Clarion Review

General

Moryak: A Novel of the Russian Revolution
Lee Mandel
iUniverse
978-1-4401-4150-8
Four Stars (out of Five)

The Russian Revolution collides with Lt. J.G. Stephen Morrison's quest to find his place in the world in this military history novel by Lee Mandel. Stephen, who started life as Lev Kambotchnik, son of a Russian rabbi, embodies the plight of Russian Jews in the late 1800s as he flees persecution and seeks freedom in the United States. Lev embraces America and works hard to Americanize himself. Speaking flawless English, he wanders the streets and docks of New York City and dreams of someday being a naval officer. Yet Jewish persecution pervades even the U.S., and young Lev quickly learns the necessity of defending himself against violence meted out by bigoted gangs.

Circumstances place him in an adoptive home where he becomes Stephen Morrison, son of a U.S. Congressman. Gone are the side curls, the broad-brimmed hat, and solemn Jewish traditions. With this new identity, Stephen achieves his dream of becoming a naval officer—but he pays a high price. Ostracized because of his religion, he spends four years in the U.S. Naval Academy enduring hazing, isolation, and constant harassment.

During the years of Lev's growth from child to naval officer, Russia experiences a drought and famine that sparks unrest in peasants and workers. Tsar Nicholas's autocratic policies and refusal to give the people a voice in the government further incites workers and peasants to unite behind a Marx-influenced Bolshevik ideology. The old autocratic Tsarist regime weakens. In the U.S., President Theodore Roosevelt searches for ways—diplomatic and covert—to bring the raging wars to acceptable conclusions.

Stephen possesses the linguistic and military skills necessary to pull off a daring covert operation. He and a British spy creep into Russia to kidnap Tsar Nicholas. Their plan is thwarted. Stephen is captured and spends ten years in an isolated Russian prison on Solovetsky Island. There he is transformed from a spit and polish Navy Lieutenant to a killer. He becomes

Moryak (“sailor” in Russian).

Mandel, a physician with the U.S. Navy and a published historian, strengthens this tale with authoritative historic facts and research. He paints his protagonist as a true patriot and a pawn who never quite finds acceptance and peace.

The sparse writing and lack of sensory descriptions distance readers from the characters and keep them from immersing themselves in the scenes. Reportage rather than crafted fiction techniques further diminish the reader’s connections to the story: “Like his classmates, Morrison could not wait to pick up his copy and share it with his family,” Mandel writes. “The shock of what he saw in the book stunned him. He quickly thumbed through all of the pages…”

However, the strong attention to history will keep readers turning pages. The book will be of special interest to readers who enjoy a flawed but heroic character or the era of the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian Revolution, and World War I.