Book Reviews

Michael David-Fox


Michael David-Fox’s monograph takes a multifaceted approach to offer a valuable new perspective on the Stalin-period Soviet Union and its relationship to the world outside its borders. The book draws upon and revises some previously published journal articles, though it also incorporates much interesting new research. It is divided into three sections on “Russian and Soviet Modernity” and “Ideology, Concepts and Institutions” and “Mediators and Travelers,” though one might also split it another way between “theories and concepts” and “empirical case studies.” Excepting the introduction, the first four chapters deal with various theoretical and historiographical questions, the final three with concrete historical enquiry, and are intended to be read in the light of, or perhaps as practical applications of, the points raised in the first section of the book. The focus on transnational history is a useful way of exposing new dimensions and foregrounding issues of cultural circulation, borrowing and interaction captured by David-Fox’s term “entangled modernities” (p. 47). The study of the cross-border travel of cultural products and people has much to offer historians: not only does it break down binaries and allow for the contextualization of Soviet history in an international perspective, it also allows for the excavation of fine detail, including that relating to personal relationships and other micro-practices.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the literature on Russian and Soviet modernity and the historiographical debates between scholars of the modernity school and those who advocate neo-traditionalism. In this analysis, neither approach is totally adequate for understanding Soviet – especially Stalinist – society. David-Fox quite rightly points out the “imperative to move beyond conceptual frameworks that segregate intentions and consequences, ideas and circumstances, political programs and social reality, above and below” (p. 45). Consequently, he suggests that by adopting a middle ground that accepts the possibility of multiple and failed modernities, it will be possible to reconcile
investigations of universalism and particularism. Chapter 2 sharpens the focus on the particular line of development followed by Soviet modernity, especially its civilizing mission that drew the state, the intelligentsia, and the masses into a joint imagined project for development. In this examination of Soviet modernity, continuity between the imperial period and the Bolshevik/Soviet era is emphasized. Taken together, these chapters establish the principal aim of the book, which is to challenge dominant notions of Soviet history, especially the polar oppositions between Soviet exceptionalism and approaches that emphasize historical and geographical continuities, termed “shared modernity” (p. 3); David-Fox challenges these conceptualizations, offering a “move to the radical center” that charts a route in between the “dueling binary oppositions that have shaped modern Russian studies.” One result of this approach is to ensure that the concept of modernity functions as a heuristic tool rather than the end point of discussion, as a “potential opening” (p. 47) for future work.

The book’s second section shifts focus to the important role of ideology in the Soviet context, once again seeking to chart a course through a theoretical middle ground between universalism and particularism. Chapters 3 and 4 seek to restore ideology as an important topic central to an understanding of the Soviet system, examining how ideology can be conceptualized in terms of a worldview, a discourse or a performance. The concept of cultural revolution is also examined, in an attempt to place this scholarly short hand under scrutiny (and at the same time hinting that other clichés in Soviet historiography might also bear reconsideration), producing interesting results, although the comparison with the Chinese cultural revolution perhaps seems like something of an afterthought.

The most fascinating chapters of the book are those which apply the theoretical discussion to richly detailed concrete case studies of institutions, interpreters and mediators in Stalin-era culture. Chapter 5 discusses the takeover of the Academy of Sciences by the Communist Academy in terms of the particularly Soviet dualism between party and state and the upheaval of the Great Break. The eventual “synthesis” between the two systems complicates the usual idea of a simple “defeat” by the party over the intelligentsia, but rather a “complex merger between the institutions and the traditions they represented” (p. 158). This chapter on exchange and merging between institutions anticipates the study of relationships across borders in the final, trans-national section of the book. The sixth chapter focuses on Romain Rolland’s relationship with Mariia Kudasheva, whom he would marry in 1934, and her role in bringing him close to the Soviet Union. The roles of intermediaries such as Kudasheva, whom David-Fox terms an “intimate mediator” (p. 166), were complex, since they were squeezed between the privilege and influence of their links with Westerners and Stalinist politics. With one foot in each “camp,” Kudasheva was