

**Mikhail Robinson.** *Sud'by akademicheskoi elity: Otechestvennoe slavianovedenie (1917 — nachalo 1930-x godov)*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Indrik', 2004. 432 pp.

### Literary Academia under Soviet Power

Mikhail Robinson's book studies the generation of Russian Slavists established professionally before the Revolution, but continuing to work under the Soviets and experiencing a traumatic transformation of their scholarly institution. The period examined is the first decade and a half of Soviet rule and the monograph focuses on the struggle for survival of a scholarly community whose entire mode of existence — social as well as intellectual — was stripped down to its bare foundations.

The study is based on a large (if inevitably fragmentary) correspondence of around 60 scholars (mostly Slavists), and the nature of this source in many ways determines the vantage point from which we are presented the 'academic elite' of this era. Robinson highlights the significance of this informal type of communication among colleagues, who came to see themselves as 'comrades in arms' even in cases where they happened to be bitter academic opponents and had little else in common apart from their professional connections and a shared sense of be-

longing to a historically unique scholarly generation. Robinson is especially keen to reveal *the people* behind the well-known academic names and ranks, and he achieves this extremely well by weaving his narrative around continuous direct quotations from scholars' letters. The humanity of Robinson's subjects is unveiled both in the informal register through which the scholars speak and in the actual content of their epistolary exchanges, which expose above all else this elite's *anxieties of everyday life*.

In addition to the problem of basic physical survival (feeding one's family and securing adequate heating during winter), the shock of unprecedented economic difficulties clearly affected the scholars' identity as intellectuals by vocation and their perception of their 'proper' place in society. In a different way, the constant unpredictable moves to and from the provinces, as well as the splitting of this academic group between those who had emigrated (mostly to neighbouring Slavic countries) and those who preferred to remain in Soviet Russia, caused further dislocation and fragmentation of professional priorities, routines, hierarchies and identities within the collective. A prevailing sense of powerlessness resulted not just from the chaos of social turmoil or from the loss of professional rights, but also from the scaling down, in the new political circumstances, of the academic elite's sense of general social responsibility.

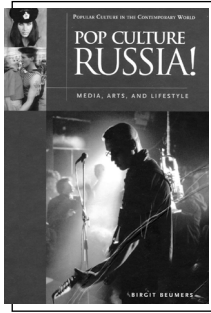
Yet Robinson's account of this generation is ultimately one of coping and survival rather than defeat and desperation. Hunger, suffered by all in the first years after the Revolution, only reinforced a sense of community among these scholars, instigating informal initiatives to send provisions to colleagues who were the most in need. The constant underlying panic about falling victim to random state terror usually went hand in hand with the busy activity of trying to assist friends who had ended up in such a predicament by pulling the few 'strings' that some members of this collective still had at their disposal. Similarly, the sense of doom at the radical reforms (for which read, purges) of academic establishments was invariably balanced by scathing and sarcastic private dismissals of the reigning 'Marxist' ideological fetishes and methodological fads (e.g. Marrism, Pokrovskyism, sociologism) propounded by the new authorities and the 'red' professoriate. Robinson also emphasises the remarkable (Quixotic) persistence of this 'old guard' in dutifully carrying on with their labours, trying to fulfil their academic responsibilities and preserve as much as possible certain established scholarly traditions, despite material obstacles, institutional frustrations and onslaughts of illness and depression.

Robinson does not explicitly analyse the rhetoric of the correspondence that serves as his source, but (in ethnographic fashion) allows his subjects to 'speak for themselves'. Particularly interesting in this

rich, mosaic-like, polyphony of voices is the odd intermixing, often in a single breath, of old-woman-like moans about exorbitant black-market prices and aching aged bodies, and the boyishly excited 'shop talk' about new research endeavours or a fortunate resurfacing of some rare manuscript collection. Yet despite cheery (albeit ironic) remarks about the variety of daily activities that had become a regular part of every academic's life (such as chopping firewood or dragging heavy buckets of water up the stairs) the fact that scholars were forced to engage in the physically draining matter of pure material survival was regularly interpreted by this community as an irresponsible 'waste of resources' that had sent to a premature grave many an irreplaceable brain. Extremely valuable is also Robinson's depiction of the internal workings of some key relations within this academic community in the semi-personal semi-professional correspondence between 'the masters' and 'the disciples'. His analysis reveals the intricate mechanisms of academic patronage and the forging of academic 'schools' and 'families', paralleling official learned institutions that were being subjected to such unpredictable ideological restructurings.

