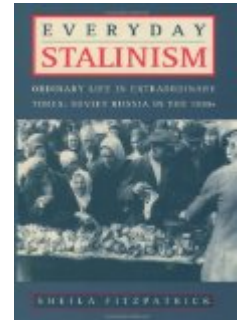


Sheila Fitzpatrick. *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. x + 227 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-505000-4.



Reviewed by Nellie H. Ohr

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This is one of several recent additions to Sheila Fitzpatrick's *oeuvre* on the social and cultural history of the Soviet Union in its dramatic early decades. A counterpart to Fitzpatrick's recent book on collectivized peasants, this work is devoted to urban residents in the Russian republic in the 1930s. Fitzpatrick finds it unnecessary to divide the group into subspecies along class lines because class definitions had become so distorted in the Stalinist lexicon, and the population so mobile, that "relations between classes were comparatively unimportant in Stalinist society. What mattered was the relationship to the state -- in particular, the state as an allocator of goods in an economy of chronic scarcity" (pp. 11-12). Focusing on a common urban experience, this book provides few scenes from the factory floor but many from the street, the food-store and the kitchen table.

Fitzpatrick seeks to prove a refreshingly simple assertion: that Soviet urban residents in the Stalinist 1930s sought to live "normal," ordinary lives in extraordinary times, amidst chronic shortages, social upheaval and political terror. Going further, she attempts to paint a portrait of the

emerging species *Homo sovieticus*. A major contribution of the book is to detail various strategies by which Soviet urbanites attempted to live "normal lives." This included strategies not only for physical survival but also for emotional and psychological survival. Fitzpatrick attempts to get inside people's heads and to understand how they perceived and made sense of what was happening.

An introductory chapter elaborates on major characteristics of Stalinism, which Fitzpatrick summarized earlier as "Communist Party rule, Marxist-Leninist ideology, rampant bureaucracy, leader cults, state control over production and distribution, social engineering, affirmative action on behalf of workers, stigmatization of 'class enemies', police surveillance, terror, and the various informal, personalistic arrangements whereby people at every level sought to protect themselves and obtain scarce goods. . . ." Stalinism was "a maximalist version of [the Soviet experience] and its defining moment" (pp. 3-4).

Her method is anecdotal, providing a sort of taxonomy of state policies and popular responses,

illustrated by examples taken from primary sources such as memoirs, Communist Party instructions and reports, secret police reports on public opinion, newspaper articles and advertisements, and the post-WWII interviews of former Soviet citizens known as the Harvard Project. The sections of the book alternate between cultural and social history perspectives, chronicling government policies and other external events, giving examples of actions taken by the population in response, and attempting to describe popular perceptions of what was happening.

In Chapter Two, for example, she describes food shortages and other miseries of urban living and the subterfuges, personal connections and other skills necessary for "hunting and gathering" food and other necessities. The following two chapters, "Palaces on Monday" and "The Magic Tablecloth" contrast this with a more positive social phenomenon, the unprecedented upward mobility of the era, and with the bracing cultural images of a brave new world under construction. In a similar alternation of social and political with cultural issues, Chapter Six details family problems such as absconding husbands and political measures such as the 1936 law restricting abortions, then retells her previously published research on the cultural pretensions of managers' wives.

In the early chapters, after juxtaposing official propaganda of abundance and equality with sordid realities of poverty and hierarchy, Fitzpatrick considers how people might have harmonized the two in their minds and avoided the pain of what sovietologists used to call "cognitive dissonance." How did Soviet citizens reconcile their current material hardships, for example, with what they read in the newspapers? Did they accept official declarations that current privations were mere hiccups on the road to abundance? Fitzpatrick argues that whether they believed is less important than the fact that utopian promises were part of the population's experience; "a Soviet

citizen might believe or disbelieve in a radiant future, but could not be ignorant that one was promised" (p. 67).

Similarly, how did they reconcile an egalitarian ideology with the existence of privileged elites such as prize-winning workers, Writers' Union members and Communists? One strategy for psychological survival in the face of this contradiction was "misrecognition," by which elites found mental frameworks to rationalize their own privileged position (p. 104). Stalin himself used "misrecognition" by "appropriating the term 'intelligentsia' to describe Soviet elites as a whole," justifying this elite's privilege because it was supposedly "the most cultured, advanced group in a backward society"(p. 105).

