



Alexei Elfimov. *Russian Intellectual Culture in Transition: The Future in the Past.* Münster, Hamburg, London: Lit Verlag, 2003. 209 pp.

THE RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA NOW

At least since the *Vekhi* collection of the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘intelligentsia-bashing’ has been a popular strategy in the self-reflective practices of Russian intellectuals. In this respect Alexei Elfimov’s scathing critique of the current, post-perestroika, ‘paradigm’ of Russian intellectual discourse in the humanities is hardly new. However, the author’s principal target is less the more familiar ‘organic’ (‘literary’ or ‘philosophical’) intelligentsia, and more the somewhat narrower, and traditionally less prominent, field of the humanities and social sciences *academe*, although he clearly also dwells more broadly on the ‘organic’ intelligentsia’s influence on post-Soviet society and culture.

Elfimov debunks the current Russian humanities scholarship above all for its distinctly backward-looking and absurdly uncritical obsession with ‘cultural restoration’ and ‘revival of the past’, for its utter lack of concern with the needs of the present Russian society, and for its conservative unreceptiveness to progressive cultural

and intellectual developments. Elfimov links this fetishisation of the past to what he describes as the Russian intelligentsia's traditional disdain for 'the present moment' and 'modernity' as such, explicitly echoing similar criticisms voiced already by Chaadaev in the early nineteenth and Berdyaev in the early twentieth century. Elfimov is, however, more interested in tracing the roots of the recent Russian scholarly infatuation with 'cultural restoration' to the contradictory status of the *Soviet* academic community, and especially in the latter's search, from the 1960s onwards, for a more secure moral and intellectual identity in which it would avoid an overtly interested association with state bureaucracy and ideology while remaining inescapably bound to these.

Elfimov discusses the unusual institutional expansion of the discipline of history as the principal umbrella-science of the Soviet humanities, and, in this context, he points out the important disjuncture that occurred between, on the one hand, the understanding of history as a discourse of cultural continuity and inheritance, and on the other, a normative form of history that was used in Soviet ideology specifically to justify historical discontinuity and the cultural autonomy of the post-1917 era. While the latter discourse gradually became enclosed within the narrow framework of bureaucratised academic historiography, the former was the one that took on the role of the intelligentsia's true (nostalgic) search for its own (as well as the nation's) 'authentic' cultural and moral identity, which inevitably referred back to the 'forgotten' pre-Revolutionary times, and especially its aristocratic heritage. Elfimov reveals a similar sort of development in Soviet architecture with its shift, especially in the late 1970s and 1980s, towards the policy of conserving and restoring 'historic' buildings, which were seen as objects invested with 'culture' simply by the fact that they belonged to the pre-Revolutionary past, regardless of their actual aesthetic value or historical significance.

As regards the 1990s, Elfimov especially ridicules some of the academic intelligentsia's unsuccessful attempts to achieve political prominence in the post-Soviet era and to emulate various pre-Revolutionary trends by reviving the 'good old' traditions and institutions, such as high-culture clubs, salons and literary societies, yet failing to achieve anything resembling the cultural authoritativeness and social prominence that it craved and that it associated with Imperial times.

Elfimov also argues that post-perestroika institutional reforms, allegedly intended to 'revitalise' the old Soviet academic structures, failed miserably, primarily because of a reluctance by the political establishment to eliminate the conservative 'old guard' *nomenklatura*, who are still dominant in the post-Soviet academe, especially at the bureaucratic level, and who continue to determine the fate of the humanities and the social sciences. According to Elfimov, it is this

‘old guard’ who are the most keen to maintain the conservative paradigm of ‘cultural restoration’ and who resist the most progressive trends from the West, such as the various critically-oriented post-modernist methodologies. Elfimov also shows how some apparent disciplinary ‘innovations’ that occurred in the post-Soviet era were in actual fact mere mirages of change. He especially debunks the new discipline of ‘culturology’, which he portrays as a flaky ‘philosophy of culture’ that achieved surprising success in post-Soviet Russia mainly because it was taken over by the former *nomenklatura* academics who used it as a substitute for disciplines such as ‘Marxist philosophy’ and ‘scientific communism’. Finally, Elfimov dwells throughout his book on how absurd the academe’s ‘restorative’ attitudes ended up being when they started filtering into general public discourse (that of the mass media or state officialdom, for example), where they became their own most revealing caricatures.

