

Utopias Lost and Found: In Search of Soviet Culture

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Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992. \$39.95 (cloth); \$13.95 (paper).

The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992. \$69.95 (cloth).

Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society 1917-1953*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1992. \$59.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992. \$45.00 (cloth).

Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1992. \$44.95 (cloth); \$14.95 (paper).

Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1992. \$49.95 (cloth).

Soviet cultural history is currently something of a growth industry, with books and dissertations now appearing on fresh topics such as spectator sports, popular religion, and oppositional youth culture. This reflects in part a wide-scale shift to cultural studies in all fields of historical research, but it also shows that Soviet historians have become increasingly interested in the methods the general population employed to alter or resist the invasive cultural programs of the Bolshevik regime. The books reviewed here are by scholars who

have long been engaged in cultural history, and whose work has shaped and inspired the current interest. They examine many different forms of cultural expression and span the entire Soviet period from the Bolsheviks' rise to power until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite their different emphases, they converge around four central themes: the relationship between the cultural intelligentsia and the state; the place of the avant-garde in Soviet culture; the tastes of the consumers of mass culture; and the character of Stalinist culture in the 1930s.

The stormy relationship between the intelligentsia and the Soviet state is the main theme of Sheila Fitzpatrick's collection of essays, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. Fitzpatrick is a major figure in Soviet cultural history, and it is hard to imagine a contemporary Western book on the subject that has not in some way been affected by her prolific writings. This volume contains ten essays, eight of which have previously been published, on a wide range of topics from the sex habits of Soviet students in the 1920s, to the controversy surrounding Dmitrii Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in the 1930s. Also included is her influential essay "Cultural Revolution as Class War," first published in 1978, which argued that Stalin's "revolution from above" launched during the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932) was in part "a revolution from below." Her boldly stated thesis sparked a controversy that still rages about popular support for Stalinist programs and revisionist approaches to Soviet history in general.¹

Although they were published over a twenty-year period, these essays present a remarkably consistent picture of the place of intellectuals in Soviet society. Fitzpatrick traces the many battles within the cultural elite itself between the "old," non-Bolshevik intelligentsia, the disruptive "Young Turks" who sympathized with the regime, and newly promoted members from the working class and peasantry. In her view, it was the old intelligentsia whose values emerged transcendent by the end of the 1930s. While not denying their persecution under Stalin, including waves of arrests and intimidations during the First Five-Year Plan, and again during the terror of the 1930s, she believes that members of the old intelligentsia gained material benefits and even some modicum of institutional control by the 1930s. More than this, their conception of "culture" was by and large victorious. By the 1930s Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov dominated concert programs, while the Bolshoi Theater and the Academy of Sciences were major recipients of the state's largess. There was an ambivalent outcome on the cul-

tural front in the long struggle between the intelligentsia and the Communists. "[T]he intelligentsia had lost freedom and self-respect along the way, though it had won the battle of culture, while the Communists had lost confidence in the relevance of Communism to culture, though it had won the battle of power" (15).

All of the books discussed here provide a critical reexamination of intellectuals' role in the shaping of Soviet culture, and Fitzpatrick is not the only scholar to deny them the role of martyrs. Even Peter Kenez, who is generally hostile to revisionist approaches, finds few heroes among the cultural elite. In his study of Soviet film from 1917 to 1953, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, he concludes that "artists were not simply victims but also the architects of the system that destroyed them" (252). Some authors go even further to argue that battles within the intelligentsia were more tempestuous than those between intellectuals and the state. In her study of popular films, *Movies for the Masses*, Denise Youngblood rejects both the term "revolution from above" and "revolution from below" to describe the cultural radicalism of the First Five-Year Plan period. Instead she argues it was a "revolution from the middle," launched by disaffected artists and critics themselves (178).²

The short and tragic history of the Russian avant-garde has long been a staple of Soviet cultural studies. The innovative work of avant-garde artists gained the Soviet Union an international reputation in the 1920s, but they were brushed off, and in some cases even killed off, when Stalin rose to power. *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, which documents the highly acclaimed 1992 Guggenheim exhibit, presents a complex picture of the avant-garde's place in early Soviet culture. Even for those familiar with the vast literature on the subject, this book will come as a revelation. Containing over seven hundred plates and twenty scholarly articles, it charts the wide range of avant-garde experimentation from architecture to photography to book design. The articles examine not only the work of the major artists, but also of their lesser-known students. What emerges from this impressive collection is a picture of a diverse and far-ranging movement beset by its own internal disagreements and generational conflicts.

