

Russia's War Memory: How Tolstoy Uses Homeric Epic to Reconstruct History

Authors : Svetlana Yefimenko

Abstract : Situated within the fields of Russian literature, Russian history, and classics, this paper investigates the early writing of Leo Tolstoy in terms of his reception and appropriation of Homeric epic for the purposes of reconstructing early 19th-century Russian history. The epic mode, specifically its Homeric variation, was deployed in Tolstoy's writing on his military experience in the Crimean War to legitimize a version of historical events which positioned Russian soldiers as the inheritors of ancient Greek heroism. With reference to Tolstoy's oft-neglected Sevastopol' Sketches, and the short stories The Raid, The Wood-Felling, and Two Hussars, this paper examines how such narratives pass from communicative memory into collective memory both in the Homeric epics and in Tolstoy's reworking of them, particularly on the literary effects produced when the distance between communicative and collective memory collapses. Within a song culture, epic song functions as memory, and this paper shows how, by modeling his early work on epic, Tolstoy produced texts which act as memory itself, thereby becoming the authoritative version of Russia's past in the Crimea, often contradicting historical facts.

Keywords : classical reception, collective memory, Russian history, Russian literature

Conference Title : ICCLC 2020 : International Conference on Comparative Literature and Culture

Conference Location : London, United Kingdom

Conference Dates : August 20-21, 2020