August 1914: The Red Wheel Knot I Short Guide

August 1914: The Red Wheel Knot I by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

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Contents

Characters

August 1914 has an epic cast of characters that numbers in the hundreds.

The dramatis personae include both historical and fictitious characters. Many are fascinating, attractive people whose adventures and plights engage the reader's sympathy. Atypically for fiction, the novel ends without recording the fate of some major figures. (It is expected that some of their stories will be finished in subsequent volumes of The Red Knot series.)

There are three important historical characters. First, Alexander Sumarov is commander of the Russian Second Army. Through his eyes, self-doubts, and commands the battle unfolds.

Early in the novel it is clear that Samsonov is in a situation requiring more tactical insight and strategic overview than he possesses. Shamed by his failure to keep the Second Army from a German encirclement, Samsonov wanders toward the frontlines in a pathetic attempt to rally his troops. When he fails, the commander kills himself. Second, Pyotr Stolypin is the Czar's minister who has a vision for Russia. This vision is organically Slavic rather than imported European; it builds upon the communal spirit of the village for both political organization and economic patterns. Stolypin's vision is unfortunately solitary; he is surrounded by men inside and outside government who think first of their own vanity and interest before the nation's. Stolypin is killed before he can effect changes or convince others to carry the vision.

Third, Nicholas II is the Czar who loves his people and means them well but who is ill-prepared by his training and ill-served by his ministers to rule a modern state. Believing himself an "omnipotent autocratic monarch," Nicholas has little ability to reflect upon the pragmatic consequences of decisions. He rules by vacillation, pursuing his own ideas until his wife or a minister subtly redirects his thinking.

Four important fictional characters dominate the narrative. Colonel Georgii Vorotyntev is a staff officer who abandons headquarters to investigate the battlefield. He is the first to realize that the Russians have blundered, but his superiors will not heed his warnings. Vorotyntev is the ideal officer: As fighting looms, he realizes that this is the crisis for which he has trained, the duty for which he will sacrifice wife, family, and life. Vorotyntev survives the slaughter of battle and pell-mell retreat; he lives to address a scathing rebuke (the one Solzhenitsyn himself would like to deliver) to the General Staff. Sanya Lazhenitsyn is an idealistic young man fresh from school who volunteers for the army and enters battle unprepared for the slaughter he will witness. Yet he fights heroically.

His counterpart is Sasha Lenartovich,a cynical ensign with revolutionary sympathies who expects the war will crumble the corrupt monarchy. Although he deserts when the rout begins, he returns to his unit after realizing that love and camaraderie are real virtues, not false ideals.

Social Concerns

The subject of Russia's military defeat at Tannenberg has fascinated Solzhenitsyn since 1937, when it was first proposed to him as a research topic at Rostov University. He read extensively on the topic and collected material for decades. Ironically he was arrested in East Prussia near the site of the events.

Solzhenitsyn believes that the Bolshevik government that seized power in Russia in 1918 was neither a natural sequel to Czarist autocracy (as many Western scholars argued) nor an historically necessary evolution (as Marxist theoreticians asserted). To him Soviet Communism was an aberration caused by a coincidence of extraordinary events in the first two decades of the century. The first of these is the battle of Tannenberg in August 1914, a major defeat of the Russian army in the first month of the World War I. The original version of August 1914 (1972) describes the invasion of East Prussia by the Russian Army. It ended disastrously, doomed the Czarist government to fight a losing war, and ultimately caused the overthrow of Romanov autocracy as well as the budding democratic institution of the Duma (parliament). The revised version of the novel (1989) adds chapters on events that contributed to the 1914 disaster: the revolutionary movements from 1890-1910 which sapped the morale of political leadership, the assassination of the reformist minister Pyotr Stolypin, and the naive rule of Czar Nicholas II.

In the tradition of epic poetry, Solzhenitsyn's novel focuses on a crucial period in a nation's past in order to understand its present state of calamity.

Techniques

To tell the sweeping story Solzhenitsyn creates a polyphonic structure. The narrative shifts restlessly from frontlines to field headquarters. One chapter will focus on Samsonov, the next on Vorotyntev, the following on Lenartovich's battalion. When the narrative switches to the events surrounding Stolypin's assassination, Solzhenitsyn studies each major participant in turn and at length: the assassin, his victim, and the monarch. In these chapters he works in reverse chronological order, as if nothing of the present can be understood without plunging into the past.

Three special techniques enhance the historical materials. First, Solzhenitsyn assembles several chapters out of headlines and advertising slogans from actual newspapers of the time. This collage suggests the Russia — its ideals as well as its follies — for which the army fought. Second, Solzhenitsyn intersperses objective, textbook accounts of the battle's progress. These accounts keep the nonspecialist reader aware of the context in which individual soldiers planned, fought, and died. Third, Solzhenitsyn, composes sections called "screens" to vary the narrative. Written out like a film script, the screen gives a series of rapid battle images. The effect is cinematic, and since the screens are without dialogue, the elliptical sentences imitate the staccato frames of a silent movie.

Images of red wheels, calling attention to the title and the theme, punctuate the novel. Lenin leans against a red train wheel as he is about to depart Zurich; a red wheel of flame devours a building under bombardment; a flaming wheel separates from a shot-up wagon and careens wildly. Red wheels suggest the ferocity of events overtaking the people and the nation.

