MAKING MARTYRS, THE LANGUAGE OF SACRIFICE IN RUSSIAN CULTURE FROM STALIN TO PUTIN, By Ayse Dietrich*, Published by: University of Rochester Press, USA. Written by Yuliya Minkova, Year of Publishing: 2018. Subject Area: Russian history, culture and literature, Book Type: Literature and Language. Total Number of Pages: 246. ISBN: 9781580469142, $65.00 (Hardcover).

This book is about the language of canonization and vilification in Soviet and post-Soviet media, official literature and popular culture. The book argues that Soviet discourse not only introduced various heroic and sacrificial figures into Russian society as a means of self-policing and censure, but also used them as a means of asserting ideology’s continued hold on society, while the post-Soviet discourse of victimhood appeals to nationalist nostalgia. The book investigates the cultural mechanisms that allow the coexistence of aggressive behavior and self-identified victimhood in the same political subject. In her analysis, to examine the issue of sacrificial mythology, she uses newspaper articles, fiction, memoirs, and films, and for theoretical framework of the book, she relies on Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and Oleg Kharkhordin’s *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*.

The book is composed of five chapters. Chapter I discusses the two main characters of sacrificial narrative: the enemies of the people and the partisan hero of WWII. The author shows how the official discourse of WWII manipulates media canonizations and portrays the warriors. This chapter also examines the Thaw period after the death of Stalin and the treatment of the sacrificial mechanism.

Chapter II talks about the distress of two aerial hijacking events which occurred after the Thaw and their representation in Soviet press, literature and film. This chapter introduces the depiction of the figure of a heroic flight attendant, women and pilots in media, literature, and films as an heiress to the legacy of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and other martyrs of WWII. It also examines how hijackers were treated as traitors, enemies of people in Stalinist media and literature. It shows that the metaphor of the sacred victim was crucial to Soviet discourse and remained operative even after the
Chapter III discusses the heroic death of the Chilean singer Víctor Jara at the hands of General Pinochet’s junta. The author is interested in the official language used in the print media between the 1970s and 1990s which reflects the ideology of the Soviet state in the image of the Chilean martyr for communism that helped the Soviets to strengthen and legitimize their regime. The author concludes that the language used in regard to sacrifice in the 1970s and 80s harks back to the style used in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly in its portrayal of the stark contrast between betrayal and loyalty, and its use of religious imagery in discussions of patriotism.

Chapter IV examines the wartime sacrificial figures in post-Soviet nationalist literature, and discusses the return of the wartime hero in the late-Soviet and post-Soviet literature and popular culture. The author examines fiction, essays, journalism and interview with the popular writers Zakhar Prilepin, German Sadulaev, and Dmitry Cherkasov and talks about the war in Afghanistan in the 80s, the military operations in Chechnya and the military conflicts in Yugoslavia and in Ukraine. She argues that during perestroika, despite the erosion of the Soviet state and the resulting loss of prestige and influence, Soviet idealism retained a hold on the public imagination. Consequently, a new hero figure began to emerge, one who continued to symbolize sovereignty in post-Soviet Russia. Elements of the now discarded official Soviet narrative began to re-emerge in cinema, media and literature.

In the Chapter V, the author discusses Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s treatment in the media and popular culture, that created a character of a businessman-hero for popular culture. The author is interested in the construction of heroic victimhood and patriotism, and examines the ways in which modern Russian intellectuals advocate a more liberal society within this framework.

In the Conclusion of this book, the author provides a number of contemporary examples to support her claim that the language and imagery of heroic victims and sacrifice, freed from the bounds of official discourse has entered popular culture and is used in everything from talk shows to statements by officials.

This scholarly written book delivers a satisfactory information on sacrificial language used during the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet era. I would recommend this book to anyone who were interested in the discourse analysis of the Soviet and post-Soviet era in media, official literature and popular culture.

*Ayse Dietrich - Professor, Part-time, at Middle East Technical University, Department of History, and Eurasian Studies. Editor and the founder of the International Journal of Russian Studies e-mail: editor@ijors.net, dayse@metu.edu.tr, dietrichayse@yahoo.com

© 2010, IJORS - INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RUSSIAN STUDIES