Polly Jones, *Revolution Rekindled: The Writers and Readers of Late Soviet Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 320 p. ISBN 978-01988-043-4-5

As a professor of Russian at University College, London, and University College, Oxford, Polly Jones earned a reputation for careful interpretations of Soviet cultural history based on meticulous archival research and studies of autobiographical and literary texts in her first monograph, covering the Khrushchev era. Delving through records of official meetings and letters sent by ordinary people to authors and the editorial boards of periodicals, she developed a persuasive reinterpretation of de-Stalinisation and the Thaw as a process of ‘working through the past’, not unlike the ‘memory boom’ which took place in other parts of Europe at various times in the second half of the 20th century, and most notably after the collapse of communism.¹ In her first monograph, she challenged the ‘tenacious belief that Soviet public memory consistently falsified and silenced popular memories, and so produced private (and oppositional) memories’ (p. 15).

In this respect, her second monograph and the subject of this review, *Revolution Rekindled*, marks a natural progression from the chronological focus on Khrushchev’s Thaw to what Mikhail Gorbachev christened the era of stagnation (*zastoi*) under Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko. The main thrust of the book, though, is to rehabilitate the morbid reputation given to this period, showing the dynamism and debate behind the labels coined during the period of *glasnost*’ and *perestroika*. In her second, as in her first monograph, Professor Jones is concerned with problematising the conventional interpretation of Soviet society and culture as radically divided between the public and private spheres.

Since the collapse of the USSR, histories of the period by now referred to as ‘late socialist’ or ‘late Soviet’ have blossomed, as scholars sought to understand the deeper causes of communist decay, as well as the social and cultural continuities that arch over the political point of collapse in 1991. Alexei Yurchak was perhaps the first to challenge

¹P. Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma. Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–70* (New Haven, 2013).

the stagnation paradigm, drawing attention to the powerful and largely unrecognised social and cultural processes in play at the time. In a paper first presented in 1994, he developed a novel interpretation of how state power and ideology functioned, and how the 'late socialist subject' experienced the official representation of reality as 'largely false and at the same time immutable and omnipresent'.²

Yurchak's work on this theme culminated with the publication of *Everything was Forever Until It Was No More*, and opened the door to more subtle investigations of the inner workings of late Soviet culture and the nexus between the Soviet state and citizen, revealing a great variety of subcultures that belie the image of cultural homogeneity and conformism.³ Since then, studies of cultural counter-currents and pockets of authenticity in the late Soviet period have become a mainstream topic for historical and literary studies, including in the Baltic states, where a concern with the collection of oral history and the 'everyday' has led to a boom in related publications and research.⁴

In this regard, Jones' second monograph marks an ambitious step forward, insofar as she extends the thesis of cultural dynamism from the limited, exceptional sphere of various counter-cultures to an in-depth investigation of the most official and mainstream of all Soviet cultural institutions, the State Publishing House of Political Literature, Politizdat. While most analyses of mainstream late Soviet culture suggest that 'success depended on downplaying traditional markers of ideology, or on resistance to ideological pressure from above,' she contends that political literature was under pressure from above to 'reframe ideological messages in emotionally affecting, aesthetically innovative forms', and that this pressure 'opened up scope for more creative, even subversive approaches to its inescapably political subject matter' (p. 9).

Established in 1918, and initially named Kommunist, the primary duty of Politizdat was to publish agitprop materials and the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and official Party materials. Responsible for the editing and presentation of authoritative versions of canonical texts, Politizdat (until the Sixties called Gospolitizdat) was tightly intertwined with the Central Committee of the Communist Party and its ideological priorities.

² A. Yurchak, 'The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretence and the *Anekdot*', in: *Public Culture* 9 (1997), pp. 161–188.

³ A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006).

⁴ V. Davoliūtė, 'State of the Art in Studies of Late Socialism in the Baltic States', in: *Sovijus*, Vol. 8, No 1 (2020), pp. 56–70.

In material terms, the publishing house wielded enormous resources, with print runs for works like Stalin's 'History of the Communist Party: Short Course' running into many millions of copies.

The turning point for the organisation, and the reason why Jones presents it in Chapter 1 as a force of cultural dynamism through the end of the late Soviet period, flows directly from de-Stalinisation, and took the form of a Central Committee resolution passed in December 1953. Entitled 'On the Serious Shortcomings in the Work of the State Publisher of Political Literature', the resolution pointed to 'inadequacies' and 'serious errors' in the work of the publisher, which consisted in an over-emphasis on the mass publication of canonical texts, and a corresponding failure to satisfy the demand of Party cadres and the broad popular mass for relevant political books (p. 34).

In Jones' reading, the focus of the resolution on the 'needs of the reader' led not only to profound changes to the mission of Politizdat, but also to the form and content of Soviet political literature. Several meetings of the publisher's board in subsequent years were dedicated to the elaboration of the intent of the reform, and it continued to be cited in discussions into the 1970s and 1980s. The critique from the Central Committee ultimately paved the way for the 'literary turn' in Soviet propaganda, which began with an effort to recruit creative writers, to pay respect to the status of the author as the creator (*tvorets*) and maker (*sozdatel'*) of the book, and to weed out hack writers (*khal'turshchiki*) (pp. 40–41). The literary turn resulted in the establishment of the 'Fiery Revolutionaries' (FR) series of books.

