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Review of *The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II through Objects* by Brandon M. Schechter

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Brandon M Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II through Objects*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. Xxiv + 315pp. ISBN 978-1501739798 (hardback). Price: £27.99.

For all that it has long been recognised as *the* formative and foundational event of the Soviet era, there is still a good deal about the social and cultural dimensions of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) and its aftermath that remain unknown and unexplored. In his book Brandon Schechter breaks new ground by not only addressing some of the lacunas that persist in our understanding of the war and its impact, but does so through the medium of material culture. Drawing on archival collections of diaries and letters, reports given to high profile commissions, and materials generated by the state directly, Schechter provides the reader with invaluable insights into how the dynamics of Soviet everyday life were both shattered, and in some cases reinforced, by the experience of conflict.

The Stuff of Soldiers is organised in three parts. The first addresses what is referred to as 'biological needs', starting with the bodies of the soldiers before dressing them in uniform and sustaining them with rations (or not, as the case may be). Part Two focusses on the twin concerns of not being killed and killing, moving from the humble spade and its role in creating a 'safe' space for soldiers, to the more obvious tools of the trade – the rifle, bayonet, machine gun, mortars and tanks – and the relationship between man and machinery in this war-time context. The final part of the book focusses on possessions, and takes the reader from the intermingling between state-issued gear and personal treasures in the kit bag to the treatment of the possessions of others in the form of destruction, looting and the acquisition of trophies.

Moving through these different aspects, Schechter effortlessly blends his focus on the everyday with the greater overarching Soviet project and the experience in the extremes of war with the often extreme experience of life under pre-war Stalinism. This is seen in the interplay between the public and the private, the individual and the collective, and the relationship between the citizen and the state that carry over to the frontline context. There are other, perhaps less obvious, parallels that are drawn here too; these include the link between expropriation as a punishment for enemies, as seen during *dekulakisation*, and the looting and destruction of property by Soviet soldiers – who were themselves largely of peasant origin – once on foreign soil.

While on the whole Schechter's situating of the experience of war and the state's treatment of its soldiery within the broader framework of the Soviet project is compelling, there are a few points where this connection felt a little tenuous, such as the discussion of trenches as being in line with Soviet urbanisation. There were other

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parts where the focus on the thing itself seemed to fade into the background with a prioritisation of the larger narrative. Still, the poignant analyses of the significance of spoons, correspondence, and trinkets soon brings the reader back into the intimate space of these soldiers' daily lives and interior worlds.

There are many aspects of Schechter's work that make it a significant contribution to knowledge; most obviously is his investigation into everyday life during the war through material culture, but the interweaving experiences of the Russian and the non-Russian soldier and the male and the female soldier are undoubtedly contributory factors to the richness of the story being told here. Likewise, the dynamic between what made some of these approaches or experiences uniquely Soviet and what could be seen in parallel in other armies means that this is a book that offers much to those whose interests lie beyond the USSR.

Given the author's lively and accessible style this is surely a work that will reach an audience outside of academia, while the deeply-researched and insightful content equally makes it an invaluable addition to scholars of both the Soviet Union and those interested more broadly in the history and legacies of the Second World War. In terms of its scholarly use though, as has been noted by others, the lack of bibliography is a frustrating omission in what is otherwise a nicely produced publication.

Thus, while the premise of this book is to 'tell the story of the most central event in Soviet history, the Great Patriotic War, through objects' (p. 3), Schechter has used the history of 'things' to construct an intensely human account of this experience.

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Daniel Todman, *Britain's War: A New World, 1942–1947*. London: Penguin Random House UK, 2020. Xiv + 963pp. Maps + Illustrations + Index. ISBN 978-0241249994 (hardback). Price £35.00

Being a west coast of Scotland Presbyterian, I am naturally inclined to approach anything with the whiff of general Establishment approval with some scepticism, and resolved early doors to be firm, fair, and friendly. I have never been influenced by the opinions of so-called "great minds" and have always preferred to plough my own,