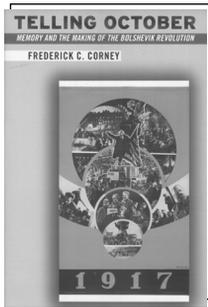
The main questions that Elfimov poses in this book (how intellectual identities in the Russian humanities and social sciences have changed in the past couple of decades and what exactly has impeded the development of a more critically informed and progressive discourse in these disciplines) are indeed of vital importance to the (self-) understanding of contemporary Russian scholarship. Judging by his introduction, Elfimov seems to have been perfectly aware that in order to answer these questions convincingly he would have needed to carry out a thorough socio-anthropological study of the Russian academic field in this key transitional period (1980s–90s). However, for some reason, Elfimov consciously eschewed a serious approach of this sort, and instead decided to go for the ‘soft’ option of mostly venting his exasperation with the current state of the Russian humanities through this ‘critical reflection’, rather than by writing an ‘anthropological monograph’ proper, as he himself puts it.

Yet somewhat annoyingly, Elfimov still maintains that his endeavour is a ‘scholarly work’ of a cultural-anthropological kind, albeit of modest proportions. For sure, the book provides a sustained intellectual argument, discusses its own ‘methodology’, provides systematic footnoting, a name index, and a decent bibliography, while the text is studded with frequent (if at times rather spurious) references to the theories of Foucault and Bourdieu. And yet Elfimov’s argumentation is quite obviously directly involved in the current politics of the field, and for that reason all too easily slips into an oversimplistic and biased polemic.

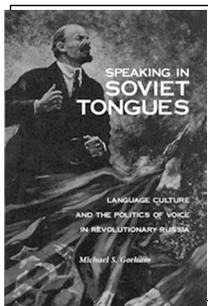
The main problem lies not in the fact that the author has an axe to grind, but that he simply fails to support properly his otherwise interesting and most often valid points. Although he claims to be focusing primarily on the academic environment, his argumentation is based almost entirely on textual examples from the general press, from his

own observations, and from interviews with a handful of scholars who seem to hold a view identical to the author's about the present (sorry) state of the Russian humanities and who are cited extensively in support of the author's own critique (almost in the way a journalist, rather than an ethnographer, might use quotations from respondents). This unfortunately leaves Elfimov's otherwise important claims wide open to counter-debunking, especially by those 'old guard' scholars that he himself rightly criticises, yet who would no doubt leap at the opportunity to expose (with little effort) the wobbly and 'unscientific' architecture of his critique. Even more regrettable is the fact that Elfimov has simply missed the opportunity to write a truly enlightening and profound, rigorous and objective study of such an important topic as the culture of Russian humanities academe at this crucial transitional juncture. The present book offers but a vague and somewhat disappointing promise of such an enterprise.

Andy Byford



Frederick C. Corney. *Telling October. Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. 320 pp.



Michael S. Gorham. *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia.* DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003. 277 pp.

THE LANGUAGE OF REVOLUTION

The decade and a half following the Bolshevik revolution has long been acknowledged as one of the most interesting, diverse and unpredictable periods of Russian cultural history, a time when Soviet culture had not yet assumed the

rigid Stalinist contours of the 1930s and beyond. Much attention has been paid in the scholarship to the utopian and experimental tenor of the creation of early ‘Bolshevik culture’ (notably in the eponymous volume edited by Stites, Gleason and Kenez, and in other works by both Stites and Kenez), in which both the content and form of the fledgling state’s ‘Grand Narrative’ were imagined in a variety of breathtakingly creative and original ways. Studies of the rich literary culture of the era of the New Economic Policy, including the motley band of ‘fellow traveller’ writers who contributed so much to its vitality, have often set up an opposition between the relatively flexible cultural policy of the 1920s and the standardisation process, culminating in the 1934 Writers Union Congress, when Socialist Realism definitively eclipsed and eliminated the diversity of the 1920s. As Katerina Clark and Jeffrey Brooks have argued, the ‘Stalinisation’ of Soviet culture, though much delayed, was largely successful in eliminating the aesthetic variety and complexity of the culture of the early post-revolutionary era. Yet the reasons for this delay, and the ways in which Soviet culture operated in this intermediary zone between Bolshevik revolution and Stalinist conservatism, have not been explored in detail in the scholarship.

