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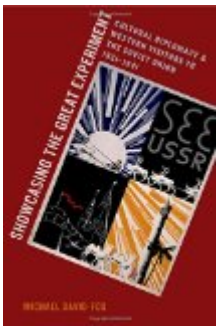

Michael David-Fox. *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 396 S. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-979457-7.

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Published on H-Diplo (May, 2012)

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Joseph Stalin's USSR wasn't the only dictatorial state to attract, fascinate, entertain, and occasionally manipulate Western intellectuals seeking ad hoc political alliances, experimental social treatments, cultural exoticism, and not infrequently, adventure and personal gain. At different times, a similar breed of fellow travelers committed to Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Mao Zedong's China, and Fidel Castro's Cuba. Yet Sovietophilia was more intense than any other intercultural political romance. The fledging regime spoke the language of European critical thought and thus was easy to relate to. Cooperation with and cooptation of Western intelligentsia had been among the Kremlin's top priorities from the start, a foreign policy in its own right, its stratagems parallel to, yet different from, those pursued by the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the Comintern.

Michael David-Fox calls his fine book a "new account of one of the most consequential encounters of the twentieth century," and this description stands (p. 1). The pilgrimage of approximately 100,000 foreign intellectuals and professionals to the Soviet Union in order to assess and report the progression of the Soviet experiment was likely the biggest interaction between East and West in modern history, and just as the author says, until recently that political romance remained "almost completely unexplored" (p. 1). Not that the pilgrimage was forgotten; to the contrary, it frequently comes up in the historiography--but usually as an epitome of Western intellectuals' naiveté. That kind of interpretation leaves readers wondering, why bother to learn more about Sovietophilia if it was nothing more than a partnership between the gullible and the manipulative? As David-Fox suggests, we "can gain much by shifting focus," looking at Sovietophilia as a "mutual interaction between Western observers and travelers with their Soviet hosts and the Soviet system" (p. 2).

There is hardly any other book providing such a complete portrait of Soviet cultural diplomacy. *Showcasing the Great Experiment* introduces every Soviet institution involved in cultural

"operations" domestically and abroad (the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad, a.k.a. VOKS, the Trade Unions' Commission on External Relations, the Agitprop Department of the Comintern, the Intourist, and the Foreign Commission of the Union of Writers). The book is based on new materials coming from Russian archives. Vividly and evocatively, David-Fox describes the paragons of the endeavor: Ol'ga Kameneva (Lev Kamenev's wife and Lev Trotsky's sister), Maxim Gorky, Ilya Ehrenburg, Mikhail Kol'tsov, and Ivan Maiskii, among others. Their Western counterparts featured in the book include Theodore Dreiser, Romain Rolland, Bernard Shaw, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, André Gide, and Lion Feuchtwanger, but as the author remarks, the full "list of visitors to the Soviet experiment is a virtual 'who's who' of the international Left and intellectuals of the interwar era" (p. 5).

Part of the reason ***Showcasing the Great Experiment*** is such a fine book is the way David-Fox interprets the 1920s-30s pilgrimage to the Soviet Union. The motives of Westerners interested in or committed to the Soviet cause have been explored before, and David-Fox's contribution is about the Soviet part of the equation. He argues that the reaction of Westerners to what they saw in the USSR was important to the Soviets not only because that was good public relations (and of course Stalin's apparatus was rather good in publicity), but also because the first generation of Soviet revolutionaries needed Western eyes and commentary to be able to redefine the Soviet system for the system's sake. David-Fox writes about the "Occident inside the USSR: that is, how the importance of convincing outsiders and the centrality of Western eyes toward self-understandings affected the direction and shape of the Soviet experiment" (p. 314). Soviet Marxism was steeped in the Western intellectual tradition, yet born on the periphery of Europe, and it sought the opinion of a cohort that was closer to the origins of critical thinking, coming from a culture intrinsically informed by Hegel, Hobbes, and Adam Smith. If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

David-Fox suggests that the "internal-external nexus" (p. 316) of Soviet cultural diplomacy can be interpreted as a "superiority-inferiority complex, constructed by Soviet hosts looking West and Western visitors to the East" (p. 27). Of course, the nexus lasted for just about fifteen years: Lenin's initial dictum that Bolshevism had much to learn from the West was succeeded by Stalin's declaration of "across-the-board Soviet superiority" (p. 26), and that killed the dialogue. By the end of 1930s, cultural diplomacy came to an end and what followed was the "systemic clash of the Cultural Cold War" (p. 313).

Stalin's declaration of Soviet superiority finished the East-West debate in the Soviet party and the Soviet ***salon***; those paragons of cultural diplomacy who survived the purges, such as Ivan Maiskii (Ol'ga Kameneva and Mikhail Kol'tsov didn't), quietly bowed out. The succeeding generations were disconnected from the Occident, as intellectually it didn't mean anything to the ideologue of the 1950s or 1970s, who now interpreted the Soviet experiment as completely homegrown.

We must thank David-Fox for introducing theory to the analysis of Soviet cultural diplomacy. Apart from making its history clearer, the "superiority-inferiority" model he applies to the study of Russian interactions with the West seems a useful tool for analyzing international exchanges in the days of the USSR's demise and in the aftermath of its collapse. It was the feeling of inferiority that made Russians and other Soviets welcome and embrace Westerners again in the 1980s and (as soon as it became politically and economically feasible) start visiting the West to explore, admire, and study a superior civilization. Then, as in the 1930s, abruptly around the year 2000 the attitudes changed back to the pronouncement of Russia's across-the-board superiority over the West and any other civilization. The existential zig-zag is an intriguing case which asks for interpretation.

Vladimir Putin's soft authoritarianism doesn't have the means of persuasion (or, for that matter, persecution) that Joseph Stalin's totalitarianism possessed, and post-communist Russia's Main Street has to be credited with the new Russo-centric worldview at least as much as the Kremlin. Perhaps we could persuade Michael David-Fox to continue with the topic and write another book.

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Citation: Constantine Pleshakov. Review of David-Fox, Michael. *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.

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