Even the much-rewarded rural labor heroine Pasha Angelina may have succumbed to misrecognition when she declared that she had not risen above the people; "I rose together with the people" (p. 88). Fitzpatrick reminds us that, though this mentality seems unrealistic in hindsight, it was part of the experience of Soviet urbanites in the 1930s. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that Pasha Angelina was not merely "speaking Bolshevik" in an official setting. Fitzpatrick quotes many memoirs in which the authors recall sincerely believing in elements of the official worldview. Indeed, the term "misrecognition" implies that the rationalizations become an integral part of a person's mentality. After "speaking Bolshevik" for long enough, one may begin to "think Bolshevik." Fitzpatrick is arguing that people really were being remade, even if the emergent *Homo sovieticus* did not quite resemble the ideal held up by Stalin's propagandists.

One example of how Fitzpatrick integrates propaganda images, social realities and strategies for physical and emotional survival is in her discussion of "former people," people such as former nobles and priests, dekulakized people, and some intellectuals and technical specialists who were considered socially alien. Although the press pub-

lished many "conversion stories" in which criminals were remade into good Soviet citizens, usually through the wholesome physical labor of the *gulag* (pp. 75-79), this option was not available to "former people" (or to political oppositionists, for that matter). Ironically, "to be eligible for reforging, you had to have committed real crimes" (p. 79).

Chapter Five, "The Insulted and Injured," details the persecution of "former people" and their strategies for avoiding it. One tactic was to portray oneself in ways acceptable to the regime, that is, to put on a mask. The mask image has been engagingly explored by some of Fitzpatrick's former students, such as Golfo Alexopoulos and James Harris (see e.g. p. 33) and in Jochen Hellbeck's translation and analysis of the recently discovered diary of a man whose father had been dekulakized (see e.g. p. 138). This image was a part of the Stalinist leaders' worldview as well; the regime was preoccupied with "unmasking" hidden enemies. This was one purpose of the impressive apparatus of surveillance that Fitzpatrick details in Chapter 7, "Conversations and Listeners." (That chapter is also about "avenues of communication" between the regime and the citizens, such as complaint letters and surveys of popular opinion). This surveillance found its culmination in the progressive "unmasking" of more and more enemies during the Great Terror of 1937-1938.

Fitzpatrick devotes her final chapter to urban Russians' experience of and strategies for physical and emotional survival during the Great Terror. Her story of the "rituals" or arrest and imprisonment --the midnight knock, the hasty packing, the search of prisons by wives and loved ones, the attempts to bring parcels-- will sound familiar to readers of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Robert Conquest and others, though Fitzpatrick also incorporates many new memoirs penned in the Perestroika era. She recounts how the "plague" --the taint of being identified as an "enemy of the people"-- spread, whether through plague-bearers or

through denunciation by neighbors and co-workers intent on settling personal scores or saving their own skins (pp. 205-208).

People whose lives were shattered by the Terror also resorted to various strategies for physical and psychological survival. The less educated majority of citizens, Fitzpatrick asserts without proof, did not try to reason out who was guilty or innocent, honest or lying, but treated the Terror as a misfortune, like war, famine, flood and pestilence (p. 192). Among the more articulate few who left diaries and memoirs, many remained convinced that they or their loved ones were innocent and had been arrested by mistake, but some experienced self-doubt. As Fitzpatrick sums up the feelings of Hellbeck's diarist, "It was possible, evidently, to be a wrecker without meaning to be one or even knowing it. It was possible to wear a mask that deceived even oneself" (p. 194).

Similarly, Fitzpatrick addresses the psychological survival strategies of those whose consciences were burdened with complicity, those who had denounced or failed to defend innocent people or "in a host of ways found themselves becoming participants in the process of terror" (p. 191). One tactic was to adopt a "them" and "us" categorization in which "we" (the population) are totally passive vis-a-vis "them" (the state) (p. 191). True, the image was illusory, as Fitzpatrick points out, citing Sarah Davies: the boundary line between the state and the population was unclear, as thousands of ordinary people were being promoted into official positions. However, the mental construct helped people deny that they had played a part in the Great Terror. Fitzpatrick asserts, "One of the most useful functions of the 'them' and 'us' framework for Soviet citizens --and a major reason why historians should approach it warily-- was that it obscured this unbearable fact [of complicity]" (p. 191). This assertion is, as far as I know, one of the main innovations of this book and deserves more space.

