

## Book Review

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***Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda.* Edited by Kevin M.F. Platt and David Brandenberger. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. xvi+355 pp.**

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“It is quite clear that the Socialist economy is not founded on Platon Karatajev,” declared L.D. Trotsky in 1920, attacking a symbolic peasant figure in L.N. Tolstoi’s *War and Peace* as a remnant of old Russia.<sup>1</sup> In this declaration Trotsky articulated a common dream of the Bolsheviks: to cut themselves off from Russia’s past and remake the mind of the Russian people in accordance with their own ideology. After ten years of experimentation, however, the Bolsheviks found that their socialist heroes and other symbols were not attractive enough by themselves to mobilize the ordinary people in war, and those symbols needed to be supplemented with other ones, closer to the people’s hearts from the tsarist era.

This u-turn, or retreat, of Soviet politics has long been well known, but recently it has aroused renewed interest as an important topic in the history of national identity in modern Russia. This volume, composed of 12 articles and many historical documents, is a fruit of this renewed interest in the rehabilitation of the tsarist era in Stalin’s Russia, and the attempt of the editors to investigate the complicated and contradictory Stalinist revision of history by organizing collective research from different disciplines attains much success.

However contradictory and full of tensions, it is beyond doubt that the revision of the tsarist era in the 1930s was launched from above. Tracing the downfall of Dem’ian Bednyi by the mid-1930s, Alexander Dubrovsky makes clear the gulf between the old, internationalist modes of mocking the Russian epic and the new official modes of rehabilitating traditional Russian culture. The revision of history for propaganda purposes is evident in two studies on the rehabilitation of Ivan the Terrible. As Maureen Perrie points out, among M.A. Bulgakov’s banned plays, only *Ivan Vasil’evich* had not been revived because of its historical theme. David Brandenberger and Kevin Platt underline the practical necessity for the party leaders to rehabilitate Ivan the Terrible because of his mobilizing capacity.

That the revision of tsarist history was initiated from above does not mean, of course, that it was just a manipulation by the party to mobilize the people. A

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1 L. Trotsky, *The Defence of Terrorism (Terrorism and Communism): A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (London: Labour Publishing, 1921), p. 153.

study of M.I. Glinka's opera *Ivan Susanin* by Susan Eggers draws our attention to the complexity of the campaign from the viewpoint of show business. On the one hand, the themes of the opera – the threatening enemy, Russia's superiority, and self-sacrifice – well reflect the Stalinist worldview of the 1930s. But on the other hand, Eggers points out the opera's flexibility of composition as a key factor for its success, especially that the image of the enemy could easily be changed in accordance with the current political situation. Such adaptability may always be an important condition for any play to be a standard number in the repertoire. And it is always crucial to find a patron to stage a lavish opera, not only in Stalin's Russia, and the most powerful patron is usually the state.

In other words, the revision of history in Stalin's Russia is not as extraordinary as it might seem at first glance. What happened was a new phase of nation-building in modern Russia, in which the notion of nation was beginning to develop not only among politicians and intellectuals, but also among the masses.<sup>2</sup> In this volume, the frenzied reaction of the masses to the revision of the tsarist era is analyzed well by Brandenberger using the case of S.M. Eisenstein's *Aleksandr Nevskii*.

So what was the core problem in this new phase of nation-building? Here we return to Trotsky's declaration on remaking the human being: one of the major challenges for Russian politicians – tsarist, Soviet and contemporary – has always been how to make ideal citizens in such a backward country as Russia. And it is not so strange for the leaders of the 1930s, seeking a supplement to their own communist heroes and morals as criteria of the ideal citizens,<sup>3</sup> to turn to the figures, literature and history of tsarist Russia. As Dominic Lieven points out, the Russian classics provided "a common and very healthy source of identity and pride."<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, it is natural that some great Russian authors were listed together with tsars and princes as models for the ideal Soviet citizen. William Nickell researched the 100th anniversary of Lev Tolstoi's birth in 1928, and shows persuasively how the interpretation of the multi-faceted writer had been unified under the authority of Lenin's text. David Powelstock analyzes the canonization of M.Iu. Lermontov in the 1930s. His conclusion that mutual

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2 This is the main thesis of David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

3 A Japanese scholar Tomita estimates highly the role of new Soviet heroes such as Chapaev in consolidating the regime after the revolution from above. See Takeshi Tomita, "'Sovieto aikoku shugi' no kigen: 1930 nendai seijishi no ichidanmen [The Origin of Soviet Patriotism: An Aspect of the Political History of the 1930s]" (in Japanese) in *Ryōtaisenkanki Roshia no Seiji to bunka no rekishiteki kōsatsu [Historical Considerations of Politics and Culture in Inter-war Russia]* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Working papers, 2001).

