

12-1996

Faculty Research Note: Leonid Heretz

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev

Recommended Citation

(1996). Faculty Research Note: Leonid Heretz. *Bridgewater Review*, 15(2), 32.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol15/iss2/19

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

FACULTY RESEARCH NOTE

Leonid Heretz

Professor Lee Heretz of the History Department is a scholar who is determined to present the past from a different perspective. Heretz, a student of Russian and Eastern European history, uses a non-traditional approach of documenting events in that region by accenting the influence of traditional culture and religion as expressed in popular beliefs, legends and rumors.

Heretz feels that too often historians have not placed enough emphasis on exploring events such as the Russian revolution and World War I through the cultural lens of the peasantry. Instead, historians have examined the past from a modern elite perspective while ignoring the thoughts, lifestyles and the beliefs of the common people. Heretz's work, which is a kind of "counter history," is designed to explain historical events by investigating the way in which the peasants perceived important changes occurring around them.

Heretz is particularly interested in the role played by religious beliefs in forming the world view of Russian and Eastern European peasants. In his research Heretz found that at the beginning of the twentieth century the Russian peasantry was essentially 'Medieval' in culture -- its beliefs, way of life and work were suffused

with traditional religious meaning. In addition, the peasant worldview had a strong tendency toward dualism -- the perception of conflict between good and evil, the spirit and the flesh, God and the devil. In this context, the traditional peasantry viewed itself and the Tsar as being on God's side, while the nobility and educated people were viewed as agents of evil.



Though very alien to us at present, this 'holistic' traditional culture and worldview gave sense and order to the peasants' lives.

As Heretz stresses, that world view was shattered by World War I when peasants were taken out of their villages to fight in battles miles from their farms. The war ended the harmony of rural life, displaced millions of peasants and ended the monarchies along with the prominence of traditional religion. What replaced the old system was new idea systems such as Bolshevism and National Socialism, which competed with religion for the hearts and minds of the peasant class.

Heretz is currently working on a book-length manuscript which will further

elaborate his peasant-based study of the critical World War I period. He, however, is actively involved in a number of other research projects centered in Slavic Europe. Heretz recently delivered a paper at the prestigious Kosciusko Foundation in New York on the 20th Century Polish writer Josef Wittlin. Heretz believes that Wittlin's most recognized novel, *Salt of the Earth*, is one of the best works of fiction about World War I. The novel, which describes the impact of the war on a peasant, provides the reader with keen observations of the mentality of men in war and reinforces Heretz's belief that much can be learned about important events from a peasant perspective.

Professor Heretz's ambitious research schedule also includes a forthcoming conference presentation on the continued vitality of the Russian language in the newly-independent Ukraine and Belarus. Heretz places this question in the context of the relationship between modern, urban life -- where Russian predominates -- and the traditional countryside -- where Ukrainian and Belorussian are spoken.

A conversation with Professor Lee Heretz is an enlightening and enlivening journey through the past. His belief that historical events must also be told from the view of the peasants places him in the front ranks of scholars who approach the past with new methods of inquiry and a new commitment to write history in a different manner. ■