New monographs by Frederick Corney and Michael Gorham now seek to fill this gap, with meticulous readings of newly available archival material and under-used published sources that shed much light on the contestation and uncertainty that surrounded, and in many ways impeded, the emergence of a definitive ‘Soviet culture’. Their micro-studies of, respectively, the evolution of the definitive Bolshevik ‘founding narrative’ and the development of a hegemonic language of the state, may productively be read in tandem as parallel, mutually reinforcing narratives of a party-state in search of its own identity and, more importantly, of its relationship with the people in whose name it had carried out the revolution. If the Bolshevik party found it difficult to stabilise the forms in which it represented itself to the people, it was yet more difficult, both authors claim, for the people to understand the actions, aims, even the language, of the Bolsheviks. Yet both studies conclude relatively optimistically, not only indicating the party’s ultimate success in forming a stable historical narrative and language, but also suggesting that these narratives achieved a measure of popular resonance. At the same time, for all that they document instances and examples of syncretism, assimilation and accommodation between the competing visions of revolutionary history and Soviet language, both studies ultimately replicate the foregoing scholarship’s emphasis on growing cultural restriction. Thus, whilst they do not fundamentally reshape our understanding of the transition from the revolution to the Stalinist culture of the 1930s, as outlined above, both studies offer richly nuanced and detailed accounts of the complex institutional,

interpersonal and cultural force-field from which archetypal Soviet culture would eventually emerge.

Frederick Corney's fascinating study explores the gap between the Bolshevik revolution and its canonical representation in Soviet public culture, a gap of at least ten years' duration (the 1927 jubilee being, in both Corney's view and that of the party, the first successful public narration of Bolshevik history). Yet within this fissure Corney finds not a gaping absence of narratives and memories, but rather a chaotic abundance of approaches to 'memory work' and commemoration that jostled for official prominence and approval throughout the first post-revolutionary decade. The volume examines these variants chronologically, proceeding through the successive anniversaries of the revolution(s) that punctuated the period, showing a broad shift *from the theatricalization of October to its institutionalization as historical memory in the course of the 1920s*' (p. 2). Although this linear structure is sometimes repetitious and tends to obscure the broader lines of the argument, it illuminates the multiple contingencies, set-backs, reversals and disappointments that attended the creation of the party's 'master narrative' of the revolution and, ultimately, of itself. The centrality within this narrative of 1917, and more particularly of the incidents in Petrograd and the Winter Palace, was by no means inevitable or immediate, and it is the rigorous exposure of the contingent and constructed nature of this seemingly impersonal, timeless narrative that is one of the most interesting and innovative features of Corney's work.

Drawing on central and local party sources (most interestingly, documents from branches of the party's main history-writing commission, the *Istpart*), pro-Bolshevik and anti-Bolshevik memoir accounts and a broad range of contemporary journalism, literature and film, Corney shows that the party was concerned from its earliest days in power with displaying and narrating its past and its traditions as a means of legitimating its power, both to members of the party itself, and to their often uninterested or uncomprehending public. The 'invented traditions' of Bolshevism and its founding myths nevertheless proved difficult to construct; the process was hampered not only by the evident problems of resources and institutional immaturity that plagued the party during the Civil War and the 1920s, but also by the absence of a central blueprint for the institutionalisation and canonisation of party memory. Both the central and local branches of *Istpart*, and also the highest party authorities, struggled to define the kinds of archival, biographical and oral-historical sources that ought to be used to piece together this memory narrative. Canonical memories only emerged through the successive failures of the historians, local party officials, artists, film-makers and other figures enlisted on to the project, and by the official

castigations that drew attention to these. Despite these setbacks, as Corney traces, a centralised, canonical narrative of the revolution steadily emerged, into which people learned to inscribe their own experiences, reshaping them to fit within the official limits on the articulation of memory.

