

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Catriona Kelly, David Shepherd, eds. *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. xii + 358 pp. \$79.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-874235-7; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-874236-4.

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Was the Soviet Union More Russian than Russia?

When one asks a student or non-specialist what happened during the Russian Revolution, most responses consist of vague notions of a man with a goatee and a lot of red banners overthrowing a “king” and creating a totalitarian regime. Even historians who specialize in modern Russia often myopically focus on the “workers” and their consciousness, the growth of the socialist movement, autocratic failures, and the emergence (or absence) of a middle class. In a recent course on the Russian Revolution, several students expressed dismay that only one of fifteen weeks focused on 1917. After explaining that it is important to understand what leads to and derives from a particular historical event or moment, I attempted in an introductory lecture to explain that 1917 was simply part of a larger age of revolution. Now, rather than rely on a lecture, I can point to Kelly and Shepherd’s *Constructing Russian Culture*, which rightly looks across the “watershed” of 1917 for commonalities.

After meeting in London at a workshop on Russian cultural studies, the authors and editors of *Constructing Russian Culture*, set forth an ambitious agenda – to bring cultural theory and history closer together in order to create a better understanding of Russian culture. Quite rightly Kelly and Shepherd criticize historians (and name names as well) for using literary sources uncritically and not taking into account the linguistic structure of documents. In addition, they fault literary specialists for deep textual analysis with little or no reference to the historical circumstances at the time of publication. By bringing these two groups together, the editors argue, we will all

benefit.

In what can only be called an unorthodox but rewarding editorial process, the chapters presented in this volume are more a collective work than one of individual scholarship. Most of the chapters are co-authored with one or more other participants supplying “additional material.” We must commend the editors and especially the participants for undergoing an invasive editorial process for the sake of a more cohesive text. What we as readers have is a volume that spans the revolution, combines methodological approaches, and seeks a deeper understanding of turn-of-the-century Russia. In the attempt to create co-authored segments on various fields of cultural production, however, the editors sometimes have forced tight arguments into lengthier and less focused chapters.

The first section, “Prologue: Key Concepts Before 1881,” attempts to define the vocabulary necessary to understanding revolutionary culture. Chapters on the terms *lichnost’*, *obshchestvennost’* and *sobornost’*, *narodnost’*, and *literaturnost’* describe, sometimes in exhausting detail, the historical development of the terms and how they changed over time. There is no doubt that these five terms were centerpieces of cultural production in revolutionary Russia, a period during which concepts of individuality, society, unity, and nationality were all played out in literate and illiterate communities. The six chief authors of these chapters provide the reader with some true gems. Catriona Kelly and Vadim Volkov, for example, retell Khomiakov’s creation of the term

“sobornost’” from his translation of “catholic” unity in multiplicity, and Derek Offord posits a division of “lichnost” into universalist (Westernizer) conceptions of individual personality and particularist (nationalist) collective personality. Forty pages later, the reader finally gets to the body of this magnificent book, but much of the reason for including the introductory chapters has been lost in the detail.

Kelly and Shepherd promise in the introduction that the book will explore three themes: commercial culture (the nexus of culture and the market), questions of objectivity (imagined communality and its representation in literary realism), and issues of identity (the combination of one’s national affiliation and individuality). Part II of the book focuses on these themes in late Imperial Russia, and Part III (deceptively entitled “Epilogue”) traces their further development after 1917. Herein lies one of the chief critiques of this reviewer. If the text focuses on three themes across the revolution, it seems that the argument would be made better with a thematic rather than chronological presentation. For example, why are the themes presented in the chapters of Part II as objectivity, commercial culture, and identity while in Part III commercial culture follows identity? The transitions and links between the three themes are not always clear and convincing despite the internal coherence of each chapter and the relationship between similar chapters in the second and third parts. This review will treat the material thematically rather than chronologically.

