

Claire L. Shaw. *Deaf in the USSR: Marginality, Community, and Soviet Identity, 1917-1991.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. 310 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-1366-8.

Reviewed by José Alaniz (University of Washington)

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Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

In Mikhail Bogin's remarkable 1965 short film *The Couple (Dvoe)*, the star-crossed lovers Sergei, a hearing music student, and Natasha, a deaf acrobat, start cementing their bond—appropriately enough—during a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. This production differed from most others at the time in that it was put on by Moscow's Theater of Sign Language and Gesture (TMZh), founded in 1957. It featured deaf actors signing the parts while lip-synching the dialogue, which was read over a loudspeaker for the benefit of the nondeaf.

Clair Shaw's book *Deaf in the USSR: Marginality, Community, and Soviet Identity, 1917-1991*, opens with a brief discussion of *The Couple* as a testament to the contradictions of deaf identity and belonging in the Thaw-era Soviet Union. For one thing, Natasha presents as an exemplary Soviet citizen: independent, hard-working, cultured, reliable. This means nothing, though, to the men who reject her and her deaf woman friends for their "defect." Even Sergei is horrified initially. Moreover, Natasha was played not by a deaf actress, but by the hearing Viktoria Fyodorova. Finally, as shown in the film, the TMZh's performances presumed and privileged a hearing audience; the deaf bore the onus of "proving" themselves useful and assimilable to mainstream society. Not that many of them questioned that stance. As Shaw persuasively shows, "Soviet ideology emerges as a driving

force in the development of Soviet deaf identity: Soviet values such as collectivism, initiative, consciousness, and labor were key categories used by deaf individuals to conceptualize their own identity" (p. 11).

Deaf in Russia, winner of the 2018 British Association for Slavonic & East European Studies (BASEES) Women's Forum Book Prize, joins a growing list of Deaf and disability histories/cultural studies focused on Russia and Eastern Europe by Anastasia Kayiatos, Irina Sandomirskaya, Pavel Romanov, Michael Russell, Sarah Phillips, Irina Iarskaya-Smirnova, V. Z. Bazoev, V. A. Palenniy, Susan Burch, Kateřina Kolářová, Frances Bernstein, Anna Klepikova, Tomas Matza, Katarzyna Orjzyńska, and Cassandra Hartblay. Like these scholars, Shaw—now at the University of Warwick's Department of History—displays a facility with Western disability studies and Deaf studies while emphasizing what makes the Soviet Deaf community unique. For one thing, she chooses not to capitalize the word "deaf" in reference to that community, as has become standard in discussions of Western Deaf culture.

Building on the work of US Deaf studies scholar Karen Nakamura, Shaw argues that Soviet deaf culture developed via a hybrid, intersectional identity politics: "Soviet socialism, with its discourses of equality and social rights, its privileging of pro-

ductive labor, and its utopian notions of individual and collective transformation, provoked new conceptions and experiences of deafness” (p. 15). This has applications beyond her subject. As she notes, “Soviet deafness provides a revealing window into the dreams and limitations inherent in Soviet practices of molding the self” (p. 4).

Basing her account largely on archival research, Shaw constructs a history of the deaf from the toppling of the tsar through World War II, the post-Stalinist Thaw, the Brezhnev era, and Perestroika, showing how in each period state and public perceptions of deaf citizenship changed, and how the deaf themselves negotiated these changes to maximize their social position. At the same time, one thing did not change: their status as different. “The fostering of sign language in the 1930s, the emergence and recognition of deaf spaces, and the growth of traditions and cultures in the 1950s,” Shaw writes, “all demonstrate the existence of a distinct community, defined by visual cultural forms that marked it out as different from the broader Soviet collective” (p. 16). This applied even as the Soviets’ Marxist-derived defectology (*defektologiya*) regarded deafness in largely social, not medical, terms—anticipating Western disability studies’ “social model”—and during the ready incorporation of the deaf into the work force in the 1930s. For example, they were not bothered by loud factory conditions, an instance of Dirksen Bauman’s “Deaf Gain.”[1]

Central to Shaw’s story, around which she organizes the book, is the All-Russian Association for the Deaf (*Vserossiiskoe ob’edinenie glukhikh*; founded in 1926, it went through some name changes, but always kept its acronym, VOG). By the 1970s, over 95 percent of deaf people in the Soviet Union belonged to VOG. Through VOG’s shifting fortunes and strategies to protect its members from audist prejudices, at times (anxiously) projecting an image of dignified citizenship, the reader gets a sense of this group’s challenges, triumphs, and failures.

In *The Couple*, Natasha’s is a very VOG representation of a 1960s deaf person: she lives in her own apartment, keeps a wide social circle, contributes to society, and always maintains an even keel when repeatedly insulted and underestimated by hearing people. Her front door even sports an advertisement for the VOG newspaper *Deaf Life* (*Zhizn’ glukhikh*), as well as *Izvestiia*.

Nonetheless, the post-Stalin Thaw era proved an anxious time for deaf people, who found themselves increasingly caught between their own autonomous cultural identity and the pressure to conform as much as possible to the hearing world’s rules, that is, to be “the right kind” of deaf person. Shaw characterizes this quandary: “VOG discourses from this period ... show complex practices of inclusion and ‘othering’ as deaf activists attempted to better define the ideal of deaf-Soviet behavior. Such practices were often linguistic: activists increasingly pointed to a distinction between the cultured deaf (*glukhie*) and uncultured deaf-mutes (*glukhonemye*). Such distinctions were far from literal; although they drew on persistent social attitudes that posited oral speech as cultured and sign language as ‘backward,’ the terms ‘deaf,’ and ‘deaf-mute’ soon became synonymous with ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable,’ or ‘Soviet’ and ‘antisoviet’” (p. 184).

VOG’s job became no easier when its leadership was caught embezzling funds in the 1950s and 1960s, which fueled public concerns over “deaf criminality.” Such misgivings about a “deaf *mafia*” remained even after the collapse of the Soviet Union; we see their vestiges in Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy’s *The Tribe* (*Plemya*), a 2014 Ukrainian film about deaf criminals, told entirely in sign language.

Shaw tells a compelling, at times riveting, story, one slightly marred only by its focus on Leningrad and Moscow; a follow-up volume on the provinces and the post-Soviet era, which takes greater account of deaf identity’s intersection with other categories, like race and gender, would be

most welcome. That said, I was especially fascinated by Shaw's discussion of oral-based versus sign language-based approaches to Soviet deaf education, this showing some sad parallels to other countries by the defining question she seeks to answer: could Deaf and disabled people ever "measure up" as equal Soviet citizens? Among many other virtues, *Deaf in the USSR* offers numerous insights into what made that question perennially hard to answer.

Note

[1.] H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, eds., *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

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