Corney's study eloquently demonstrates the difficulty with which a coherent vision of Bolshevism was developed and disseminated to the masses after the revolution. Michael Gorham's volume takes a more microscopic perspective, examining the building blocks of such narratives, by focusing attention on the very language and terminology through which the new power expressed itself. Like Corney, Gorham emphasises the confusion that accompanied both the drafting of a new, Bolshevik language, commensurate with the scale and importance of the revolution, and also the reception of this language. In a sense, his story is the prelude to that told in studies by Stephen Kotkin and Jochen Hellbeck, who depict Soviet 'subjects' adroitly, even strategically, deploying the language of the state in the 1930s and beyond. Gorham claims not to subscribe entirely to Kotkin's idea of 'speaking Bolshevik' (p. 5), but his study suggests important ways in which Soviet language developed, from very inauspicious beginnings, to a point where such confident language use was at least a feasible point of aspiration for ordinary Soviet citizens.

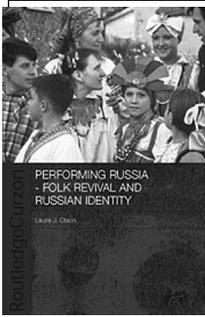
The majority of the study is devoted to documenting the rich variety of theories that competed for prominence in the post-revolutionary debate on the creation of a new, Bolshevik language. Responding to the cataclysm of the 1917 revolution, these linguistic theorists — ranging from linguists and *littérateurs* to politicians, including Lenin himself — proposed a diverse range of possibilities for the language of the new era. Gorham shows how the desire to show due reverence to the 'authentic' voice of the proletariat and peasantry was undercut by calls, some from powerful figures such as Gorky, to transform the coarse, backward diction of ordinary people into the purer Russian language of the nineteenth-century literary classics. The linguistic debate therefore largely hinged on contrasting perspectives of the pre-revolutionary Russian language, with one side viewing it as hopelessly outmoded and unrepresentative of the masses, whilst the other side conceived of the revolution as the opportunity to endow the entire nation with the same 'classical' linguistic competence. As historians such as Sheila Fitzpatrick and Lynn Mally have shown, these competing pressures played out on a broader scale in the controversies concerning Proletkult and Narkompros in the period. In this respect, the language debate exhaustively documented by Gorham constitutes another, valuable case-study of the anxieties about proletarian culture of the 1920s. Meanwhile, although the concluding chapters offer much new detail

on the emergence of Socialist Realist language, the overall conclusion, highlighting the eventual standardisation and clarification of party language, also echoes the conclusions of previous scholarship on the subject.

Gorham's distinctive contribution lies rather in his analysis of the anxieties that surrounded the imagined reception of the new Bolshevik language and the slippages that occurred between its reception and its popular reproduction. Tracing the different 'ideal' modes of disseminating 'Bolshevik speak' after the revolution, from the early model of charismatic oral transmission of the party message to the growing preference for the written word in the late 1920s, Gorham shows how works of literature, especially those by 'fellow travellers' such as Pilnyak and Platonov, problematised the reception of party discourse. Through analysis of a selection of scenes concerning language transmission, taken from an impressively wide range of Soviet and Soviet-era literature, Gorham highlights the pervasive theme of popular incomprehension of party orators and party texts in post-revolutionary literature. He postulates that this spectre of popular alienation haunted the party throughout the NEP and motivated the party to codify a new language at the end of the 1920s, drawing on all the competing theories of the early post-revolutionary period whilst blunting their iconoclastic and 'revolutionary' edge, and placing a premium on clarity and accessibility.

Like Corney, Gorham therefore charts the descent into conservatism over the course of the 1920s, whilst also showing the Bolsheviks' aptitude for amalgamation and syncretic appropriation of precedents and heterodox views in forging 'new' cultural forms. In both cases, the authors' focus on a time when Soviet power was still in the process of 'becoming' produces rich, often dense, but always interesting insights into what Soviet culture could have been, as well as what it, eventually, became.

Polly Jones



Laura Olson. *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity.* New York and London: Routledge Curzon, 2004. 304 pp.