Many of the articles take on the controversial issue of the avant-garde's relationship to the Bolshevik regime. In Hubertus Gassner's challenging analysis of the constructivists, artists who turned away from painting and sculpture to create utilitarian objects, he disputes the notion that the avant-garde spontaneously embraced the Bolsheviks in 1917, long the conventional wisdom. Instead he shows

a long and painful process of accommodation that led to the "turbulent misalliance between the 'Futurists' and the Communists" (299). Constructivists believed that they had struck a bargain with the state whereby they would be allowed some professional autonomy in return for the creation of useful things. However, their notion of utility pleased no one and their autonomy was easily swept aside.

The avant-garde's ambivalent relationship with the public and popular tastes runs through all the books reviewed here. These experimental artists believed their mission was to educate society in a new aesthetic sensibility, even if viewers neither liked nor understood what they saw. The result was at times an overbearing arrogance, as shown in Charlotte Douglas's fascinating article on textile design in *The Great Utopia*. The younger generation of designers who came of age during the First Five-Year Plan destroyed thousands of floral fabric patterns to force their own prints of tractors and factories onto an unwilling population, an effort that was ultimately unsuccessful. Avant-garde film makers had no better luck with the public, according to the three books examining film. Youngblood, Kenez, and Richard Stites all show that viewers turned away from the innovative works of Eisenstein, Dovzhenko, and other now-famous directors, confused by their complex editing and murky story lines. Indeed, Kenez comes to the interesting conclusion that avant-garde films were possible in Soviet Russia precisely because it was not a market-based economy. The state subsidized films that found little acceptance among Soviet viewers, something that would not have been possible if the films had had to pay their own way.

But if avant-garde experiments did not gain wide popularity, what did? How did people entertain themselves in the Soviet period? These questions are the starting point for Denise Youngblood's analysis of popular movies during the 1920s, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s*. This book not only examines popular tastes, it also shows how cultural and political debates within the Soviet bureaucracy facilitated a diverse film market. Because of the state's desperate need for revenues, the film trust, Sovkino, imported foreign movies that were big box office hits. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were stars to Soviet movie fans, their work and lives chronicled in numerous movie magazines and pulp biographies. Soviet moviegoers also enjoyed the work of one of the great prerevolutionary directors, Iakov Protazanov, who chose acceptable Soviet themes for his films but also incorporated some of the swashbuckling style that had shaped his prerevolutionary successes. In addition, Soviet audiences could view the work of

young directors like Boris Barnet, who eschewed the complex editing of avant-garde films and instead analyzed Western movies to determine their market appeal. Thus viewers in the 1920s had many choices—foreign box office hits, new Soviet films aimed at mass audiences, and movies that continued popular prerevolutionary traditions.

By showing the fierce debates between moviemakers and movie critics, Youngblood's study gives new insights into the tensions that shaped the culture of the New Economic Policy (NEP), a period that has long been portrayed as one of comparative cultural tolerance. Her book shows that the pluralism of NEP was the result more of cultural bureaucrats' internal conflicts and indecision than of a sincere commitment to diversity. Nonetheless, film viewers had broad choices during NEP, many of which they lost under Stalin. The sex, adventure, and glamour that audiences had enjoyed in the films of the 1920s were sanitized or eradicated by the 1930s. She asks in her open-ended conclusion, "Could Soviet citizens possibly find collective farmers and factory workers as entertaining as Protazanov's dashing thieves and bumbling NEPmen" (172-73)?

