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In Search of Soviet *Podlinnost'*

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Anatolii Pinskii [Anatoly Pinsky], ed., *Posle Stalina: Pozdnesovetskaia sub"ektivnost' (1953–1985)* (After Stalin: Subjectivity in the Late Soviet Union, 1953–85). 454 pp. St. Petersburg: EUSP Press, 2018. ISBN 978-5943802423.

Back in the 1990s, two circumstances came together: the “linguistic turn” reached historians of Russian and Soviet history and the “archival revolution” opened new possibilities for investigation. This made it possible to find new answers to the question of which statements—private or public—made by people living under totalitarian regimes are more believable and to what extent “common” people internalized Bolshevik values. Since then, the discovery of a “Stalinist subject” that *sincerely* tended to articulate itself through totalitarian discourses and practices had a huge impact on the study of Stalinism and promoted the appearance of a wide range of works dealing with “subjectivity” under Stalin and later in the post-Stalin era.¹ Anatoly Pinsky’s edited volume is a contribution to this ongoing research endeavor.

The term “Soviet subjectivity” appearing in the title is more an umbrella term for various ways of looking at the actors’ level than an operational concept. The authors, for example, differ not only on the question of how a subject is constituted but also on the question of its possibility to judge and to act independently. Also, not all contributors favor ego documents for the analysis of “subjectivity.” The editor’s attempt to distinguish three conceptual forms of “subjectivity” used by the contributors functions, unfortunately, only on a quite abstract level and thus only partially clarifies the problem. There seems, however, to be at least one common premise formulated by Pinsky:

¹ The discussion started with Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin’s review of Stephen Kotkin’s *Magnetic Mountain* (“Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin’s ‘Magnetic Mountain’ and the State of Soviet Historical Studies,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44, 3 (1996): 456–63.

the paradox that after the end of mass terror, the Soviet state became with time more branched and stable. This development fostered the strengthening of individual tendencies toward more autonomy and creative self-expression, which in turn undermined the attempts of various Soviet authorities to create normative Soviet subjects.

The texts in the first section of the volume deal with the “macrolevel”: that is, with discourses and practices considered to be crucial for the understanding of the “subjectivity” of a considerable number of Soviet people. Cynthia Hooper shows in her text on Soviet writers and filmmakers how difficult the search for “authenticity” (*podlinnost'*) and happiness was after mass terror had abated, when Soviet authorities had to reconcile “that what the people want with that what people should want in their opinion” (40). Hooper shows that Soviet filmmakers and writers like El'dar Riazanov or Vasilii Aksenov were still dedicated to the normative values of the Soviet state, although they extended the boundaries of personal possibilities for Soviet people. However, while it seems to be true that these cultural figures thought in similar categories to, for example, state propagandists, it is not entirely clear why all of Hooper's historical actors saw “this sometimes absurd and disturbing Soviet social-economic structure” (29) as a guarantee of *podlinnost'*. Such a view implies that Soviet filmmakers and writers have been unable in principle to distinguish between morals and politics and therefore unable to undock Soviet (or “humanistic”) moral goods from the Soviet “social-economic structure.” It is also doubtful whether the opposition of *podlinnyi* and *mnimyi* (delusionary) actually originated in the 1930s, when the distinction between “true” and “false” Communists reached an unprecedented peak, or was a much older problem.

Maria Maiofis writes about children's choral studios as a place where Soviet values and virtues such as discipline, collectivity, devotion to work, and solidarity were internalized. Maiofis argues that in the absence of terror the Soviet project was in great need of new, positive forms of mobilization. This led to growth in the number of children's choral studios and finally to their absolute dominance in the Soviet Union. She also points to the fact that many former members of the studios maintained a nostalgic form of loyalty to their former collectives even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Another contribution to the problem of *podlinnost'* is offered by Mikhail Rozhanskii in his paper on Soviet films dealing with Siberia in 1959. Rozhanskii's finding is that with the “semantic collapse of ‘communism’” (Batygin/Rassochina) the idea of a quest for authenticity emerged. The idea of a quest implied skepticism—if not in the higher truths of communism, then in their realization. It also implied that social environment (*sreda*) to some

degree conceals something “true,” “meaningful,” and “authentic.” Siberia was by this time the locus of this quest. Another interesting observation made by Rozhanskii is that self-sacrifice was still part of this “search for authenticity.” But if Stalinist culture demanded—as Hooper formulates it—“a permanent self-sacrifice for the sake of some magnificent and fundamental collective victory” (42), the “reformation of Soviet ideals” (116) made self-sacrifice rather an individual choice.

