the nineteenth century, this figuration represented a vague idea of freedom in the sense of a lack of restraint and struggle against unjust rulers. These heroes were ascribed magical powers that made them invincible and invulnerable. They were described as fearless, boisterous fighters, with leadership qualities and charisma. They were uneducated, but clever and never set themselves apart from the common people. They fought for the oppressed and for the common good.⁴ Rebellious leader, freedom fighter, bandit, social outlaw, wizard, and messiah all merged into one persona.

This type of Cossack hero was also important to intellectuals and played a key role in the formation of the Russian self-image in the nineteenth century. The Cossack myth evolved in the 1820s and 1830s – in other words, during the heyday of Russia's search for an ethnic identity and its formation as a nation. The intellectuals involved in this project were fascinated with the freedom of the Cossacks and their seemingly egalitarian and democratic form of self-organization.⁵ In this national narrative, the Cossacks became the antithesis to bureaucratic modernization. Characteristics that had a negative connotation, like ferocity and lack of restraint, became positive qualities for the Cossack heroes. The Cossacks stood apart from society; they rebelled against unjust rulers, and they embodied the idyllic notions of freedom, equality, and justice, earning them the right to defy the norms defined by the autocracy. Cossacks were transgressors of boundaries and breakers of norms per se.

Pugachev was not only a popular legend, he became a literary and poetic figure as well. His story was hence enriched by fiction, as can clearly be seen in Alexander Pushkin's version of Pugachev's story.⁶ Pushkin also inspired the historical and critical engagement with the Cossacks' rebelliousness during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, which continued in the 1860s with the help of an author with affiliations to the Narodnik movement.⁷ During this

¹ Osipov, K. [eigenti. Kuperman, O. M.] 1938: Suvorov. Velikij ruskij polkovodec, Moskau.

² Bol'nych, A. 2013: Štyk – molodec. Suvorov protiv Vašingtona, Moskau.

³ Lubčenkov, J. 2013: Geroi Rossii. Vydajuščiesja podvigi, o kotorych dolžna znat' vsja strana, Moskau.

⁴ Lozanova, A. N. (Hg.) 1935: Pesni i skazanija o Razine i Pugačeve, Moskau.

⁵ Kornblatt, J. D. 1992: The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature. A Study in Cultural Mythology, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁶ Puškin, A. S. 1834: Istorija Pugačevskogo bunta, St. Petersburg; Puškin, A. S. 1836: Kapitanskaja dočka, St. Petersburg; Puškin, A. S. 1840: Geschichte des Pugatschew'schen Aufruhrs, Stuttgart.

⁷ Mordovcev, D. L. 1867: Samozvancy i ponizovaja vol'nica. Istoričeskaja monografija, St. Petersburg / Moskau.

period, intellectuals became interested in popular legends and official sources, integrating the leaders of the rebellions into Russian history instead of leaving them out, as had been the official practice. Their focus was not on heroization, however, but on intellectual engagement, with the goal of doing justice to historical figures. During the late czar era, when intellectuals were occupied with Russia's past in the service of a Great Russian patriotism, a syncretistic relationship with historical figures – even negative ones – of Russian history can be observed.

During the early Soviet period, Pugachev and Razin became symbols that could be interpreted in many different ways.⁸ From a communist perspective, they were reinterpreted in a positive light as the leaders of “peasants’ wars.” This heroization was not consistent, however, because it was clear that these rebellious leaders were not really suited as role models for a state that demanded discipline from its citizens. Pugachev and Razin therefore remained ambivalent until the end of the Soviet Union as figures who were regarded as fundamentally positive with heroic attributes, as well as flaws and weaknesses. What was important was their historical interpretation as leaders in the struggle of the oppressed peasants against the feudal landowners.

Because of their potential for violence and serious threat to the state, the rebellious Cossack leaders are a theme found in feature films in popular culture to this day. The first Soviet movie about Pugachev was made in 1928 and was based on Pushkin's literary version. According to files, a film about Razin from 1939 also primarily intended to represent the protagonist as a popular hero. Later Soviet and post-Soviet films and novels were more ambivalent in their characterization of Razin and Pugachev.

In a diachronic comparative perspective spanning more than two centuries, it became clear that the two models of heroism – that of the “state hero” Suvorov and that of the “people's hero” Pugachev – may have developed independently of each other. However, at certain times they appeared as variations of the same type, or similar types, of heroism. From the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century, both heroic models were part of Russia's attempts to define itself and its relationship to Europe. Around 1900, they became expressions of a legitimization crisis of the autocracy and existing social conditions. In the World War II era, they played an important role for Soviet patriotism and the mobilization of people for the project of building socialism. Today, they define Russia's role in the world and distinguish it from western culture, which is oriented only toward commercialism and individualism.

The analysis of the two heroic models thus concentrated on these timeframes in order to establish connections and interactions between the different figurations. Comparing the two models and identifying common patterns of heroization turned out to be an ambitious task. Common denominators included the role of the media, the reflection of contemporaries and later generations on the heroic and non-heroic and on the necessity of heroes and the heroization of certain people in different constellations, colliding systems of norms and values, and the competing and conflict-laden utilization of figures by different groups.

The project group was in close contact with Benjamin Schenk (University of Basel), who is researching new insights into the medieval prince Alexander Nevsky.⁹ Thanks to this, the group was able to take a more in-depth look at the heroization of historical figures. Cooperation with researchers of Eastern Europe studies at the University of Basel continued with a guest lecture by Ivo Mijnsen about “Heldenstädte der Breschnew-Ära” (Heroic Cities of the

⁸ Kamenskij, V. 1916: *Sten'ka Razin* [P'esa], Moskau; Kamenskij, V. 1931: *Emel'jan Pugačev*. Poema, Moskau [als Oper im Marientheater Leningrad aufgeführt]; Esenin, S. A. 1922: *Pugačov*. Dramatičeskij poem, Moskau.

⁹ Schenk, F. B. 2004: *Alexander Nevskij. Heiliger – Fürst – Nationalheld. Eine Erinnerungsfigur im russischen kulturellen Gedächtnis 1263–2000*, Köln.

Brezhnev Era) along with joint study days. A number of essays were written (see below) and lectures held, which generated a large response beyond the University of Freiburg, including as far as Russia. Several Russian colleagues were also inspired to explore the theme of heroes. The project group is thus already in contact with potential partners for the planned follow-up project. Through its two graduate seminars “Volksaufstände in Russland (17./18. Jh.)” (Popular Rebellions in Russia in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century) in the summer semester 2013 and “Helden in der russischen Geschichte” (Heroes in Russian History) in the winter semester 2013/14, the project group had an impact on teaching and inspired students to write theses on this subject. Synergy was also generated within the University of Freiburg in the form of two PhD dissertations exploring related themes in research training groups, in which the project leader is also involved. These include Andreas Haller’s thesis on social rebels for the (research training group) GRK 1288 “Friends, Patrons, Clients,” and Gleb Kazakov’s thesis on rebellions in the seventeenth century for the (integrated research training group) IGK 1956 “Deutsch-russischer Kulturtransfer” (German-Russian Cultural Transfer). The workshop “Kosakische Aufstände und ihre Anführer im vormodernen Osteuropa: Heroisierung, Dämonisierung, Tabuisierung” (Cossack Rebellions and Their Leaders in Premodern Eastern Europe: Heroization, Demonization, Tabuization) organized together with project group C2 brought together the research of Cossack rebellions with their continued influence on remembrance and was attended by scholars from Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Russia in October 2015. The project group also collaborated closely with colleagues from Moscow and Kazan on a thematic booklet on Russian war heroes.

Publications by the Project Group

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