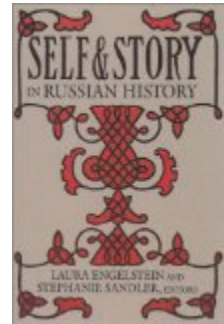


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laura Engelstein, Stephanie Sandler, eds. *Self and Story in Russian History*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000. ix + 363 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8668-5; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3791-5.

Reviewed by Peter Pozefsky (Department of History, The College of Wooster)  
Published on H-Russia (April, 2002)



## The Russian Self

### The Russian Self

In their introduction to *Self and Story*, Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler provide a thumbnail sketch of the idea of self in Russian history. It begins with the critic Vissarion Belinsky's observation, made in an essay of 1847, that in Russia "the personality is just breaking out of its shell" (p. 5). Belinsky found Russian notions of selfhood poorly developed, and looked to the West for models for the relationship between the individual and society more congenial to the former. In contrast, rival Slavophiles idealized a native communal spirit with a diminished role for individuality. Nonetheless, several generations of nineteenth-century progressives, following in Belinsky's footsteps, sought to establish social, political and legal institutions in Russia that would foster selfhood on a liberal Western model. The Bolsheviks, although an offshoot of this tradition, had different objectives. They wanted to build a new society and to create new types of human beings to inhabit it. Walter Benjamin, who visited Moscow ten years after the October Revolution, thought they had succeeded. In reflections on his visit, he wrote that "Bolshevism has abolished private life" (p. 1), an essential element in the conception of the individual for nineteenth century Westernizers. Visitors to Moscow today, however, can see for themselves just how mistaken Benjamin was. The evidence, visible in the streets and in the media, suggests that "New Russians," through their fashion and lifestyles, are reinventing private life and strengthening an ideal of self that stands in sharp opposition to the model promoted by the

first leaders of the Communist Party. The process described by Belinsky remains vital if incomplete to the present day.

The volume examining this process is the product of a 1996 conference with the ambitious goal of promoting collaboration between literary scholars and historians as well as the consideration of both disciplinary boundaries and the relevance of recent theoretical innovations in the humanities to the study of Russia. On the relationship between self and society in Russia, Engelstein and Sandler's introduction raises big questions. Is selfhood a "necessary attribute of civilization" or a product of a specific set of historical circumstances? Is the story of the "self-determining individual" a Western myth or a historical reality? In their own words, "are we selfish or unselved?" (p. 3).

The fourteen essays in *Self and Story* examine the idea of self and its relationship to narrative from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries through the exploration of subjects ranging from mass and elite culture, to gender, sexuality, popular fiction, psychiatry, politics, criticism, film and the history of ideas. In addition to the studies discussed in this review the collection includes essays by Alexander Zholkovsky on Akhmatova, Richard Wortman on early twentieth-century images of the monarchy, Evgenii Bershtein on the Russian reception of Oscar Wilde, by Cathy Popkin on psychiatric case histories, by Reginald Zelnick on a Russian interpretation of Gerhart Hauptmann's play "The Weavers," by An-

drew Kahn on Radishchev and by Laura Engelstein on the personal testimonies of the Skpotsy. Given the heterogeneous subject matter and the lack of an over-arching evolutionary perspective, some kind of thematic organization might have given the collection greater cohesiveness than the reverse-chronological ordering chosen by the editors. Nonetheless, readers will find that the essays hew remarkably closely to the theme of “self and story”. Almost all focus on the role of stories in the process of what might be described as individual and communal self-actualization and fall neatly into a manageable number of thought-provoking sub-themes.

Several chapters focus on the writing of stories. Collectively, they view personal narratives such as journals not merely as evidence of individuality but as instruments for its fashioning. In “Writing the Self in the Time of Terror,” Jochen Hellbeck regards the diary of the writer Alexander Afinogenov as, following Foucault, a “technology of self.” Purged from the Writers Union and the Party for Trotskyism in 1937, Afinogenov was reinstated early the next year. In the intervening months, he suffered terribly and to relieve his anxiety, he wrote extensively in his diary. The unfortunate writer did not so much question the authorities or bemoan his fate as consider the weaknesses in his own character that he thought contributed to his downfall. According to Hellbeck, the process of journal writing heightened Afinogenov’s sense of individuality and served as the vehicle for a “radical self-transformation” that helped him to purge himself of moral impurities. In this way, the diary acted “as a corollary to the regime’s attempts to mold the populace into the prototypes of the New Man and Woman” (p. 71). Hellbeck’s case study suggests a reading of the purges, not as an expression of totalitarian state power or an outbreak of random violence, but as “part of a revolutionary agenda of purification, involving both the social realm and individual selves” (p. 70).