Richard Stites takes the broad spectrum of popular pastimes as his central theme in *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*. He argues that Soviet popular culture has not received the attention it deserves because many scholars refuse to believe it could exist under the oppressive conditions of the Soviet regime. In addition, Western researchers often share the disdainful attitudes of the Russian intelligentsia towards popular leisure-time pursuits. Rejecting these views as politically narrow and culturally elitist, Stites makes his case by tracing the diverse ways that ordinary people filled their daily lives with music, dance, adventure stories, and a host of other entertainments. This eye-opening study is, quite simply, a great read, enlivened by Stites's engaging writing and broad knowledge of Russian culture. It also contains many surprises, including a brief look at an oppositional youth culture that began to take shape during Stalin's last years. Even in the midst of fierce antiforeigner campaigns, some young people listened to Western music and wore American-inspired clothing, anticipating the Khrushchev era by several years.

The most provocative part of Stites's book is his treatment of Stalinist culture of the 1930s, years that included forced collectivization, rapid industrialization, famine, and terror. In a chapter entitled "Stalin by Starlight," Stites portrays the 1930s as a period with diverse and appealing chances for entertainment. Stalin's regime jet-

tisoned the avant-garde for good and used the mass media to create a new mass culture designed to entertain the average viewer. Stites argues that Stalin was much more adept at bringing people what they wanted than were the early Bolshevik leaders. Jazz and musical entertainments flourished, the circus thrived, and the radio emerged as a medium to promote new Soviet songs, melodic tunes that have maintained their popularity even to this day. Under the watchful eye of innovative Stalinist bureaucrats, a new Soviet cinema took shape imbued with a happy optimism and featuring vivid heroes, gripping plots, and happy endings. Stites offers a sympathetic treatment of the popular musical comedies of the 1930s directed by Grigorii Aleksandrov and starring his wife, Liubov Orlova, who is reputed to have had Stalin as one of her fans. The lush sets, moving music, and attractive stars in these films conveyed the image of a happy, prosperous, and tolerant country.

Stites is consciously walking a fine line in his portrayal of Stalinist popular culture. His purpose is not to deny the horrors of the 1930s or to question that film comedies and snappy tunes were in part designed to mask them. Rather he is asserting that despite all of this, people were able to draw pleasure from what they saw and heard. "In many realms of culture—high and low, democratic, market driven, or otherwise—there is no necessary contradiction between fraud, deceit, and manipulation on the one hand and authentic popular enjoyment on the other" (96). In a period of great social upheaval, Stites concludes, people's lives were made more tolerable by these optimistic pictures and stirring songs.

Peter Kenez passionately disagrees with this line of argumentation. In *Cinema and Soviet Society*, he argues that consumer choices shrank drastically in the 1930s. Movie viewership rose only because the government greatly expanded the distribution network, not because of the inherent popularity of Stalinist films. He points out that the kinds of movies available to viewers narrowed precipitously. Foreign films were almost entirely banned, as were many of the Soviet hits of the 1920s. Political control of the production process became so invasive that it could no longer be described simply as censorship. Political authorities were involved from the outset in the construction of films, especially Stalin himself. He viewed every film, sometimes edited their scripts, and even commissioned movies on special themes. Because of the elaborate approval process, few films actually made their way to viewing audiences in the 1930s compared to the previous decade.

For Kenez, Stalinist culture of the 1930s was little more than an

elaborate system of obfuscation. The cheery musicals created an imaginary world of happy workers and prosperous peasants that had absolutely no relationship to the daily lives of viewers, and thus were more likely to cause confusion than pleasure. The more ominous films focusing on the unmasking of enemies—usually family members, friends, and coworkers—contributed to the atmosphere of terror. However much socialist realism grew out of longstanding Russian cultural traditions, Kenez asserts, it came into being because politicians needed it. "Genuine socialist realism presupposes concentration camps in the not very distant background" (159).