Pinsky analyzes the turn of Soviet writers interested in the reformation of the Soviet Union to “small forms,” primarily the diary. Such forms played a key role in the exploration of new directions in literature and functioned in this sense as complements to the “big” novel. As in the case of the quest for *podlinnost'*, turning to “small forms” assumed the prevalence of a new, more critical approach to reality. This turn was to a great extent assured by the incompleteness of these literary forms, their lack of didacticism, and the tendency to treat the chosen themes in a more documentary way. The new forms led to a variety of approaches to knowledge competencies and potential for action attributed to Soviet men and women. The “empirical imperative,” as Pinsky calls the new approach to facts, weakened the impetus of the “reformer” to build a just socialist society: the diaries offered space for disappointment in the possibility to realize one’s “true” or “authentic” wishes.

Il'ia Kukulin explores the special relationship between the *shestidesiatniki* (people of the sixties) and the world *zagraniitsa* (abroad), manifested in the travelogues of Soviet writers. In the 1930s, when very few travelogues were written, writers encountered in the world outside the Soviet borders either enemies or potential allies. With the curtain between the “West” and the Soviet Union becoming more friable, the travelogues assumed the function of “emotional self-regulation of the Soviet subject” (182). After Stalin, the journey became an “ideological exam” (195), where the traveler enriched himself by marveling at Europe’s cultural heritage but at the same time denounced the “tempting” but “false” promises of the “West” in favor of “authentic” Soviet values. In the 1960s, the images of the “Soviet traveler abroad” became more diverse. Kukulin shows convincingly that the program of self-regulation failed since Soviet universalism as declared was not viable. In the case of Viktor Nekrasov’s “apolitical” flaneur, they turned out to be highly subversive. In the case of Vsevolod Kochetov, with his strict distinction between “we” (Communists, sympathizers) and “them” (capitalists, enemies), there was simply no room for universalism.

Alexander Golubev introduces the concept of a “Western observer” as one of many culturally derived situations that helped create the Soviet

subject. The imagined observer demanded that the observed subject behave in a distinct Soviet way, produced shame or pride depending on the subject's performance, and helped consolidate its experiences. Golubev argues that in situations where the differences between propaganda and Soviet reality were especially obvious, the observed subject became ashamed of the "un-Soviet" behavior of state officials and in this way took over the position of observer. According to Golubev, this effect led to a "negative politicization of the Soviet man" (250) and thus contributed to the collapse of the USSR.

The texts in the second part of the book deal with the "microlevel": discourses and practices that are to a large degree dependent on "superordinate" discourses and practices. The section opens with Oleg Leibovitch's study of "mental and behavioral shifts" among members of the repressive forces after the detention and execution of Lavrentii Beria. He shows that a form of "subjectivity," described by Hellbeck among others, where the individual felt the (almost self-torturous) need to merge with the collective in order to become a Soviet man or woman, weakened considerably.² Most of Leibovitch's historical actors began to associate themselves more and more with their former sociocultural environment. A minority, however, started to move toward a more articulate individuality, which speaks of a "crisis of the ideological subjectivity" (278).

In the case of Daria Bocharnikova's actors—members of *Novyi element rasseleniia* (NER)—a specific relationship between the individual and the collective appears to be a sign of "Soviet subjectivity" as well. Bocharnikova looks at the future visions of her actors and thereby shows how they planned to achieve a new harmonious coexistence of Soviet people through architectural decisions. While articulating their normative ideas of communism, NER members leaned not least on the literature produced by Soviet specialists that reinterpreted the old problem of the collective and individual. They stressed the freedom (which now included temporary freedom from the collective) and creative potential of human beings. The "project of the emancipation of the individual" (312), however, undermined itself, since it was designed by specialists without even the consult of the potentially affected individuals.

Like in the case of the films analyzed by Rozhanskii, "authenticity" became a key concept in the process of constructing a collective identity by the members of the "student stage collectives" of the 1950s and 1960s. The students, studied by Bella Ostromoukhova, embraced *nastoiashchest'* (presentism) and *iskrennost'* (sincerity) in their turning against the Stalinist

² See Alexander Etkind's insightful critique on the problem of self-realization under Stalin ("Soviet Subjectivity: Torture for the Sake of Salvation?," *Kritika* 6, 1 (2005): 171–86).

past as well as against theater professionals. Although the old Soviet values—work for the sake of society, altruism, *kul'turnost*, and so on—remained the same, the students gave them a new quality by denying the idea that the individual has to sacrifice everything—even his life and the lives of his family members—for a greater cause. This created a complex situation where the “young people” could, for example, at the same time laugh about official forms of organization and reproduce them.

