

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Volume 3, Number 7

Politics and Culture in the 1920s

Traditional assumptions about the political and cultural climate of the Soviet Union in the 1920s need to be reevaluated, according to Mark von Hagen, historian and associate director of the Harriman Institute. Further research on this era is necessary to explain convincingly the rise of Stalin, he said, since traditional interpretations fail to do so. Von Hagen addressed an audience of students and faculty November 9, 1989.

Both Western and Soviet historians have recently discussed the "Bukharinist alternative," that is, the possibility that the USSR could have developed without the terror of Stalin or the distortions of the command economy. This "socialism with a human face" is exemplified by Nikolai Bukharin and by the New Economic Policy (NEP) Lenin instituted in 1921. Today we often read the nostalgic memoirs of cultural figures who refer to the 1920s as the "Golden Age" of Soviet socialism and who claim it was a time of cultural pluralism that stood in marked contrast to the sterile constraints of the Stalin era.

This focus has "diverted our attention from investigating the origins, character and evolution of the Stalin system," von Hagen said. He criticized the "ahistorical approach of the 'Bukharinist alternative,'" noting that contemporaries did not view the 1920s as an ideal time by any means. Revolutionaries saw the NEP as a huge step backward, believing that those who profited were "kulaks, Nepmen, speculators and cabaret-owners" — the class enemy. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of true believers committed suicide in protest of the New Economic Policy.

Von Hagen posed the question: "If the 'Bukharinist alternative' was so attractive, then why did it fail?" And he noted that the cultural intelligentsia of the 1920s, far from endorsing pluralism, was itself advocating state intervention in the arts.

Cultural Pluralism?

State involvement was strong from the very beginning of the Soviet period. Members of the cultural intelligentsia were employed by state organizations such as the People's

Commissariat of Enlightenment, the Red Army, the Cheka, trade unions, the youth leagues, and the Communist Party propaganda apparatus.

Moreover, patronage by the regime and the intelligentsia's own views mutually reinforced one another. The cultural intelligentsia held a deeply ingrained feeling that it must serve the people and that it should lift Russia out of its backwardness, including the backwardness of private or individual enterprise. Von Hagen stated, "Importantly, no one advanced any cultural countermodels to that of the non-market public one. Hence, no real ideology of cultural pluralism appeared." This was due not to Bolshevik totalitarianism but to "the anti-market consensus of the radical and more centrist democratic intelligentsia.... They would try virtually anything except let the market allow vulgar philistinism to triumph."

Within this consensus, however, there were attempts by the radicals to gain supremacy. "They were among the most intolerant of artists and writers and most eagerly sought state intervention to assure themselves predominance over their less radical colleagues." In effect, the agendas of the radical intelligentsia and the anti-NEP political forces converged. Von Hagen was critical of this over-politicization of culture by the avant-garde, which created tendencies that could be exploited by Stalin and his supporters. Demands for the extension of class warfare into culture were used for the establishment of the cultural regime of the 1930s.

Pantheon of New Heroes

While attention to Soviet culture in the 1920s is almost entirely focused on avant-garde artists — such as Mayakovsky, Eisenstein and Shostakovich — almost nothing is said about the more traditionally-oriented elements of the cultural intelligentsia, about which little research has been conducted. Von Hagen emphasized that all elements were attempting to create a progressive mass culture, but to a large extent both the public and the Bolsheviks rejected the cultural experiments of the avant-garde.



THE W. AVERELL HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY OF THE SOVIET UNION
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY • 420 West 118th Street • 12th Floor • New York, New York 10027

It was the non-modernists who were able to recast the national memory by popularizing links between the old peasant uprisings and the proletarian revolution, by substituting scientific themes for religious ones, and so on. Instead of rejecting all of the past, as did the avant-garde, non-modernist painters, musicians and writers reached into a tsarist past "cleansed of all reactionary and non-progressive elements." Thus they uncovered "a pantheon of new heroes and heroines."

To understand the failure of the "Bukharinist alternative," von Hagen asserted, it is precisely the attitudes of the more traditional elements of educated Russian society of the 1920s which need to be studied. He pointed in particular to the lower middle-class functionaries — the technical intelligentsia comprised of teachers, technicians and administrators. These elements emerged from the nineteenth century as the moral resistance to autocracy. They were possessed with a strong sense of service to society, and their values were attuned to the revolutionary climate of 1917. The Bolsheviks needed the old intelligentsia because it offered a short-cut to modernization, so they grudgingly conferred upon it legitimacy and position.

Von Hagen points out that it was these white collar administrators who ran the country after 1917, serving under Bolshevik heads. "Most state activities simply could not be entrusted to the untutored masses but demanded

specific skills, if nothing more than a familiarity with government documents and chains of command." The Bolsheviks, discomforted by this dependence, sought actively to introduce "proletarian" elements into the old intelligentsia, creating a hybrid. It was with the help of this hybrid that the centralized plan economy was built.

A survey done in 1924 reveals that a majority of white collar workers displayed attitudes which were anti-capitalist, nationalist, and great statist/Russian imperialist. Their views presumably had an impact on culture as Stalin consolidated the new order.

This period, dubbed "The Great Retreat" by one historian, saw the re-emergence in books and films of the Great Man as the shaper of history, with an emphasis on Russian nationalist themes. Von Hagen sees in these attitudes the roots of intellectual support for Stalin's new society: "Although such ideologies did a great deal to reconcile much of the intelligentsia to the Soviet state and its modernizing ambitions, they did not provide an intellectual support for political modernity, but rather reinforced certain authoritarian trends."

Reported by Jeff Zelkowitz

Note: The previous issue of *At The Harriman Institute* incorrectly identified the city of Riga. It is the capital of Latvia.

Recently published by Princeton University Press —

luzovka and Revolution, Volume I:

Life and Work in Russia's Donbass, 1869-1924

by Theodore H. Friedgut

Studies of the Harriman Institute

Harriman Institute
Columbia University
420 West 118th Street
New York NY 10027