

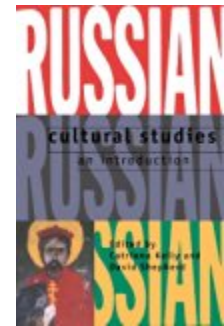
# H-Net Reviews

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Catriona Kelly, David Shepherd, eds. *Russian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. xiv + 428 pp. \$70.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-871511-5; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-871510-8.

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## The Polyphony of Twentieth-Century Russian Culture

Numerous studies of Soviet Russian culture have, over the past decade, sought to redefine and diminish the role of the state in the formation of Russian cultural identities.[1] Instead of presenting a cultural scene polarized between official socialist realism and dissident movements, recent scholarship has helped to illuminate the ambiguities and polyphonic voices within traditional cultural spheres, and to expand our understanding of culture to include the routine activities that often escape scholarly attention. *Russian Cultural Studies*, edited by Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, presents eighteen essays that faithfully represent the current state of Russian cultural studies. The work is divided into five sections: “The Politics of Literature,” “Theatre, Music, Visual Arts,” “Cinema, Media, the Russian Consumer,” “Identities: Populism, Religion, Emigration,” and “Sexuality, Gender, Youth Culture.”

Overall the volume attempts to eschew “the notion of Russia as torn between warring poles” (p. 2). Yet a perpetual vacillation between periods of relative laxity and reactionary militancy informs many of the papers. Whether we are dealing with theater, music, literature, or visual arts, the general outline remains the same, leading to some repetitiveness within the essays. During the Civil War, pre-revolutionary avant-garde experimentation is suppressed as the Bolshevik leadership seeks to turn cultural produce into a “medium of social critique” (p. 25). The end of the Civil War and the inauguration of the New Economic Policy allows for a respite from militant cultural policies, a reemergence of eclec-

ticism, and a reacquaintance with western culture. The cultural revolution of 1928, though, leads to a new homogenization of culture—usually preceded by the convocation of an “All-Union Party Congress.” By the mid-1930s socialist realism is firmly entrenched within each artistic sphere, and it remains the sole acceptable form of aesthetics until the Second World War. The war years are characterized by a “relaxation of constraints on expression” (p. 49) and a relapse into traditional modes of cultural expression. In 1946, Zhdanov initiates a series of condemnations on individual intellectuals that serves to “narrow further than ever the sphere of the permissible in intellectual life” (p. 50).

The death of Stalin in 1953 and Khrushchev’s 1956 Secret Speech invites another spate of polyphony, characterized by the emergence of a dissident movement, “existing in a state of critical opposition to the tedious and academic orthodoxies which continued to be propagated by the Union right up until after the Gorbachev period” (p. 124). During the Brezhnev era, the government strikes back at dissident artists through banning, jamming, and exiling. Gorbachev’s reforms “gave intellectuals hopes that they could not only act as the passive, if respected, transmitters of cultural values, but actually enter the political arena as the Party’s equal partners in reform” (p. 71). But “the fatal weakening of the Soviet system had unpleasant side effects. The intelligentsia suffered considerable material hardship and loss of social prestige” (p. 72). Rather than becoming mentors, guiding and educating the masses, the intelligentsia have in many ways

become the handmaidens of the masses as “the spectator of the 1990s is more and more overtly pushed into the role of a consumer” (pp. 97-98).

The authors intelligently appreciate and incorporate much of the recent scholarship that has helped to highlight some of the ambiguities within the paradigm. For instance, recounting arguments that have been made by Regine Robin, Boris Groys, Katerina Clark and others [2], Peter Kenz and David Shepherd, in their article on high literature, note that “cultural revolution did not entirely lose its Leninist connotations of disseminating rather than curtailing tradition” (p. 43). Similarly, Stephen Lovell and Rosalind Marsh, in their article on the intelligentsia and literature, note the importance of the guitar-poetry and youth culture that flourished during the era of stagnation, as well as the role of literary criticism in offering “exciting new ways of locating and characterizing oppositional, even utopian-revolutionary, subtexts in a variety of cultural products” (p. 64).