Robinson's book is of course not just about Slavic Studies. Although students of the history of Slavonic philology in Russia will no doubt find in this monograph the most detailed account to date of this discipline's fate in the early Soviet era, the disciplinary specificity of this academic field fades behind a more general study of a 'fallen' scholarly elite, for which the network of Slavists is just a telling case-study. Robinson is not the first to examine the fate of the pre-Revolutionary academic intelligentsia in the Soviet 1920s–30s, but the originality of his approach (foregrounding the patchwork of personal correspondence in all its linguistic and empirical richness) represents an indispensable complement to existing historical studies of a more sociological and political bent.

*Andy Byford*



**Birgit Beumers.** *Pop Culture Russia!: Media, Arts, and Lifestyle.* (Series: Popular Cultures in the Contemporary World). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005.

### The Culture Bazaar

As is well known, the word ‘culture’ can be applied to a wide variety of different concepts. In part following the way that Beumers herself uses the term, here ‘culture’ will be employed in a slightly unusual way for this journal, a way that is not exactly anthropological: as in the term ‘*cultural institution*’ (p. 255). Beumers’s book, as its title suggests, is in fact nothing less than an encyclopaedic study of late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian popular culture. It collects together information relating to quite different and, it might seem, very distinctive cultural phenomena — ranging from religion to TV serials and from sport to cafes and restaurants. As it turns out, even in restaurants one lives ‘not by bread alone’. The overall effect is a very striking fragment from the world we, as Russians, currently inhabit.

I have not had the opportunity to look directly at other books in the series ‘Popular Cultures in the Contemporary World’, all of whose titles and subtitles have the same format as this one. Among the places the series addresses are not just individual nation-states (India, Japan, Israel, France), but also large geographical territories that are assumed to have a unified popular culture (Latin America, the Caribbean, West Africa). It is possible that the structure of Beumers’s book is in fact modelled on some kind of general plan.

The book opens with a dateline running from the death of Chernenko (1985) to Putin’s victory in the presidential elections of 2004. The

Introduction also has the character of a historical overview, here of a discursive kind, with the different, chronologically arranged, sections pointing to the main landmarks and tendencies in Russian culture at this period, to the relations between culture and power and of culture with governing ideologies. It opens, however, by addressing the unavoidable question of how the term ‘popular culture’ is to be applied to late Soviet society, given that, unlike the commercially-driven entertainment industry in the contemporary West,<sup>1</sup> mass culture was expected to play an educative role (‘raising cultural levels’, as the Soviet term had it) and to serve explicitly political ends. The state of things in today’s Russia is different, but some of its characteristics remain completely Soviet.

Beumers’s Introduction is followed by a series of chapters, each with its own bio-bibliographical apparatus (including short notes on the various people mentioned and definitions of specific concepts used, as well as lists of further reading (in English only). Chapter One deals with the media (TV, radio, the Internet, newspapers and magazines), and it is followed by chapters on visual culture (particularly crafts and architecture, with sections on churches and icons); on the theatre (including *estrada* [the musical hall] and the circus); on music (the chapter is in fact called ‘Music and Words’, and includes a section on youth slang); on ‘popular entertainments’ (sport, popular literature, TV serials); and on the culture of consumption, including advertising, leisure, festivals and holidays, and fashion. The chapters include vivid photo-illustrations (often from the *Kommersant* archive), and there are also text-boxes with concrete examples of genres — translations into English of song texts, a list of church festivals, a list of popular souvenirs, a synopsis of the plot of Ilf and Petrov’s *The Twelve Chairs*, and so on. The examples are uniformly striking and well selected. At the end of the book is a short glossary (three pages long) and a subject index.