4 Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 306.

criticism in literary discussions, if kept within bounds, served as a useful channel for self-censorship among the intelligentsia, accurately uncovers a process of spreading new moral values in Stalin's Russia with the help of the classics. Stephanie Sandler clearly shows the 1937 Pushkin jubilee as a campaign to find a model for the new Soviet man. Though Sandler estimates the results of the campaign rather pessimistically, referring to the negative attitudes to it of M.A. Bulgakov and D.I. Kharms, these two writers were, I think, an obvious exception. Keeping in mind the eager acceptance of the revision of the tsarist era by the masses in the Stalin years and after, the optimistic assessment by James von Geldern (in the conclusion) on the capacity of the historical debates of the 1930s for creating a real audience and vibrant public culture seems more persuasive.

The fruitfulness of the revision of history in the Stalin years was partly secured by the sincere participation of many talented artists. Andrew Wachtel traces an attempt by D.D. Shostakovich to create a new positive heroine in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*. Wachtel's investigation of the connection between N.A. Leskov and Shostakovich via E.M. Zamiatin and B.M. Kustodiev is very thrilling, making clear the accumulative process of inheritance and reinterpretation of form and type in the art across regimes and eras. His study raises the question: is it only in suppressed works such as *Lady Macbeth* that we can find that creative connection between the Russian classics and Soviet art? What was the situation in the officially praised works of the Stalin period? We may find one answer in the study of the Stalin period films of I.A. Pyr'ev by a Japanese scholar, Tanaka Masaki.<sup>5</sup> Comparing A.N. Ostrovskii's *The Rich Brides* and Pyr'ev's *The Rich Bride*, she finds that Pyr'ev intentionally reversed the social position of the heroines in Ostrovskii's play to underline the independence of new soviet women on the collective farms. This demonstrates that the Russian classics were successfully adapted for the public culture of Stalin's Russia.

Kevin Platt's analysis of A.N. Tolstoi's many returns to Peter the Great is another case study of a talented artist's independent participation in the creation of the new positive heroes. His approach to Tolstoi's vision of Peter as a single "work in progress" is highly original. This approach allows him to successfully trace the development of Peter's image in Tolstoi's works as a result of the author's independent political and artistic strategy, rather than by dictates from above.

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5 Танака М. Некоторые аспекты изображения деревни в довоенном советском кино: Музыкальная комедия «Свинарка и пастух» И. Пыр'ева. (Unpublished paper delivered to the international symposium "History of the 20th Century Russian Peasantry," University of Tokyo, 2005); See also Masaki Tanaka, "Senzen Soren eiga ni okeru nōson no keishō: Puiriefu *Butakai musume to hitsujikai* wo chūshin ni [Images of Villages in Pre-war Soviet Cinema: I. Pyr'ev's *They Met in Moscow*]," (in Japanese) *Slavistika* XXI/XXII (University of Tokyo, 2005/2006), pp. 56-57.

One argument of the whole volume which I hesitate to agree with is the russocentric nature of the rehabilitation campaign under Stalin. Was Peter the Great, for example, really so russocentric a figure for the leaders and the people of the 1930s and after? In the film *Peter I* at least, the hero is not so much a Russian emperor, as a Bolshevik superman who could do everything from constructing ships to commanding the army to finding talented men among the ordinary people. And this image of Peter was historically not so far from the truth. Accordingly, it appears to me that in the 1930s the Bolsheviks had begun to rehabilitate the tsarist past not only because it was effective in mobilization, but also because they became aware of the similarity between the two supra-ethnic empires. Perhaps we should remember Nicholas Timasheff's comment that nationalism in the USSR after the Second World War was "a kind of corporate nationalism, involving all the groups forming the family of 'the peoples of Russia'. This neonationalism is more akin to the older 'imperial' policy which prevailed in Russia up to 1880 than to the narrower 'nationalistic' policy of the last few decades before the revolution."<sup>6</sup>

In any case, the volume is full of stimulating facts and arguments, and it must be considered a milestone in the study of national identity in modern Russia. The historical documents included in the volume with a detailed commentary are very helpful.

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6 Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946), p. 381.