

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nancy Ries. *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. xiv + 220 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8416-2; \$62.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3385-6.

Reviewed by Susan Costanzo (Western Washington University)

Published on H-Russia (September, 1998)

Talk Is Not Cheap

Nancy Ries's book *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika* so illuminates the dynamic of conversation with and among Russians that it would be tempting to focus on the value of the work for individuals who plan to participate in Russian culture. But to do so would neglect the originality, meticulous research, and seamless writing that characterize this first monograph.

As the title suggests, Ries identifies talk as a fundamental means of cultural construction in Russian society. She argues that "the spontaneous conversational discourses are a primary mechanism by which ideologies and cultural stances are shaped and maintained ... [T]he discursive world does not merely reflect the world of more obvious social action, but also helps to construct it ... *Talk*—in all its forms and manifestations—is a key ingredient in the production of social paradigms and practices, and in the reproduction of what has often been called 'Russianness'" (pp. 3-4, emphasis hers). For Ries, the content and meaning of such conversation also contributes to the ongoing political relationship between the powerful and the powerless.

Her subjects included urban intelligentsia located predominantly in Moscow and Yaroslavl in 1989-1990. In order to mitigate against the possibility that her conversations were skewed because of her status as a foreigner and an American, she also created a "control group" by eavesdropping on conversations in lines and on the metro. She also conducted interviews in 1994 for the purpose of comparison.

What Ries first assumed to be a response to the difficult economic circumstances later emerged as a "cultural ritual": "the ritual laments of the perestroika era informed and influenced these processes [of political, economic and legal change], challenging them in subtle and often not so subtle ways. The discourses of the intelligentsia during the perestroika years had a significant cultural impact" (p. 18). "[S]uch narratives symbolically rehearsed an ideology about the natural or inescapable

dichotomies between high and low, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, Them and Us, elites and people ... [They] seemed to be the key to the maintenance of a symbolic hierarchy of value which was the inverse of the utilitarian value hierarchy promoted in Russian socialist (and, increasingly, Russian capitalist) discourses" (p. 19). Her well-educated subjects identified themselves with "the people" (*narod*) in opposition to the state or other manifestations of power. These "strategies allow people to defend, justify, and extol the value of their own identities and their lower socio-economic status in the face of the self-valorizing stories of the Moscow *nouveau riches*" (p. 27, emphasis hers).

Ries identifies a variety of genres for the conversations. She classifies the most important of them under the rubric of "the Russia tale" (p. 50), an apt term for the folkloric qualities of stories told about life in "anti-Disneyland," as one interviewee characterized Russian society (p. 42). These stories often essentialized what is Russian, what is female, and what is male. For men, mischief tales and other genres that tend toward humor, irony, and exhibitionism predominated. For women, heroic shopping tales and husband tales emphasized moralism and suffering. In particular, suffering provided a means to create community and belonging among participants, both male and female, of a conversation; the ability to persevere through hardship and suffering was regarded as a sign of moral superiority and status. With respect to authority, female genres inverted existing hierarchies of value, while male genres usually subverted or mocked them (p. 40). Paradoxically, "narratives stressed the connection of women with the values of order, endurance, generosity, and heroism, and thus reinforced an association of female values and official values" (p. 81), even though female litany "may have helped to sustain relative powerlessness and alienation from the political process at the same time as it lamented them" (p. 83). While litanies posited blame, they did not seek solu-

tions and perpetuate the status quo because the suffering itself had value. "To put it bluntly," Ries concludes, "this national story of victims, villains, and saviors, performed through litanies, has been a discursive mechanism that facilitated authoritarian social relations" (p. 120).

Her conclusion regarding the relationship between perestroika and these modes of conversation suggests the strength of the value of suffering and the enormous obstacles to change. She persuasively argues that glasnost transferred litanies from the private to the public sphere, but the resulting "orgy" of grievances reinforced a sense of the futility of political action; the wail of laments drowned out discussions of rational measures to address needed changes (p. 167). Her expression of disappointment that subjects did not understand democracy as a task requiring ongoing effort and organization after the attempted coup in 1991 suggests that to some extent she shares with them a desire for a magical solution to transform Russian society into a strong democracy (p. 188).

Ries successfully places her models for conversation in historical and anthropological frameworks. Although she obviously cannot find evidence for actual conversations in the past, she notes that similar laments, litanies, and a propensity to blame rather than to solve occurred throughout Russian culture from folktales to Chekhov, Bulgakov, and Akhmatova. The work also contains cross-cultural comparisons and a solid grounding in the anthropological scholarship with an emphasis on the works

of Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu, and Victor Turner. In these cases, the prose never degenerates into obfuscating jargon and should be easily comprehensible to individuals without a strong background in that field. Ries is on less solid ground when she tries to link her conversational models to other present-day activities, such as her connection between male mischief tales and the mafia, but such moments are few and do not detract from the overall soundness of the work. More fruitful might have been a consideration of the tendency to create conspiracy theories in Russian conversation. In spite of its compact size, *Russian Talk* is also somewhat repetitive.

In addition to the thought-provoking scholarship, Ries's discussion of conversation sheds light on the frustration that Americans encounter when their proposed solutions to problems raised in the litanies are "met with silence" (p. 46). As someone who lived in Moscow in 1990-1991, I was delighted to read this logical, if very American, explanation for my friends' and colleagues' responses to "complete disintegration" (*pol'naia razrukha*). My own experiences mirrored those of Ries. Although litanies have receded back to the private sphere since then, their persistence in Russian culture reinforces the importance of Ries's scholarship.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Susan Costanzo. Review of Ries, Nancy, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2305>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.