In “The Objective Eye and the Common Good,” Louise McReynolds and Cathy Popkin examine the growing civil society’s attempt to understand and aid the segments of the general public most challenged by the rapidly changing conditions in *fin de siecle* Russia. After a thorough and creative synthesis of the literature on urbanization, social welfare, philanthropy, and the growth of the socialist movement, the authors turn to a search for the “common good” in education. Most elements in society saw the benefits of education either for industrialization, social betterment, increased receptivity for socialism, or personal economic advantage. Among the intellectuals, scientific education often led to a search for objective truth whether in art and literature or an understanding of historical development. This assumption has often been used to explain why Marxism and its Russian “deviations” gained prominence among intellectuals so quickly; the search for objective and absolute truth (also clearly influenced by Orthodoxy) and “scientific socialism” converged.

McReynolds and Popkin go much further to show how the “cult of objectivity” (p. 88) manifested itself in ethnography, physiognomies, photography, and more. With a common tool used throughout the essays in this volume, the authors then turn to the world of literature. Physician and writer Anton Chekhov serves as a case study. Chekhov’s medical and scientific training led him to a positivist faith in evidence, yet his artistic mentality showed him that there were multiple ways of knowing. Thus, much of Chekhov’s work shows that despite a desire for detached objectivity, there is always subjective feeling or emotion involved. He understood, and showed through his stories, the limits of objectivity even while the same objectivity was sought and repeated as a mantra.

Catriona Kelly then traces how the intellectual community’s search for objectivity and the common good was transformed after the October Revolution. Despite the fact that most Old Bolsheviks were themselves intellectuals, the revolution eventually brought with it an anti-intellectual bias. For physicians, engineers, professors, and other professionals this atmosphere threatened what they saw as their civilizing mission. As the “bourgeois specialists” faced persecution, Kelly argues, their sense of objectivity and the common good was slowly co-opted. She further posits that the intellectual community, rather than speaking out as opponents as before the revolution, fell into careerism and self-interest based on the new conditions of a top-down administration. While there is no doubt that scientists and artists were less able to speak out against declining social conditions in the repressive and centralized Soviet Union, Kelly suggests that the top-down administration led to “nepotism and other forms of patronage” within the intellectual communities (p. 240).

One must be careful not to extrapolate from this specific case to society as a whole. Tsarist administration was far from democratic or widely participatory, but even under the relative freedom before the revolution there was more than enough incompetence based on personal connections. Herein lies a problem of interpretation. Throughout the volume, authors use “intellectuals” and “*intelligentsiia*” as synonyms. Simply because someone has an education or works in a profession does not make him or her an *intelligent*; one must have a “social consciousness.” When “intellectuals,” for example biologist Trofim Lysenko and architect Karo Alabian, became hatchet men for centralized knowledge and uniformity in the Soviet Union, should we still consider them *intelligent*? Here is where Kelly’s argument prevails.

Once knowledge became centralized or “official,” objectivity again became the norm and anti-intellectualism was weakened. Red specialists and party spokesmen became creators of objective knowledge, whether accurate or not. The common good became preservation of the regime.

With our fixation on the growth of worker radicalism and the socialist movement, historians rarely look into the lives of the participants. The second theme of this collection provides a much needed, although not entirely unique, corrective by focusing on commercial consumption and the creation of culture. Steve Smith and Catriona Kelly (with Louise McReynolds), in “Commercial Culture and Consumerism,” discuss the development of a culture market and how ideas of “culture” changed before 1917. Kelly and Vadim Volkov in “Directed Desires: *Kul'turnost'* and Consumption” define Soviet “culturedness” and how its meaning changed with the shifting winds of official policy in the 1930s.

Together, these two essays provide the most interesting and thought-provoking material in this collection. Both chapters first discuss the creation of consumption, but then they analyze the social function and symbolic meaning of the goods purchased. Just as clothing was a badge of social identity and hierarchy in tsarist Russia, Kelly and Volkov alert the reader to the importance of underwear, white tablecloths, bed linens, curtains, and lampshades in Stalin's Russia. The key is that, despite prevailing politics, there was a consumer (a market) and the objects of consumption helped to define the individual purchaser. While the store (*magazin*) and the etiquette manuals instructed viewers on good taste before the revolution, Soviet consumers relied on, for example, articles in the journal *Obshchestvennitsa* or quizzes in *Ogonek* to help define “culturedness” (*kul'turnost'*).