Her conclusion sums up the survival strategies detailed above, as well as their psychological effects, and attempts a description of the newly evolving *Homo sovieticus*. Fatalistic and passive, citizens still had strategies of self-protection. Indeed, to assure authority figures that they were powerless was in itself a tactic for gaining indulgence. (As Fitzpatrick astutely points out, even the subjects of the Harvard Project interviews used this strategy toward the well-intentioned American interviewers, who themselves were authority figures). These supposedly powerless Soviet citizens were also risk-takers, trying to strike it lucky. Many played the potentially dangerous game of denouncing their bosses, for example. Managers too had to take risks all the time simply in order to carry out their jobs. As Fitzpatrick points out, this gambling mentality was the antithesis of the official mentality stressing rational planning. Outwardly obedient, *Homo sovieticus* retained a degree of skepticism. "*Homo sovieticus* was a string-puller, an operator, a time-server, a freeloader, a mouther of slogans, and much more. But above all, he was a survivor" (p. 227).

The relationship between this species and the regime thus ranged between passive acceptance and cautious hostility. Some, such as young people, supported the regime actively. Workers probably felt a "residual feeling of connection with the Soviet cause" and thus gave passive support to the regime. Trying to explain this grudging acceptance, Fitzpatrick points out that Stalin's regime had positioned itself as the only alternative associated with national sentiment and patriotism, with progress, and with a paternalistic welfare state.

Casting about for a metaphor to describe this relationship, Fitzpatrick considers and finds inadequate the images of a prison, a conscript army or a closed institution such as a strict boarding school. The final image on which she settles is original and thought-provoking. The Stalin regime was like a soup kitchen or welfare agency. Citi-

zens expected it to provide for them and placated it with a "range of supplicatory and dependent behaviors" (p. 227). To extend the metaphor, one might say that it was like the stereotype of the Salvation Army. One had to sing a hymn to Stalin or give a testimonial about one's conversion before receiving one's dinner.

The book has flaws. She relegates the issue of joining the Communist Party to a brief example in the section "Mastering Culture" (p. 82). Further, she devotes disproportionate attention to people who were involved in high culture, such as artists and writers. Her discussion of how the Great Terror was experienced, for example, relies heavily on the memoirs of well-known writers and artists (arguably necessary because theirs are the most abundant in-depth sources available); and the section entitled "Patrons and Clients" pays almost no attention to political patronage and focuses almost entirely on patronage of the arts. In many places the book seems like a mere catalog of examples, lacking transitions and summaries to round out sections (e.g. on p. 175). Fitzpatrick expounds in detail on a few uncharacteristic examples (e.g. p. 129, p. 135) without giving statistics (admittedly, statistics are unreliable) to give any perspective on what was average. The chapter on surveillance lacks an introduction or conclusion. It could easily have been tied in more explicitly with the concept of masks.

Then too, there is the question of how one can probe the minds of ordinary people. What can public images and pronouncements really tell us? Fitzpatrick's analysis of the "virtual pornography" of advertisements (p. 90), for example, points out that the ads partly had the didactic function of teaching the population to use new products. Especially in a state-dominated press, advertisements express not what the population wants, but what producers and propagandists think it should want. Admittedly, Fitzpatrick is not asserting that the ads necessarily reflect input from the population; rather, she explains, they were part of the

experience of ordinary people as consumers of these ads. Equally problematic are the reports on public opinion compiled by the secret police and newspapers, subject to distortions at every level of information-gathering and compilation.

This is not a groundbreaking work in terms of startlingly new research or new analytical concepts. Readers wanting a deeper knowledge of citizens' struggle for food, for example, might consult the work of Elena Osokina; for more on popular complicity in the Great Terror, Robert Thurston's controversial *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia* would serve; for an in-depth case study of citizens living in a Soviet city, one might read Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain*. For an analysis of Soviet jargon or consumerism in a broader time-span, one could turn to Jeffrey Brooks' *Thank You, Comrade Stalin* or to parts of Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd's collection *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution*. However, what makes *Everyday Stalinism* unique is a distinctly Fitzpatrickian analysis, both social and cultural, incorporating themes she has highlighted in the past, such as upward mobility and "culturedness."

I would not necessarily recommend this as the one book on Stalinism for undergraduates. A few primary sources, whose context and biases can be brought out in class, would probably give a more integral picture of the times than do the anecdotes here, especially if the instructor can fill in examples and perspectives from the present book. Rather, *Everyday Stalinism* would be more valuable for graduate students: it provides vivid stories; it draws on important historiographical debates, though it does not set out the debates explicitly enough (this one does not have the kind of helpful bibliographical essay that *Stalin's Peasants* [1994] had); and it has enough controversial assertions to spark discussion. To specialists on the Stalin era, its main contributions are the colorful anecdotes, the interesting concept of masks, and a refreshingly simple and important main

point about the attempt to live ordinary lives in extraordinary times.

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