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**History of Soviet Socialization**

As Russia today is increasingly compared to the former Soviet Union—a country in which the state “constantly hovers over the lives” of its citizens and society “drown[s] ... in the troubling waters of uncertainty, isolation, and degradation”—the term *Homo Sovieticus*, with all its negative and stigmatizing valence, has gained new currency in public discourse (p. x). It is because of the *Homo Sovieticus*’s “enslaved, indoctrinated, and illiberal” mentality, as multiple observers claim, that Russia has failed to democratize in the 1990s, has adopted anti-Western confrontational foreign policies throughout the 2000s, and, since 2014, has engaged in various forms of aggression toward Ukraine (p. xiv). Against this prevailing discourse, however, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova reminds us that the term *Homo Sovieticus* has a specific history of its own. It was developed during the Cold War “through the analytical lens of totalitarianism and the political stance of anti-communism” (p. xi). Simply reappropriating it now and giving to it absolute explanatory force would mean reproducing essentializing, reductionist, and transhistorical views of Russia or, as Sharafutdinova writes, slipping into cozy old shoes without considering whether they are the most appropriate for the current hike. Although *The Afterlife of the ‘Soviet Man*’ does not necessarily provide readers with the metaphorical footwear needed to understand contemporary Russia, it does an excellent job at historicizing the idea of the *Homo Sovieticus* as a human type and a set of core traits associated with a political system. In the meantime, it also reveals the specific contexts in which various intellectuals developed the term’s meanings. As such the book is an important read not only for students of the Soviet Union but also for any scholar in the field of intellectual history and educated readers with an
interest in the history of attitudes toward communism.

After introducing the subject in a brief prologue and chapter 1, in the following chapters Sharafutdinova discusses the ways in which the idea of the *Homo Sovieticus* developed in five different contexts, taking readers on an inspiring intellectual journey from post-WWII Eastern Europe to Russia at the time of perestroika and finally, the post-Soviet world. Chapter 2 discusses two dissent writers, the Polish Czesław Miłosz and the Bulgarian Georgy Markov, whose works, in the author’s interpretation, “presaged the concept of the Homo Sovieticus” (p. 25). Here Sharafutdinova shows that while Miłosz and Markov produced nuanced analyses of communism’s “seductions” and “mental imprints” on East European intellectuals, in the West their ideas were generally applied to the mass of citizens living under state socialism (p. 26). In addition, amidst the Cold War, Milosz’s and Markov’s sophisticated critical stances toward the communist system were conveniently fitted into binary representations of good and evil.

Soviet dissidents too, as we learn in chapter 3, reflected on the ways in which the communist system impacted individual citizens’ consciousness and psychology. Sharafutdinova explores this process by analyzing the lives and works of Alexander Zinoviev and Vladimir Bukovsky, two “contrarian” intellectuals who had a hard time adapting to the pressures of life in the Soviet Union and eventually left the country as political emigres (p. 39). Zinoviev is known for coining the term “Homo Sovieticus,” or “homosos,” to indicate “a human adaptation,” negative but not immoral, to the realities of communism (p. 39). Bukovsky especially emphasized the communist system’s denial of human rights and individuality. Both writers relied on their personal experiences in describing the Soviet system of power and, defiantly struggling against it, “transferred their hatred of the system on the human element (i.e. Soviet people)” (p. 43). Again, just as with Miłosz and Markov, at the height of the Cold War, Western anticommunists simplified their individual dissenting voices and mobilized them to draw general conclusions and sustain black-and-white mythologies of totalitarianism. Meanwhile, Western observers forgot to recognize that *Homo Sovieticus* could be a dissident too.

