Review Essays

Soviet Subjectivity
Torture for the Sake of Salvation?

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When people experience a personal trauma, they believe it to be unprecedented and inimitable. With time and healing, however, such perceptions change. Health means, besides other things, the eventual ability and desire to compare one’s own experiences to others’. With even more time and experience, another phase generally occurs. An event from the past once again seems unique, this time not as immediate pain but rather as a memory that, like a work of art, may be at once terrible and attractive. This is the difference between memory and history, but also between ethics and aesthetics. When memory is transmuted into history or art, ethical judgments can give way to aesthetic contemplation. Looking backward, we gradually cease to subject tragedies to moral judgments, especially great tragedies, meaning those with the greatest number of victims. Still, such tragedies provoke curiosity and sometimes, fascination. Historians of the Russian Revolution seem to complete this cycle.

Recently, the historian Michael David-Fox divided Russian historians in North America into grandparents, parents, and (grand)children. Counting himself among the last of these groups, Igal Halfin is concerned with his intellectual grandparents, political historians of the “modernization school,” who—in the spirit of the Cold War and the liberal confrontation with it—were familiar with all the nuances of the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks but failed to notice that their common ideas were definitively anti-modern. Halfin is even more concerned with his spiritual fathers and mothers, social historians of the “revisionist school,” who—in the spirit of détente—forgot all about ideology. They chose to represent Soviet life not as a Great Utopia or as a Great Terror but rather as a queue in an empty grocery store. Emphasizing the “vertical dynamics” of Soviet careers more than the mass murders of those Soviets, “revisionists” imagined Stalinism as an exercise in non-institutional democracy. To be sure, queues were long in the USSR, and the queue in a grocery store teaches more about the Soviet experience than the queue at the Lenin Mausoleum. Ignoring ideology and underestimating violence, however, led to a gross misunderstanding. This school of thought served short-term, specifically North American ideological purposes but was a far cry from historical justice, even to those who stood in the Soviet queues, not to mention those deprived of this privilege. No less important, “revisionism” ignored much that was original and therefore instructive in the Soviet experience.

Halfin, along with some other “grandchildren,” makes “revisionism” look obsolete. He believes that ideology matters. Many of the Soviets who suffered on the fronts of the Civil War, in the GULAG, and in the grocery stores did know what they were struggling for. Like other cases of spiritual upheaval, the enthusiasm of these people warrants investigation. Coming full circle, though perhaps not fully aware of it, Halfin actually follows his great-grandparents—the earliest historians of the Revolution, who were also, not by coincidence, its authors, victims, or both. This group included people such as Lev Trotsky, Pavel Miliukov, Nikolai Berdiaev, and René Fülöp-Miller. They were horrified by the power of the sword, but they were also aware of the power of the word. Violence had its logic, but it was faith that propelled violence into action.

Great-grandparents are easy to forget, however, even for a historian. Parents are the focus of conflict. Anxiety of influence is a universal engine of progress in scholarship, but in our case it coincides with a tectonic shift in understanding and self-understanding, the ineluctable result of political change in Russia and the world. Thus far, changes in the historiography of Russia lag far behind actual changes in Russian history, a reality that infuses the newest

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scholarship with a flavor of bitterness. As the first phrase of Halfin’s *From Darkness to Light* has it: “Not an autobiography, or a memoir, this nonetheless is a personal book.” A former Marxist, Halfin is trying to transform Marxism “from the status of subject to the status of object of historical analysis.” In other words, he is attempting to turn (or rather return) Marxism from the unique inspiration of research to the role of alienated object, one as important as myriad other objects of scholarship. Equivalent to a turn from religious faith to religious studies, a feat like this requires a lot of reconsideration, pain, and perhaps repentance. In practice, a large part of religious and ideological studies, good and bad, has been written by true believers. Would we trust a cannibal who wrote a history of cannibalism? A repentant cannibal, perhaps. Most of the available histories of Marxism were written by either Marxists or former Marxists. Poets have written histories of poetry, but they did it in prose, not in poetry. Is there a non-ideological language for writing a history of ideology? To put Halfin’s question back in Halfin’s terms, if Marxism is the object of the research, what constitutes the subject of such research?