In Chapter One, the section dealing with Russian TV records all the upheavals of privatisation and re-nationalisation, and uses concrete examples (Chernobyl, Vilnius, the August 1991 putsch, the shoot-out at the White House in 1993, coverage of presidential elections) to demonstrate how handling of news programmes has changed in the post-Soviet era. The role of the media in political trials is described, and a survey of TV entertainment set out. Less space is given to radio, but print media are described fairly thoroughly and there is even a special section on ‘thick journals’.

‘Visual Culture’ begins with a very detailed and clear survey of the history and achievements of Soviet and (more particularly) post-

<sup>1</sup> In the mid twentieth century, Western mass culture was sometimes also expected to play an educative role — as in the case of the BBC under Lord Reith, for instance. [Editor].

Soviet cinema, including animation — thus, there are two pages on Masyanya, for instance. Beumers notes the growing role of visual culture in modern Russia by comparison with Soviet Russia, and includes in her discussion, among other things, conceptualist installation artists, the Mitki avant-garde literary group, and the post-perestroika *matreshka* dolls modelled on political leaders (which, as it turns out, are known as *patreshkas* rather than *matreshkas*). The changing landscape of city memorials is considered — the former idols have vanished and radically new ones have been set up — and so is the ‘Luzhkov style’ in modern Moscow architecture. The image of the modern Russian city, as Beumers argues, is directly linked with consumption — an argument that logically leads to a discussion of trade at this point. The final six pages are essentially a tourist’s outline guide to the Orthodox Church.

Beumers’s own area of academic specialisation is Russian theatre and cinema, and the chapter on the theatre deserves the highest praise for its fullness, its informativeness, and the clarity with which the information is conceptualised. The general emphasis on ‘large-scale’, public forms of theatrical art at first makes it seem strange that a section on narrative jokes, with examples from the Soviet and perestroika era, is included here, but in fact the logic is impeccable: here we see life itself becoming a performance in the mirror of these miniature playlets for private consumption. The influence of the cinema on everyday language (including Soviet anecdotes) is also most perspicaciously and appropriately recorded by Beumers. (At this point we might note that there has long been a plan to create a dictionary of the verbal clichés traceable to the popular Soviet cinema, a plan in fact realised not long ago.)<sup>1</sup> However, Beumers’s examples of popular sayings from films (p. 180) may well mystify readers who have not seen these films and who have no idea of the context in which the sayings were originally uttered.

‘Music and Words’, Beumers’s chapter on Russian pop and rock, begins with a short paragraph on jazz (from Tsfasman to the mid-1980s), then continues with the Russian bards (particularly Vysotsky), after which follows a detailed and extremely competent explanation of the central issues behind the chapter, accompanied by an excursion into socio-linguistic issues (youth slang and swearing). If he or she reads this chapter before landing up in a youth *tusovka*, an adventurous foreigner won’t run the risk of being shown up, particularly if they make their music purchases with the help of the neighbouring sections. Here again, though, one wonders what the reader who, unlike Beumers, has never heard any of the music

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<sup>1</sup> A.Yu. Kozhevnikov. *Krylatye frazy i aforizmy otechestvennogo kino*. SPb, 2004.

described and who only understands the English translations of the terms given, will make of this discussion.

The most heterogeneous chapter is the next, 'Popular Entertainment'. It includes a sketch portrait of Soviet and post-Soviet sport, followed by a survey of mass-market literature and then of TV serials. One has the impression that this is simply a place where material that didn't really suit any of the other categories was collected together, so that it could be dealt with en bloc.

The chapter on consumer culture concluding the book is of considerable interest. True, the sections on holidays and superstitions read more like something out of a fashionable guidebook, and have very little to do with consumer culture in the first place. However, the rest of the material could easily have formed the starting point of an extremely interesting specialist study. Unfortunately, a certain lack of conceptualisation and generalisation is evident here — derivable in part from the aims of this particular series, which is evidently meant to consist of compendiums of information, rather than academic analyses.