Susan Reid asks in her empirically saturated text how home improvement, as one of many cultural and social practices, helped create a continuous sense of self. She shows how the new housing conditions gave more room for agency: individuals regained more consumption options, more time for recreation, and more freedom *from* the collective in comparison with the Stalin era. She concludes that the process of self-creation via home improvement was of a “hybrid nature” (397): new elements of the so-called “Contemporary Style” merged with older ones.

Benjamin Nathans analyzes the memoirs of Russian dissidents that were published abroad in the 1960s. On the one hand, he confirms the existing thesis that Russian dissidents articulated their self in a way that to some extent resembled official Soviet discourses. This behavior had much to do with the dissidents' socialization as well as their original interest in Lenin as the source of a supposedly “pristine” socialist thought. On the other hand, Nathans convincingly shows that the differences were much more significant than the formal analogies would suggest. This had much to do with the disillusion of the dissidents and their “complete lack of faith in the historical progress” (406). This development showed itself not least in the famous dissident toast “to the success of our hopeless cause,” which, of course, was an ironic reference to the “common” or “holy cause” of the revolutionary movement.

The book *leaves a somehow ambiguous impression*. On the one hand, it offers well-written and informative texts that provide various fascinating insights into the history of the late Soviet Union. The volume also contains an introduction that processes a huge amount of literature in an elegant way and therefore offers a good orientation for anyone interested in the problem of “Soviet subjectivity.” On the other hand, it is quite difficult to draw general conclusions because the contributors have differing views on “subjectivity” and have chosen different sources and themes.³ One gets the impression that the volume could have contained any other texts dealing with levels of

³ A more detailed explanation of this matter would, for example, have been helpful in convincing those readers who—like this reviewer—are skeptical about to what extent “ideological interpellation” (especially in combination with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power) is at all transferable to the Soviet Union before perestroika.

subjectivity—provided they were of the same quality—without making any significant difference.

For this reason, I focus on the problem of “authenticity” that appears in one form or another in most of the articles.⁴ This context-conditioned concept stresses the need to live in accordance with one’s “true” wishes, positions, and abilities, which in turn presupposes a distinction between a “true” human nature and distortions imposed from “outside.” The self-expressive urge to look behind the “false” façade of capitalism to the very “core” of things is, in my view, by no means a reinterpretation of practices associated with purges. Here a broader historical contextualization would have been more useful: as early as the 1860s, radicals regarded capitalistic society as spoiling human nature and therefore hindering the unfolding of the people’s “true” creative potential, just as later Russian revolutionaries did.⁵ However, if the early socialist authors favored spontaneity as a tool to find out what is “authentic” and what is not, the populists of the late 1870s, as well as their successors, abandoned that “quest” in favor of more or less dogmatic considerations. They still spoke about “true” feelings, beliefs, and wishes as the basis for their actions, but the focus on a superhuman task limited self-realization to a great degree. During the Soviet era, the ideals of “autonomy” and “authenticity” became stunted in a previously unprecedented way, although claims about releasing the people’s creative potential increased. It is therefore only logical that with the (re-)discovery of a “quest for authenticity” the Soviet Union started to appear to many citizens as a place where “true” wishes were hard—if not impossible—to fulfill. The further exploration of the “paradox-thesis” could be a promising direction for new research. Indeed, it seems that the branching of state institutions and their relative stabilization fostered the drive for “autonomy” and “authenticity” and thus undermined the whole endeavor of creating normative citizens. This point invites the reevaluation of old questions. Did Soviet people favor precise forms over the literal meaning of ideology, to pose the question in an Yurchakian way? Did they decouple “authentic” values such as social justice, meaningful work, and certain forms of collectivity from “empty” ideology or did they still see in the “social structure” a guarantee of *podlinnost'*? Or does such a question simply not do justice to the supposed “diversity” of “subjectivities” in the Soviet Union?

⁴ A current overview appears in Achim Saupe, *Historische Authentizität: Individuen und Gesellschaften auf der Suche nach dem Selbst—ein Forschungsbericht*, H-Soz-Kult, 15 August 2017 (www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/forschungsberichte-2444).

⁵ Victoria Frede, *Doubt, Atheism, and the 19th-Century Russian Intelligentsia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Vitalij Fastovskij, *Terrorismus und das moderne Selbst: Religiöse Semantiken revolutionärer Gewalt im späten Zarenreich (1860–1917)* (Munich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).

The aim of this edited volume is to “set the direction for further research“ (17) by uncovering general tendencies in history and in historiography. The investigation in the problem of Soviet *podlinnost*’ could offer a promising direction.

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