In “Enlightenment and Tradition,” David Ransel examines the late eighteenth-century diary of the Dmitrov merchant Ivan Alekseevich Tolchenov. One of two surviving merchant diaries from the eighteenth century, it begins in a form typical of noble memoirs and journals of the same period: a simple chronology with annual entries listing accomplishments for the year. Ransel shows how Tolchenov used the diary to fashion the various axes of his existence (temporal, geographic, economic and social), while Ransel uses it in order to reconstruct them. Among other things, Ransel is struck by the way that Tolchenov presents a self that is both enlightened and devoutly Orthodox without experiencing internal con-

traditions. Beginning in 1785, when Tolchenov suffered devastating financial setbacks, the terse annual lists of events are accompanied by the type of self-reflective commentary characteristic of more modern journals. They comprise a carefully crafted personal narrative that reads like an archetypal tale of moral corruption. In this tale over-consumption engenders debt, economic ruin and “public humiliation,” which are followed by clarity of vision and ethical insight. In the “self-conscious” moralizing of this unhappy tale, Ransel finds traces of an emerging sense of selfhood and the influence of European thought on the provincial merchantry earlier than generally suspected.

Other chapters present the popular consumption of stories as part of a similarly active process of self-fashioning. In “The Silent Movie Melodrama,” on the impact of the films of the early Soviet filmmaker Evgenii Bauer on female audiences, Louise McReynolds suggests that cinema allowed “the inarticulate and often illiterate an unprecedented opportunity to refashion themselves” (p. 121). Bauer’s melodramas, peopled by villainous males unable to control the glamorous, pleasure-seeking heroines they sought to exploit, provided women with the empowering image of a world that they could control. Particularly popular was the actress Vera Kholodnaia, who excelled at playing the femme fatale and was most admired for roles in which she “indulged her fantasies and desires” in spite of their potentially destructive impact (p. 136). In McReynolds’s interpretation, female audiences were engaged actively if imaginatively in the cinematic experience, looking upon the personalities of Bauer’s heroines like new clothes, to be tried on, tested and, where possible, acquired. In her view, a visit to the theater was not simply an occasion for teary immersion in escapist fantasy, as some feminist critics have suggested, but an opportunity for the subversion of patriarchy.

In “Girl Talk,” Susan Larsen discusses the impact of the best-selling early twentieth-century novelist Lydia Charskaia on the adolescent women who were her biggest fans. While McReynold’s analysis is based largely on an examination of potentialities inherent within the genre of melodrama, Larsen’s is based on letters from Charskaia’s readers published in the pages of the same periodicals that published her stories. Readers write of their admiration for the physical courage and moral daring of Charskaia’s heroines, schoolgirls like themselves. These heroines tried their best to live according to the rigid social codes that constrained the behavior of young women, but they sometimes found the de-

sire to act out their subversive fantasies and impulses irrepressible. Larsen argues that these female heroines acted as role models, helping readers “to determine for themselves both who they were and what they might become”(168). For Larsen and McReynolds, mass culture provided women with tools for self-definition and personal liberation. Like Ransel and Hellbeck, their use of sources is inventive; their findings simultaneously provocative and persuasive.

Still other contributions explore the work of writers who were themselves preoccupied by the relationship between self and story. These essays provide some of the most interesting theoretical insights in the collection as they comment explicitly on both the limits and potential of personal narratives as tools for self-description. In “Tolstoy’s Diaries: the Inaccessible Self,” Irina Paperno’s Tolstoy spends a lifetime stalking the self with narrative as his snare. He tries a great variety of literary forms and innovative narrative techniques with little success. Tolstoy was most perplexed by the problem posed by the representation of time to the literary presentation of self. He found that he could easily write about the past and future but not the present, which, in practical terms, had no beginning and disappeared entirely the moment it came into view. The young Tolstoy’s efforts to represent his own self in the present by describing his experience of the entirety of a single day quickly became the story of yesterday, which in turn became the story of the day before yesterday. Likewise, a novel about the Decembrists ended where it was supposed to begin and became *War and Peace*. The older Tolstoy’s attempts to capture the self were confounded by his realization that the self existed on multiple planes that evolved simultaneously, while narrative could represent them only as a temporal sequence. Thus Tolstoy’s utopian efforts at a “complete textualization of self” (p. 265) were doomed to end in failure. Paperno does an excellent job contextualizing Tolstoy’s preoccupation with time and narrative within the larger context of European thought.