Themes

The themes of August 1914 are human, military, and political. The human theme is the heroism of the ordinary Russian soldier. With awe Solzhenitsyn depicts the hardiness of infantrymen who marched untiringly hither and yon at the contradictory orders of confused generals. With compassion he recites the courage of peasants, clerks, and teachers who fought to the death despite the obvious incompetence of their officers. Loving comrades, family, religion, and country more than life, foot soldiers and cavalrymen thought nothing of their own safety and died bravely, in droves.

The military theme concerns the stupidity and venality of the Russian generals who wasted such magnificent troops. Caring more about a place on the promotion list than about tactics, scheming to keep others from receiving a share of the glory, General Staff officers forgot the responsibility of leadership. Because of antiquated strategy or petty squabbles, they wasted battalion after battalion.

The government's plan of war contributed to the battlefield disaster.

Urged by Britain and France to invade Germany on a second front immediately after the declaration of war, Russia attacked without sufficient time for orderly mobilization. Envisioning a glorious re-enactment of the victories of 1812-1814 when Russian armies toppled Napoleon, the Czar's government imagined itself again the savior of Europe.

The final theme is that the chaos of the army reflects the chaos in the political order. The revolutionary movements from 1890 destroyed trust in the social fabric and often killed the more enlightened reformers rather than the staunchest autocrats. The most glaring example is the assassination of Prime Minister Stolypin in 1911 by a revolutionary who was unwittingly abetted by the Okhrana (secret police) which believed him to be a double agent.

Stolypin advocated numerous political and economic reforms that would have strengthened Russia's ability to compete with the more advanced societies of Germany, France, and England.

Stolypin represented a force for change that Nicholas II himself did not. Well intentioned but unassertive, Nicholas consistently made the wrong choices in domestic policy and was out-maneuvered in foreign policy.

In summary, Solzhenitsyn depicts a Russia, lacking internal strength and professing impossible diplomatic ideals, that martyred itself in World War I to save ungrateful and uncomprehending Western European allies.

Key Questions

The topics of Tannenberg, Stolypin's reforms, and Nicholas II's characters are unfamiliar to American readers.

August 1914 is a long, detailed work that a contemporary, non-Russian audience will find slow paced and filled by strange names, places, and issues.

Many appealing characters are introduced, but their destiny is postponed until a later "knot." The novel will appeal most to readers who are students of history, especially of twentieth-century military and political history.

Solzhenitsyn's interpretation of events often challenges established Western opinions on them.

1. Read a modern Western historian's account of Tannenberg (e.g. in The Guns of August by Barbara Tuchman, 1962). Contrast this account of Russia's fatal entrance into the war to Solzhenitsyn's description of the same events.

2. Solzhenitsyn believes that Russia in the early 1900s needed reform but not revolution. What is the difference?

Describe Solzhenitsyn's attitude toward revolutionaries in August 1914. Although they seek necessary change, what is their mistake?

3. Stolypin is one of Solzhenitsyn's heroes. Read Stolypin's Rebuilding Russia (1991) or The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century (1995) and compare Solzhenitsyn's prescription for Russia's ills today with Stolypin's in 1910 (described in chapter 65).

4. Note Solzhenitsyn's contrasting portrait of Bogrov, the assassin of Stolypin. How is his plan for the murder an emblem of the plan for revolution in Russia?

5. Consider Solzhenitsyn's depiction of General Samsonov. Is he a tragic character who is simultaneously the cause of his own downfall and a victim of fate?

6. Characterize Colonel Vorotyntev.

What military and personal virtues does he embody?

7. Does Solzhenitsyn credit Nicholas II with any of the virtues of leadership? How is Nicholas too much like General Samsonov?

8. Occasionally non-Russian officers such as the German general von Francois and the British general Knox become the center of the narrative. What is the foreign perspective on the performance of the Russian army and its leaders?

9. Consider the meaning of the "red wheel" images as symbols of the 1917 Revolution.

Literary Precedents

The obvious ancestor of August 1914 is Tolstoy's War and Peace (1869), itself an epic novel of one thousand pages plus which also combines historical and fictional material as it describes Napoleon's invasion of, and flight from, Russia in 1812. Just as Solzhenitsyn uses his novel to argue that Communist rule is historical accident rather than necessary destiny, Tolstoy wrote with didactic purpose. He wished to demonstrate that history is determined not by the fateful decisions of a few powerful persons, but by small actions of thousands of ordinary people.

One important difference between the two is that Solzhenitsyn virtually ignores the depiction of combat. Hardly a soldier is killed before the reader's eye. Thousands die, but their deaths are reported rather than witnessed.

Like a classical tragedy, Solzhenitsyn keeps omnipresent death decorously offstage. He concentrates instead on the impression of war as it manifests itself in each character's mind. How a man reacts to, plans for, hopes for, or fears the immanence of death in battle becomes the index of his moral character.

Related Titles

Lenin in Zurich (1975) is composed of chapters destined to be part of Solzhenitsyn's projected three-part trilogy on the Bolshevik Revolution. Chapter One is part of Knot I, a section omitted from the first version of August 1914 but included in the expanded version.

The second chapter, from the projected Knot II, concerns the events of October 1916 when the Czar, under severe criticism because of the failing war effort, dismissed his chief ministers and a revolution-minded Duma (parliament) was called into session. Knot III concerns the events of March 1917 when the Tsar abdicated and a Provisional government under Kerensky was installed. All three chapters are linked by the centrality of Lenin. Solzhenitsyn's portrait of Lenin is scathing: The man is conceited and ruthless, skillful only as an opportunist who seized command of a revolution he himself did not predict. Solzhenitsyn's portrait of Lenin has been confirmed by biographers working with archives available after the fall of the Soviet Union.

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