In his article on the legacy of Shostakovich, Gerard McBurney challenges our impressions of a monolithic music union by pointing out that there were “a number of composers who attempted a political game enabling them to hold high office in the Union and still write a kind of music that would be deemed avant-garde” (p. 125). Similarly, Catriona Kelly and Robin Milner-Gulland, in their article on the visual arts, incorporate M. C. Bown’s recent theory on the presence of surreptitious subtexts within the classic socialist realist paintings of Gerasimov [3], and Julian Graffy, in her article on cinema, draws on the work of Ian Christie [4] to show how some films of the NEP period, such as *Aelita*, provide a “remarkably blunt exposure of the vacuousness of utopian visions” (p. 42). In short, despite a bias towards high culture, particularly in the articles on literature and music, the first two sections provide a well-balanced review of the relevant secondary literature on the much-studied topics of literature, theatre, music, and visual arts.

The following sections provide somewhat more original approaches to non-traditional forms of cultural expression. In one of the most innovative articles in the volume, Frank Ellis looks at the role of “The Media as Social Engineer.” He shows how Soviet propaganda and agitation (which began to merge at an early stage) were “subject to a law of diminishing return” as “the regime, forced to depart ever further from the shores of probability, will lose control of its propaganda machine, exposing its mechanisms of control to scorn and ridicule” (p. 204). Despite a pervasive system of propaganda, Ellis argues

that the masses’ preference for foreign radio and television, particularly their addiction to American and Mexican soap operas of the 1970s, “underlines the total failure of some seventy years of Marxist-Leninist indoctrination. It marks an affirmation of shared humanity with all its absurdities, contradictions, strengths, and weaknesses over the dehumanizing effects of Soviet ideology” (p. 220).

Catriona Kelly, in her article on commercialization, tries to make a similar point, but the article is somewhat confusing as it jumps from 1990s consumer advertising to emigre art and literature of the 1970s and 1980s. A similar problem confronts her article on populism under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. The article begins with an interesting segment on the monuments and unofficial economy of the 1960s and 1970s, but ends with an analysis of Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign that seems out of place both chronologically and thematically. The reader is also left wondering how she defines populism. Continuing on the theme of identity, Jane Ellis provides a solid account of the history of religion and orthodoxy in the Soviet Union, showing how Christian themes reemerged in art and poetry in the 1970s and highlighting the role of Orthodox priests in the human rights movement.

The final section on sexuality, gender and youth culture, further expands our conceptions of Soviet culture. The longest article in the collection is the work on sexuality by Mark Banting, Catriona Kelly, and James Riordan, which deals primarily with homosexuality. Paralleling developments in other cultural spheres, the revolutionary and NEP years saw a flourishing of utopian attitudes toward sexuality, which were stifled between 1928 and 1936. When economics demanded population growth, particularly after the human losses of the Second World War, the state adopted “pro-natalist” policies, and began to temper its puritanism. The volume concludes with Lynne Attwood’s fascinating analysis of changing attitudes toward women as reflected in Soviet film, and Hilary Pilkington’s examination of modern Soviet youth culture.

Overall the volume provides a useful summary of recent research on Soviet culture, and in several cases substantially improves our understanding of the topic. Although the book is intended as an introduction to Russian culture, presumably for use in undergraduate courses, I believe that many undergraduates would find the language and interpretation to be somewhat difficult. For more advanced scholars, though, the work presents some novel approaches and stands as a testament to the recent

advances made in the field of Soviet cultural studies.

#### NOTES

[1]. See, for example, Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass, 1995); Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton, 1992); Regine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, 1992); Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge, 1992).

[2]. Robin, *Socialist Realism*; Groys, *Total Art*; Clark, *Petersburg*.

[3]. M. C. Bown, "Aleksandr Gerasimov," in M. C. Bown and B. Taylor (eds.) *Art of the Soviets: Publishing, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992* (Manchester, 1993), 127-139.

[4]. Ian Christie, "Down to Earth: Aelita Relocated" in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds.), *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema* (London, 1991), 80-102.

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