(RE)-INVENTING RUSSIAN TRADITIONS

Laura Olson's fascinating book takes on a surprisingly neglected topic in the field of Russian history: the critical role of folk culture in the construction of modern Russian identity. Perhaps the greatest paradox of the folk culture phenomenon is that it became a subject of academic, political, and commercial interest at a time when the rural culture with which it was associated was already on the wane. Far from representing something traditional and pre-modern, the fascination with folk culture, as Olson suggests, was thus a quintessentially modern obsession. Focusing on Russian folk music, she situates interest in folk culture within the larger process of imagining Russia as a modern national community. Thus, when folk-culture experts conducted fierce debates about folk music, they also were talking about the Russian nation and its proper place in the community of industrialising European nations.

Olson's narrative begins with the discovery by educated elites that the nation might just reside in the 'folk': following the lead of Rousseau and the Brothers Grimm, Russia's citified folk-culture experts began treating rural folk life as an essential antidote to the perceived evils and falseness of (their own) urban life. She then traces attempts to build the Russian nation through folk music in various political and historical contexts, from the waning Tsarist era, on through the Soviet period, and ending with the post-Soviet era. She posits a basic tension between the existence of grassroots folklore and

the production of manipulated, state-and-intelligentsia directed 'folklorism'. The distinction reflected an ongoing struggle between two very different visions of the Russian nation: one a grassroots democratic Russia and the other a top-down authoritarian society. The chapters on the post-Soviet era are especially strong. They rely on primary rather than secondary sources, including extensive interviews with Russian folklorists and folk artists as well as the author's own eyewitness observations.

While the book tells a fascinating and important story, it has weaknesses, most of which concern Olson's characterisation of the Soviet period. In her description of the folklore of the Stalin period, she takes a cue from the unfortunately titled book on folklore by Frank J. Miller, *Folklore for Stalin*.¹ Like Miller's book (and also like many of Olson's anti-Stalinist informants), Olson relegates the folklore of the Stalin era to the category 'pseudo', which then becomes a foil for the later post-Stalinist development of a more genuine 'grassroots' folklore. The distinction is based on the assumption that anything produced by the Stalinist state must be 'fake', because it originates above from authoritarian state planners, while anything produced spontaneously from below in the grassroots must be 'real'. The book makes little attempt to determine if that is a characterisation with which most Stalinist consumers and producers of folklore would agree. Similarly, Olson describes the folklore of the Stalin period as 'kitsch' and 'fakelore', but it is not clear if many people in the Stalin period would have shared those sentiments. Such judgements suggest an occasional unwillingness to look at the issue of folklore from all of the historical actors' perspectives.

Equally problematic is Olson's frequent characterisation of a folk-music revival movement in the 1970s and 1980s as an 'oppositional' movement. But what did the revivalists oppose? If, as the author sometimes suggests, the revivalists of the 1970s and 1980s opposed the status-quo in state folk-art policies, does this mean they were anti-Soviet? The author at one point equates the revivalists with the phenomenon of dissidence in the Brezhnev era (which she problematically implies was widespread), but she never fleshes out the nature and importance of their dissidence, beyond the fact that a few of these folklorists staged unofficial concerts and were followed around by KGB agents (and who wasn't?). These problems might have been aided by more attention to the growing historiography of resistance and opposition in Soviet history.

More fundamentally, one could argue that far from being oppositionists, the folk revivalists of the late-Soviet era were simply taking

¹ F. J. Miller. *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era*. Armonk, N.Y., 1990.

advantage of growing opportunities provided by the state to research and publicise the traditions of the Russian nation. From the early 1960s onward, the regime grew increasingly tolerant and supportive of citizen initiatives aimed at preserving and propagating traditional Russian architecture and folk culture (including religious icons). In this context, the fact that a group of officially recognised musicologists might take their own initiative to 'save' Russian folk singing traditions, and be allowed to do so, hardly appears oppositional. On the contrary, Olson's oppositionists seemed not to have suffered much from their opposition, unlike genuine dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov. During the late-Soviet era most enjoyed an official 'intelligentsia' social status and standard of living far higher than the vast majority of rural residents they idealised.

Andrew Jenks