All in all, the facts, evaluations, and explanations that Beumers sets out provoke few serious objections. A few touches of unevenness in assessing the importance of events and other points of detail do not spoil the picture. Well, true, Beumers mentions the fact that the pop-group Time Machine got first prize at Tbilisi music festival in 1980, but strangely, not the uproar caused by Aquarium's guest appearance on the same occasion; the start of the composer Aleksandra Pakhmutova's career is somehow assigned to the 1970s (p. 8); Sergei Kurekhin is said to have died of brain cancer (p. 258), and not of cardiac sarcoma, as actually was the case. But fluffs of this kind inevitably crop up in books with an encyclopaedic range, and there aren't enough of them here to spoil the general picture.

I will, though, mention a few points of criticism that relate to more than technical details. For instance, the section 'Youth Culture and Slang' includes not just some unexceptionable comments on sociolinguistics, but also some actual mistakes (for example, the comments on the decline in the number of words in the Russian language in the twentieth century by comparison with the nineteenth — it is presumably Soviet dictionaries that are responsible for this impression — or the claim that *notarius* [notary public] came into the language after perestroika).<sup>1</sup> Besides, interpreting slang and swear-words is quite a sophisticated activity, requiring a good deal of feeling for language and knowledge of context — relying on native-

<sup>1</sup> In fact the services of the notary public were required for property transfers etc. in the Soviet period too, not to speak of before 1917. [Editor].

speaker informants is no substitute. On the whole, Beumers copes quite well, but the valid examples listed vie with some much odder examples (for instance *ostakanitsya* [to take a glass] and *ografinitsya* [to take a carafe] as variants of 'to drink'), while the term *bazarit* [to chat] is linked with the spread of commercial culture generally (on the grounds that it is derived from the word *bazar*). Somewhat startling is the translation of the word *pizdets* [derived from 'cunt'] as 'idiot', which suits one particular sense of the word as used in a wide-ranging context quite well,<sup>1</sup> but can definitely not be considered an adequate definition of its meaning overall.

Beumers's interpretations sometimes also contain traces of popular-cultural myths about Soviet society. Thus, in the Introduction we find the following passage (the italics in the quotation below are my own):

*The Soviet system entertained two **power centres**; the party represented official ideology, whereas the dissident intelligentsia opposed the party line. Between these two poles there existed a 'middle' class that was disinterested in ideology and politics and preoccupied instead with everyday life. This large group of people sustained the 'second economy' (or 'shadow economy') that — on black markets and in the underground — provided goods and objects for consumption, **foreign books**, American jeans, and Western fashion* (p. 11 — emphasis mine).

Generally speaking, this is approximately right, but the expressions in bold give pause for thought: if we start wondering why they in particular have been chosen, and why they have been placed here, in this particular context, we will find that Beumers's analysis is so broad-brush that it hardly gets anywhere. It is accordingly neither surprising, nor reprehensible, that the definition of 'intelligentsia' given in the glossary completely omits the technical intelligentsia,<sup>2</sup> and also teachers and doctors: '*a social class that represented the "think tank" of the Communist regime, composed of thinkers, writers, and scientists*' (p. 373).

All the same, Beumers's book is without question an extremely useful introduction to modern Russian culture (in both the senses 'culture' may be used), and a source of information about this for those who are attracted by the phenomenon and want to immerse themselves in it. Professionals in the field interested in problems of comparative culture and globalisation will also find much of inter-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 'you stupid cunt' in English. *Pizdets* can also, however, be used in phrases such as *kakoi pizdets?!* (roughly, 'what the fuck'). [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> A misunderstanding has occurred here, in that 'scientist' in English, as opposed to *uchenyi* in Russian, refers precisely to the technical intelligentsia, though in that case the omission of 'academics', 'teachers', and 'engineers' would still look a little odd. [Editor].



est here. For Russian readers, the whole book offers a new, unexpected view of the familiar — a view evident not just in the evaluations given, but in the way that material has been chosen. In this respect, not just the selection of phenomena that actually are discussed is significant, but also which ones have not been mentioned.

Even bearing in mind the fact that Soviet and Russian mass culture have already been the subject of a number of studies (as Birgit Beumers's reading lists at the end of each chapter make clear), this book is remarkable in the extent of its ambitions and in the enormous amount of effort expended on writing it — efforts that have certainly not been in vain.

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