
Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, two contradictory trends in Soviet history have been apparent. On the one hand, the opening of the archives has allowed scholarly knowledge of the subject to advance with each passing year. At the same time, public interest in Soviet history has declined precipitously. An entire academic discipline, Sovietology, has given up the ghost; Russian language and history courses now struggle to attract students. Publishing reflects the same pattern, with fewer and fewer Russian history books reaching the broad audience which used commonly to attend such bestsellers as Hedrick Smith’s *Russians* (1976) and Richard Pipes’ *Russian Revolution* (1990).

Declining public interest in Russian current affairs clearly reflects the collapse in the country’s power and influence since the end of the Cold War. But this can hardly explain declining interest in Russian history: after all, people still love to read books about Britain’s, France’s, and especially Germany’s recent past, even though the power of these countries went into eclipse long before 1991. Books with ‘Hitler’ or ‘Nazi’ in the title, for example, are virtually guaranteed a mass market audience. Why is there so little similar popular interest in Russian Communism?

Nowhere has the discrepancy in popular historiography between Naziism and Communism been more visible than in the comparative saga of looted gold and art treasures. When the fifty-year anniversary of the end of World War II in the mid-1990s brought such Nazi thefts to public consciousness, there was a veritable barrage of bestselling books on ‘Nazi gold,’ looted art (*The Rape of Europa, The Lost Masters*, etc.), public hearings in U.S. Congress, class action lawsuits, compensation for victims of slave labor, and so forth. And all this hue and cry was over Nazi crimes of at most secondary importance to Hitler’s regime, about which people had known for years. Meanwhile, the last two decades have seen a relentless accumulation of groundbreaking research into illicit Soviet dumping of looted gold, precious metals, artwork, antiques, and icons – and yet these revelations, despite going to the very heart of the ideological and economic nature of Communism, have failed to excite the slightest media interest.

Anne Odom, curator emerita at the Hillwood Estate, and Wendy R. Salmond, a professor of art history at Chapman University, are therefore to be commended for putting together *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia’s Cultural Heritage 1918-1938*. While not – thus far – reaching the kind of broad popular audience which seems to be *de rigueur* for similar books on Nazi-related themes, this collection of scholarly essays should slowly work its way into public consciousness, if for no other reason than owing to its lavish illustrations and elegant presentation. *Treasures into Tractors* is that rare kind of ‘coffee table book’ which is not only easy on the eyes, but has something to say.

The scale of the sell-off of Russia’s cultural patrimony after the Revolution was staggering. Europe’s most colossal gold reserve was gone by 1922, along with vast quantities of looted platinum and diamonds. Next to disappear with church treasures, especially icons. Russia’s great estates, initially turned into ‘proletarian museums,’ were thereafter denuded of paintings and other *objets d’art*. Then came, beginning around 1928, the export of paintings by Old Masters, followed swiftly by the dumping of antiquarian books – most famously the Codex Sinaiticus Bible. In this way thousands of priceless Russian treasures were sold abroad, netting, according to the editors’ best estimate, 19.3 million gold rubles from 1928-1933, most of which was invested in the ‘tractors’ of Stalin’s Five Year Plan – tractors which, as Elena Osokina points out (p. 98), ‘were already rusting in the fields of kolkhoz (collective farms) in the late 1930s.’
It is a shocking story, told here in more detail than ever before. Priscilla Roosevelt paints a devastating portrait of loss in Russia's thousands of estate houses. Natalia Semenova and Elena Solomakha explore the covert selling off of Hermitage holdings (24,000 items were sold between 1928 and 1933), along with the upside-down world of Soviet museums. Elena Osokina's essay, 'Operation Duveen,' expertly fills out the Russian side of the story of high-end Soviet art dumping, first exposed by Robert Williams in *Russian Art and American Money* (1980). Wolfram Koeppe chronicles the fascinating and little-known sales of 18th century David Roentgen desks, clavichords, and lavabos Russian aristocrats, following Catherine the Great's lead, had collected. Wendy Salmond traces the curious provenance of American-bought Russian icons, while Anne Odom does the same for Russian decorative art. Rounding out the volume, a series of essays explain how so many thousands of Russian antique books came to be housed in America, particularly at Harvard, the New York Public Library, and the Library of Congress.

Not everything in this volume is new. Several of the essays are only slightly reworked versions of those which appeared in a German-language volume, *Verkaufte Kultur*, edited by Waltraud Bayer (2001). Bayer's own article on 'Soviet Art Sales to Europe, 1919-1936,' likewise covers much the same ground as her essays in *Verkaufte Kultur*. Robert Davis and Edward Kasinec, in a short survey of the holdings at the New York Public Library, do little more than refer readers to their earlier works on the same subject. Many authors, meanwhile, repeat points made by others in the same volume – an inevitable problem in a collection like this, but one which still grates slightly on the reader.

If one has to mine a bit for the gold nuggets, however, they are still worth the effort. We learn from Elena Osokina, for example (pp. 85-88) that Soviet gold reserves ran down hard between October 1926 and September 1928, which helps explain the sudden upsurge in art exports later that autumn. Waltraud Bayer shows how many paintings by Dutch 'Old Masters,' sold for a song by the Soviets, ended up in Nazi hands – Hitler even boasted about this – until 1945, that is, when Germany's American conquerors, ignorant of their provenance, repatriated them to Holland instead of Russia. Wendy Salmond explains how Soviet agents, like Armand Hammer, deliberately exploited the pretension and gullibility of wealthy nouveau riche Americans – in one case by hiring a fake Russian prince to preside over an auction of bric-à-brac.

There is so much to celebrate in this gorgeous, urgently needed volume that one hesitates to quarrel with it. But for all its breadth and variety – indeed, precisely because of this breadth and variety – *Treasures into Tractors* lacks a certain depth of argument. Only Osokina's and Bayer's articles have much bite, as both lament the colossal waste which saw Russia's cultural patrimony 'sold for a nickel.' Most of the authors refrain from even this kind of mild editorializing, withholding judgment to a fault. This reader, at least, was taken aback when two authors passed on without comment a Soviet museum director's claim that art dumping would 'bring badly needed food and materials to his country' (p. 180) – in retrospect a grotesque remark, now that we know how much grain Stalin exported for hard currency at the height of the Ukrainian famine.

Even the title, 'Treasure into Tractors,' has something of a euphemistic ring. As the present reviewer pointed out in his own *History's Greatest Heist. The Bolshevik Looting of Russia* (2008), the Bolsheviks also imported artillery, armored cars, machine guns, poison gas, and warplanes with the millions of dollars they netted from illicit gold, platinum, diamond and jewelry dumping.

These are quibbles, however. Odom and Salmond have performed a tremendously valuable public service in assembling so much important scholarship in one place, and in a book so attractively presented that it is sure to win attention – even if nowhere near as much attention as it