The FR series responded to the need for political literature to be linguistically appealing and emotionally engaging, and therefore more effective as propaganda. It would consist of artistic sketches of prominent Russian revolutionaries, the precursors of Marxism, Soviet communist figures, and representatives of the international communist and liberation movement. To achieve mass appeal, the texts would be written in an emotional and lively way, and prominent writers would be recruited as authors. The focus on biography matched the post-Stalin reconceptualisation of the self, of *lichnost'*, on the moral transformation of each citizen, and the necessity to release his or her full potential. Even in the Brezhnev era, Jones emphasises, the 'multi-faceted' development of the individual citizen's intellectual, moral and spiritual qualities remained a key refrain of Party discourse.

In terms of sources and methods, *Revolution Rekindled* is based on an extremely thorough study of the entire RF series and the 'communications

circuit' of its production and reception, a term she draws from Robert Darnton, which includes the writing, editing, censoring and reading of the many texts in the series.⁵ To accomplish this, she draws from a daunting array of personal and institutional archives, Soviet journalism and literary criticism, interviews with authors and editors, and literary analysis, to accomplish a synchronic and diachronic survey of how writers, editors, publishers and readers 'negotiated the possibilities and constraints of this propaganda initiative, from its creation in the late thaw to its last publication in the Gorbachev era' (p. 7).

After contextualising the emergence of the series, Chapter 2 explores the self-positioning of the late Soviet writer, arguing that the conventional paradigm which holds that writers elected either to join the 'official' intelligentsia, publish in *gosizdat* and succumb to conformism, or retreat into *samizdat* or *tamizdat* as a means of preserving intellectual freedom, is in need of revision. The experience of writers contributing to FR shows that some moved from *gosizdat* to *samizdat* more slowly, due to their participation, or that they moved between these 'zones' of literature or contributed to official and unofficial publishing at the same time.

The third chapter focuses on the way works in the series experimented with the biographical form. On the one hand, the series developed exceptional literary sophistication in the 1970s with biographies that approached the novel in terms of experimentation with form. The need to evoke unique personalities in an emotionally engaging manner was constantly emphasised by the editors, but this imperative ran up against the danger of committing ideological errors or violating narrative orthodoxies, especially when the subject was a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The dilemma of the authorities, faced with the need to appeal to the reader, and yet respect ideological orthodoxy, also structures the argument of the fourth chapter on the 'historical turn' of the late Soviet period. Again, Jones argues that the awareness by the Soviet authorities of the 'dangers of standardising historical narrative to the point where it failed to impinge of Soviet hearts and minds' opened scope for writers, especially outside the historical profession, to experiment with new approaches, with the FR series providing the platform.

The fascinating discussion of the process of historical assessment through which the books of the FR series are subjected is followed up

⁵ R. Darnton, 'What is the History of Books?', in: *Daedalus*, Vol. 111, No 3 (1982), pp. 65–83.

nicely in the fifth chapter with an analysis of the 'factographic' mode of reception evidenced by most readers (or at least the ones who wrote letters to the publisher). As distinct from the idealised reader of the Thaw, who experienced an 'inexorable liberation from Soviet models of selfhood, history and literature', her idealised reader of late socialism 'continued to engage seriously with models of heroism and subjectivity' represented in the FR series, using Soviet literature to understand and practise these models in their lives (p. 201).

This thesis of the 'moral turn' in Soviet political literature is supported most convincingly in the analysis of books in the FR series covering the People's Will, a theme that attracted a 'striking variety' of writers (p. 171), more than any other theme. Virtually all writers identified admiration for the ideals of the People's Will revolutionaries, and the notion of living in accordance with a strict set of moral precepts, as did many readers. This point should resonate even with students of the Soviet dissident movement. The Lithuanian writer and child deportee Dalia Grinkevičiūtė, for example, often noted how she was inspired by leading representatives of the movement, like Vera Figner.⁶

In the last chapter, the loyalty of the author to the protagonists of her study remains true through the death throes of Politizdat. Even as the state behind the publishing house collapses, her attention on the minutiae of internal bureaucratic processes never wavers, conveying a precious view of the apocalypse from within. 'The year 1987 is often associated primarily with an explosion of *glasnost* and a marked escalation of de-Stalinisation in the Soviet media. For the series, though, the publishing revolution seemed to be receding at exactly this time' (p. 242).

At this point, some readers might wish that Professor Jones would step back from the material, and offer some broader or even theoretical conclusions about Soviet culture, literature and propaganda. Instead, she restricts herself to rather careful summaries of the essentially descriptive points already made. In Lithuania, for example, there is no doubt about the manifest and enduring popularity of mainstream Soviet writers like Justinas Marcinkevičius, but there is also a vibrant debate over the cultural authenticity and political significance of such work under an authoritarian political regime.

Against the background of such debates, *Revolution Rekindled* seems disengaged, content to elaborate upon the sophistication of literary form

⁶V. Davoliūtė, 'Deportee Memoirs and Lithuanian History: The Double Testimony of Dalia Grinkevičiūtė', in: *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 36, No 1 (2005), p. 57.

and the thematic daring of books published at a time when supposedly no such thing could possibly happen; moreover, 'at the very heart of Soviet political publishing' (p. 262). In her second monograph, Jones succeeds admirably in accomplishing the task she set for herself. The strategy of executing a meticulous and focused study of a single book series allows the author to make what is probably the deepest dive into the culture of late socialism to date, and is sure to stimulate broad, and, thanks to her work, better-informed debates on the subject from more comparative and theoretical points of view.

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