While advertisements promised a land of plenty, the material conditions necessary to be “cultured” eventually gave way to becoming cultured. The weekly quizzes in *Ogonek* would, for example, ask the reader to name two poems by Heine and two Soviet icebreakers. “Culturedness” gave way to “educatedness” (*obrazovannost'*) as the definition of “right living” became internalized in shared cultural knowledge rather than the chic clothes and appearance of the jazz set (*stiliagi*), the new enemies. Both chapters are punctuated by numerous examples from popular stories and commercial culture; McReynold's surely supplied much of the “additional material” from her recent co-edited collection *Entertaining Tsarist Russia*.^[1]

Questions of identity complete the trinity of themes. In “Collapse and Creation: Issues of Identity and the Russian *Fin de Siecle*,” Rosamund Bartlett and Linda Edmondson (with Catriona Kelly and Steve Smith) show how multiple identities began to challenge Romanov “Official Nationality.” Lynne Attwood and Catriona Kelly explored the creation of the new Soviet person in “Programmes for Identity: The 'New Man' and the 'New Woman'”. Orthodoxy and autocracy yielded after the revolution to party-mindedness and ideological correctness in combination with *narodnost'* (nationality, nationalism, etc.) in forming the ruling troikas of the two regimes. Orthodox sects, Protestants, and scientific socialism challenged part of the tsarist troika, and autocracy, obviously, fell at the feet of the growing worker and socialist movements. But popular patriotism (xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-German sentiment), the “woman question,” and Jewish culture rebelled against Official Nationality, and from that chaos and disorder came a creative cultural outburst from Sergei Esenin, Anna Akhmatova, Isaak Babel', and many others.

The liberation of identities and collapse of Official Nationality preceding the revolution eventually gave way to what Attwood and Kelly call “programmes for identity,” or the creation of hegemony. In analyzing children's literature, school curriculum, the Pioneers and Komsomol, the physical culture campaign, parades, new urban leisure spaces (Red Square, Gorky Park, and VDNKh), cinema, literature, and more, the authors elaborate on the creation of moral education (*vospitanie*) and new official identities. The “new Soviet woman,” for instance, is depicted “an independent woman whose life is a combination of work and motherhood” (p. 278). Both work and family, therefore, become part of the new identity of a Soviet woman who has been liberated from the patriarchy of the old system.

This volume also helps to put “Russia” back into the Soviet Union. Rising consumerism under Stalin, the creation of the new Soviet man and woman, and the emphasis on “educatedness” led to the resurrection of the great Russian cultural icons of the past: Pushkin, Tolstoy, Glinka, and others. State control and commercial consumption helped to spread the program of identity. Although the “friendship of peoples” brought non-Russian folk culture to Soviet audiences, the central canon of culture was Russian. Thus, only with the breakdown of the Russian tsars' Official Nationality was a Georgian tyrant able to create a Russian, albeit socialist, culture.

Obviously there are limitations to such a synthetic

work as this, but *Constructing Russian Culture* provides an interesting and plausible framework by which to understand Russia in the age of revolution. Russia became the center of the world for Soviet citizens. Isolated from outside influences and continually told of all the achievements that Russians had made in science and art, Soviet citizens could more easily believe that the USSR was better than the barbaric, capitalist West portrayed in the media. Without a counterculture that was allowed to compete, the hegemony of a state-dictated official Russian culture dominated all other attempts at divergent expression. Were there alternate views? Of course there were, but how was one supposed to propagate them to a mass audience in Stalin's Russia when the mechanisms for consumption derived from the state?

Thanks to the participants of this conference volume, we have engaging thoughts supported by numerous ex-

amples from high and low culture. Although probably not accessible to the general undergraduate audience, this book would be ideal for graduate students. Specialists in history or literature will find many frustrations because of the multiple methodologies, but the benefits greatly outweigh the shortcomings.

Note

[1]. James von Geldern and Louise McReynolds, eds., *Entertaining Tsarist Russia: Tales, Songs, Plays, Movies, Jokes, Ads, and Images from Russian Urban Life, 1779-1917*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

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