The Dostoevsky of William Mills Todd’s “The Storied Self: Constructing Characters in *The Brothers Karamazov*” is involved in a reciprocal dystopian project. In Dostoevsky’s novel, every narrative generates a counter-narrative. Characters who recognize themselves in stories told by others—in the courtroom, bar or family parlor—feel unjustly victimized. They react “violently and vociferously to the storied selves which other characters create for them” (p. 277) and almost always respond with stories of their own. In the fictional world of the Karamazovs, narratives are never disinterested, typically un-

reliable and invariably doomed to be superceded. Todd concludes that “stories and selves fit very poorly in Dostoevsky’s novels” (p. 279).

Paperno’s Tolstoy and Todd’s Dostoevsky end their experiments on the relationship between self and story in skepticism. This is not the case with the Soviet critics in Caryl Emerson’s “Bakhtin, Lotman, Vygotsky and Lydia Ginzburg on Types of Selves: A Tribute.” For these eminent critics, the attempts by artists to organize the chaos of life into structured narratives are nothing less than heroic. They regard the process of literary self-fashioning as a liberating experience, contributing to the sum total of human freedom. Emerson argues that these four Soviet thinkers “differ from current Western critical fashion” in their faith in stories. “Each is unembarrassed to rely, in a theoretically rigorous way, on more old fashioned positions: a trust in words, a reverence for the transformative powers of art, and self-discipline in the presence of love” (p. 45). The essays by Emerson, Paperno and Todd raise challenging ethical as well as aesthetic questions and provide a persuasive argument for the central place of literature and criticism among the liberal arts as well as the importance of the subject matter of the current volume.

*Self and Story* is a thought-provoking and complex collection. The contributions, including the many that I was not able to mention here, are of a uniformly high quality, generally lively and edifying and always painstakingly researched. However, the total value of the collection may not prove as great as the value of its parts. It is not clear where “Self and Story” will fit in the larger histories of selfhood or Russia. Readers may be disappointed that the big questions raised in the introduction are not explicitly discussed or debated. The contributors do not argue for a specifically Russian notion of the self, for the idea of self as a Western myth or for the self as the product of historical circumstances that did not favor its development in a Russian context. In fact, the opposite perspectives are simply assumed in most of the chapters. The Russian construction of self is treated, not as a special case, but as part of a larger European project. More significantly, a definition of self is never clearly articulated; the problematic relationship between the English-language concept “self” and its Russian language equivalents is left unexplored, while English-language concepts such as self, subjectivity, personality and individuality are employed synonymously. For most of the authors, “self” seems to mean something close to personal identity or self-definition but, as a result of conceptual imprecision and ambiguity, it is not always clear that they are treating the same phenomenon. The introduction might

have been used to address these issues by presenting an overview of recent theoretical literature on the self or theorizing its place in Russian culture; alternatively, a conclusion could have been added to provide an ordered perspective on the contributors' diverse attitudes toward self and to place the big questions the volume raises more squarely within the historiography of Modern Russia.

This said, *Self and Story* offers many rewards. It provides rich empirical justification for the study of the evolution of notions of self, individuality, subjectivity and personality in Russian culture and opens up an exciting new terrain for future research. It also casts old themes

such as the relationship between Russia and the West and the idea of Russian "underdevelopment" (here applied to personalities rather than economics) in an original light. While the volume offers no synthesis on the nature of selfhood in Russia or its role in Russian culture, individual essays do present bold interpretations for specific fields and periods. The novel subject matter and interaction with literary scholars, moreover, has clearly compelled the historians represented to engage with a new body of theoretical literature and to work with primary sources in innovative and unexpected ways that are certain to have a lasting impact on the discipline.

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**Citation:** Peter Pozefsky. Review of Engelstein, Laura; Sandler, Stephanie, eds., *Self and Story in Russian History*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6174>

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