Moving to the last years of the Soviet Union, chapter 4 is devoted to Yuri Levada’s “Soviet man” project. Levada was a sociologist working for the newly created All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion. In 1989, he and his colleagues Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin, and Alexei Levinson strove to paint “a portrait of the Soviet person at the moment of the decomposition of the Soviet political system” (p. 57). Involving nation-wide public opinion surveys and shifting the focus from the individual to the mass, the project provided scholarly grounding for a new conceptualization of *Homo Sovieticus*. Among its findings, however, was the sad realization that the Soviet people were not ready for democracy. Sharafutdinova aptly deconstructs the foundations of Levada’s “analytical toolbox” (p. 64). As she reveals, just like the dissidents’ conceptualizations, Levada’s project, too, was undergirded and shaped by specific assumptions: not the individual experiences of single writers but the scholarly analytical preferences of a group of sociologists. And these, it is crucial to understand, came straight from Western theories of totalitarianism. “For Yuri Levada and his team,” writes Sharafutdinova, “the concept of totalitarianism represented the analytical lens underlying their broader worldview and their attitudes towards the Soviet system” (p. 69). All scientific data was interpreted through that model’s terms and categories—an approach that once more uncovers the role of politics in the formulation and circulation of the idea of *Homo Sovieticus*.

Finally, concluding Sharafutdinova’s narrative, chapters 5 and 6 investigate alternative approaches to respectively studying the ordinary Soviet person and forming the new, postwar Russian
identity: scholar Natalia Kozlova’s sociocultural anthropology and video blogger Yuri Dud’s media project. Focused on personal, everyday-life documents, grounded in the French tradition of social theory, and informed by anthropology’s principles of methodological self-reflexivity, Kozlova’s method of textual analysis produced very different results from Levada’s sociological surveys. *Homo Sovieticus* no longer appeared as atomized, lonely, and brainwashed but rather as “embedded in and an integral part of the social surroundings” (p. 87).

As a result, the Soviet experience and its richness of practices could now receive a new interpretative life: they were extricated from the straitjacket of totalitarianism and the ideological struggles of the Cold War, instead being explored on their own terms. Similarly, although using a completely different format (documentary films broadcast on social media platforms), Dud’s current media project advances a novel and fresh way to think about the “norms, ideas and values” that ordinary Russian people—especially those belonging to the younger generation—are (or should be) cueing into (p. 95).

Through Dud Sharafutdinova clearly strives to emphasize the concrete ways in which today’s ordinary Russians cannot be simply equated to passive and disengaged *Hominès Sovietici*. This is an important observation. Yet, to this reviewer, this chapter seemed poorly integrated in the history of an idea that the author masterfully traces in the previous chapters. Unlike all other intellectuals and scholars discussed in this book, Dud is not concerned with defining the pressures of an authoritarian system on its citizens and the ways they respond to them. Rather than analyzing/criticizing the identity and/or psychology of his fellow citizens, Dud seems more interesting in shaping them. Doesn’t then his project belong to a different intellectual history?

Throughout the book, Sharafutdinova’s style is clear and engaging; her light hand in contextualizing historical processes and discussing intellectual movements makes the book accessible to a variety of publics and certainly one of best monographs published in Eugene Avrutin’s and Stephen Norris’s excellent series, Russian Shorts. Given the series’ length limits, many questions remained unexplored, including the important one of how *Homo Sovieticus* was conceptualized by intellectuals from the non-Russian Soviet republics. Nonetheless, to this reviewer *The Afterlife of the ‘Soviet Man’* spoke intimately. It reminded me that contemporary Russia is not simply a reconstructed Soviet Union but an authoritarian state which, albeit having inherited the Soviet legacy, has also developed distinct features of its own. To resurrect Cold War mythologies to analyze and interpret it is both intellectually lazy and extremely imprudent: those mythologies, in the end, facilitated geopolitical polarization and served well the interests of one side but did not help the other find its way to change and freedom from authoritarianism. Ultimately, Sharafutdinova’s book is a powerful warning to how dangerous the feeling of being “on the right side of history” can be for any thinker: although the reasons for it might be very well understandable, this feeling prevents us from being cognizant of the “blind spots” and biases of our theoretical foundations. It also easily leads to minimizing our critical thinking and responsibility for analytical rigor in favor of our political and ethical commitments.
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