The radically different interpretations of Stalinist culture presented by Kenez and Stites are in part explained by their different perspectives. Kenez examines the control of cultural production from above by focusing on the movie industry, by far the most carefully monitored medium. Stites, on the other hand, looks at Stalinist culture from below. He also incorporates a wide range of entertainments that were not as strictly regulated as film. But there are more fundamental differences at issue here. In essence Kenez argues that there was little pleasure to be drawn from cultural works sponsored by a murderous regime, that people could not (or perhaps should not) enjoy them. Stites, on the other hand, believes that Soviet audiences found creative ways to entertain themselves, regardless of the regime's intentions.

Régine Robin provides yet another perspective on Stalinist culture, looking at it from the middle, from the standpoint of the artists and critics who helped to shape it. In *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, Robin examines the deep cultural roots of Stalinist literature. For Robin, the avant-garde challenge to realist traditions in Russian art was never serious. She traces complex aesthetic debates stretching from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries to determine that "[r]ealism in Russia is the very air one breathes, a basic postulate impossible to call into question" (160). Already by the 1920s the major controversies within the literary community were not between the realists and the modernists, but rather among the realists themselves over what kind of representational writing they should endorse.

The choice of socialist realism, she argues, came from writers themselves as well as state authorities. Both wanted a literature that was clear and easy to understand; both wanted a didactic form that would present reality from the viewpoint of victorious socialism. At the famous 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress, where the ground rules for socialist realist literature were defined, only a few voices argued

in favor of maintaining genuinely critical elements in their prose. A central ingredient of this literature was a new kind of hero, a new man without ambivalence or internal contradictions, which marked a radical departure from the conflicted figures of nineteenth century realism. The result, Robin determines, was an "impossible aesthetic," the unhappy marriage of realism—verisimilitude and prosaic detail—with epic and legend.

Drawing heavily on the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, Robin sees socialist realism as an effort to create monologic, authoritarian speech in literature. Both writers and censors attempted to shape a literature that was accessible, transparent, and allowed only one possible interpretation. Ultimately, however, they failed in this endeavor. Despite their pains to devise texts that could only be read in one way, Robin argues that language itself produces meanings that cannot be controlled by authors. In her interesting readings of selected socialist realist novels, Robin finds ruptures and disturbances everywhere. These were not monologic works, she contends, nor were their heroes models of the socialist realist ideal.

Thus Robin asks her readers to do two things at once. On the one hand they should recognize socialist realism's authoritarian intentions. The choice of this direction "severely strained Soviet literature and prevented the social imaginary from developing freely—a clear symptom of a diseased society" (xxxi). On the other hand, readers should realize that this authoritarian project was not entirely successful. The reception of socialist realist works could never be completely controlled. Robin moves back and forth between these two poles, and the creative tension makes for interesting reading.

In the introduction to her book, first published in French in 1986, Robin accuses the Western scholarly community of not taking Soviet culture, and particularly Stalinist culture, seriously. "Confronted with the Soviet culture of the 1930s, we practice a form of reverse Stalinism ... a scorched-earth policy, when we are not actually burning books" (xix). Now, almost ten years later, this harsh judgment no longer rings true. The works discussed here take Soviet culture seriously and are at pains to uncover forgotten aspects of that culture, to resurrect books, films, and songs rather than to burn them. While they continue to assess the state's role in shaping Soviet culture, a topic almost impossible to ignore, they also look at the independent contributions of cultural producers. None of the artists portrayed in these studies is simply a helpless victim of a cruel regime. Most significant of all, these books address the interests, desires, and tastes of cultural consumers, providing readers with a promising new per-

spective on the creation of Soviet culture.

Notes

1. For an overview of the controversy, see "Discussion," *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 357–414 and *Russian Review* 46 (1987): 379–431.

2. Coincidentally, another scholar has used the same phrase for upheavals in industry. See David R. Shearer, "The Language and Politics of Socialist Rationalization," *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique* 32 (1991): 581–608, esp. 598–601.

