
For decades literary scholars and cultural historians spurned the Stalin period, viewing it as a cultural wasteland imposed by decree "from above," with all the Soviet Union's more worthy talents consigned to silence, labor camps, or death. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s groundbreaking studies treating this culture seriously on its own terms began to appear. Monographs like Vera Dunham's In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction (1976) and Katerina Clark's The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual (1981) and the anthology Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1921-1931 (1978), edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick, greatly enriched our understanding of Stalinist society by exploring the patterns and processes that shaped it. The Culture of the Stalin Period—a collection of papers presented at a conference held at the University of Bielefeld in 1986—is the newest entry in the still small, but growing body of Western material on this much understudied topic.

In an attempt to match the complexities of its topic, the volume follows an "interdisciplinary" approach, drawing its contributors from a variety of fields, ranging from politics and history to literature and art history. (We should also note that the gathering together in this volume of West European, emigre, and American scholars greatly enhances its value as a gauge of the current parameters of methodology defining the study of this topic in the West.) To accommodate and give structure to the rather diverse studies united in it, The Culture of the Stalin Period is broken up into five sections under the headings: "Popular Culture, Everyday Life, Ideology," "Art," "Literature," "Architecture," and "Film."

As its section heading suggests, the first division in the book is something of a mixed bag. However, the four articles included in this section raise complementary issues concerning the symptoms and causes of the transformation of Soviet society that took place under Stalin. In the two opening articles, John Barber and Régine Robin challenge the model of Stalinist authoritarianism imposed "from above" on a noncomplicitous populace. In "Working-Class Culture and Political Culture in the 1930s," Barber argues that, while only a minority of workers were political activists, the majority of the working class apparently acquiesced in the Stalinist system, thereby lending it legitimacy. In "Stalinism and Carnival: Organization and Aesthetics of Political Holidays," Rosalinde Sartorti focuses on the regime's failure to engage the people's loyalty and emotions in Soviet holiday festivities, portraying the carnivals of the pre-war period as regimented, centrally-planned demonstrations of harmony, devoid of spontaneity and personal initiative. In the closing article of the section, "Stalinism and the Restructuring of Revolutionary Utopianism," Richard Stites, in a similar vein, chronicles the demise of utopian visions under Stalin, as they fell victim to the increasing hierarchization and stratification of power and privilege in Stalinist society.

The five articles in the second section of the book all deal in one way or another with the genesis or definition of Socialist Realism in art. While, like the articles in the first section, they share common concerns, the authors do not always agree on specifics. Aleksandar Flakar, in "Presuppositions of Socialist Realism," makes several rather cursory observations about contributions made by avant-garde and proletarian
culture theories, the conservative taste of the poorly educated masses, and Gor’kii to the formation of Socialist Realism. Igor Golomstock, in "Problems in the Study of Stalinist Culture," argues against taking nineteenth-century Realism as a model for Socialist Realist art, maintaining that the art of the Stalin period must be viewed as a uniquely twentieth-century phenomenon, comprehensible only within the framework of other totalitarian artistic systems. Boris Groys seconds Golomstock’s rejection of the vision of Socialist Realism as little more than a rehashing of the Realist aesthetic of the preceding century in his article, "The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde." However, as his title suggests, Groys locates the roots of Socialist Realism in the artistic theories of the avant-garde, maintaining that despite the lack of external resemblance between Stalinist art works and the experimental and abstract productions of their predecessors, Socialist Realism realized the aims of the avant-garde in erasing the boundaries between "high" and "utilitarian" art. The central argument of Jorn Guilding’s "Socialist Realism as Institutional Practice: Observations on the Interpretation of the Works of the Art of the Stalin Period" is that attempts to define Socialist Realism in the plastic arts on the basis of style or method are doomed to failure. Rather, he suggests, we should examine the institutional structures that governed the translation of theory into practice. In the concluding article of the section, "The Avant-Garde and Art of the Stalinist Era," Vassily Rakitin takes issue with Groys, maintaining that despite their apparent accommodation to the strictures of Stalinist culture and despite Soviet attempts in the 1960s and 70s to rewrite them into the history of official art, avant-garde artists resisted the incursions of Socialist Realism and neither artistically nor (by implication) ethically bear responsibility for its establishment of hegemony over Soviet art.

The two articles in the third section attack the problem of Socialist Realism in literature. Hans Günther’s "Education and Conversion: The Road to the New Man in the Totalitarian Bildungsroman" again takes up the issue of the family resemblance between artistic works from different totalitarian cultures, comparing Karl Aloys Schenzenzer’s novel Der Hitlerjunge Quex (1932) with Nikolai Ostrovskii’s How the Steel was Tempered (1932-34) to reveal "basic structures of totalitarian aesthetics." (p. 203) In "Satire under Stalinism: Zoshchenko’s Golubaya Kniga and M. Bulgakov’s Master i Margarita," Jochen-Ulrich Peters explores the evolution of the theory and position of satire in Soviet literature from its flowering during the 1920s to its emasculation and decline in the Stalin era, concluding with an examination of how the texts named in the title kept pointed satire alive under Stalin.

Like the articles devoted to literature, those in the "Architecture" section focus on specific topics, rather than presenting broad theoretical overviews, to reveal aspects of the workings of Stalinist culture. In "Moscow in the 1930s and the Emergence of a New City," Vladimir Paperny suggests Lewis Mumford’s account of the birth of an ancient city as a model for the transformation of Moscow under Stalin. In "The Ultimate Palladinist, Outliving Revolution and the Stalin Period: Architect Ivan V. Zholtovskii," Adolf Max Vogt looks at the transformation of architecture from the revolutionary avant-garde of the twenties to the "Cake Decorators’ Baroque" of the Stalin period through the prism of the career of the Stalin Prize laureate Ivan Zholtovskii.

The first of the two articles in the concluding section on film, "From the Avant-Garde to Socialist Realism: Some Reflections on the Signifying Procedures in Eisenstein’s Stachka and Donskoi’s Raduga" by Brenda Bollag, traces the same trajectory of cultural evolution from experimentation to regimentation noted by Vogt and others in the volume, adopting as her points of reference a comparative analysis of the