Quite recent, the application of the schemata of Michel Foucault to the Soviet realm has produced the concept of “Soviet subjectivity.” This is the formula that Halfin and his colleague Jochen Hellbeck have chosen as an umbrella term for their readings of documents of the early Soviet era, including diaries, autobiographies, family correspondence, and responses to various bureaucratic forms and surveys. Though the works of Halfin and Hellbeck are distinctively different in their material and manner of theorizing (Hellbeck is usually more moderate in his conclusions), I briefly consider them together. In line with Oleg Kharkhordin’s analysis of purging rituals in the Communist Party and contrary to the traditional view, Halfin and Hellbeck show that Soviet practices of political screening were individualizing rather than leveling. While preaching “collectivism” and addressing all their policies to “collectives,” the Soviets did not develop efficient instruments for treating these “collectives.” Party cells, personnel departments (*ordele kadrovi*), and People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) investigators addressed specific individuals rather than communitarian wholes. The only way to describe, evaluate, and modify a “collective” was to describe, evaluate, and eliminate its members, one by one. To achieve their purposes of surveillance and governance, Soviet institutions developed a new language for describing/evaluating Soviet personalities, applying such terms as “conscientiousness,” “culturedness,” “collectivism,” and “political maturity.” Standard, formalized practices sought out differences between personalities and tended to emphasize these differences.

While all this may be true, it is a long way from what we, in contemporary parlance, understand by “subjectivity.” Jochen Hellbeck asserts that

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Soviet diarists of the 1930s “analyzed their lives in terms which resemble the terminology of Heidegger and Foucault.”

3 If so, this speaks not about the modernity of the Soviets but about the anti-modern aspects of Heidegger’s and, to a lesser extent, Foucault’s legacy. As Jürgen Habermas wrote some time ago, a “total critique of modernity,” as practiced by Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, and their followers, is theoretically incoherent and politically suspect. 4 I believe that the same can be said of Stepan Podlubnyi and some other Soviet diarists, propagandists, and soul-seekers, who also invested their lives and writings in a totalizing critique of the modern (Western) world. To include Foucault in this company, however, is rude and misleading. Nancy Fraser subtly juxtaposed Heidegger’s and Foucault’s attitudes toward modernity. 5 A recent essay by Jan Plamper gives a picture of Foucault’s disillusionment, which was incomparably more decisive and eloquent than Heidegger’s infamous “silence” regarding Nazism. 6 As critical of liberal modernity as Foucault was, it is hard to imagine him speculating about the kind of “subjectivity” produced by Soviet psychiatric abuses.

Foucault urged us to listen to the multiple voices of the victims. The concept of “Soviet subjectivity” reproduces the rhetoric of power in a moment of unprecedented monologicity. Russian readers, sensitive to any hint of a nostalgic appreciation of the Soviet past, ask Halfin and Hellbeck whether it is appropriate to represent Stalinist Russia as “a successful project for forging a new modern subjectivity.” 7 “Project” it was; “successful” it was not. “New,” yes, but was it “modern”? Halfin and Hellbeck tend to interpret “Soviet subjectivity” as an analogy, a symmetrical counterpart to modern Western subjectivity. “Soviet subjectivity,” then, might earn praise as an alternative route to modernity. Is this not the same logic that we have already seen in modernization theory? There is something of a respected North American tradition of fellow-travelers in the very concept of “Soviet subjectivity.” To translate the idea of modernization from its original political-economic language to a fancier cultural parlance, however, does not resolve its initial problems. First and foremost, it is not at all clear that the Soviet regime was modern. Its results were decidedly anti-modern. Some of its means, such as tanks, were modern; others, such as drills, were not. Were the spiritual aspirations of the regime—its ideological goals, educational plans, ideas about right

3 See Halfin’s interview in Ab Imperio, no. 3 (2002): 220.


5 See Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), chap. 2.


7 See the editors’ introduction to the subjectivity forum in Ab Imperio, no. 3 (2002): 211.
and good—modern? Perhaps the answer should be mixed and complex, but I believe that the ideological ends of the regime demonstrated its most archaic, backward-looking features.

“Modernity” is vague, but “subjectivity” is no better. In their effort to explain it, Hellbeck and Halfin emphasize how much the Soviet regime invested in the transformation of its subjects. Foucauldian terminology, however, distracts from the original, Nietzschean background. The idea of the transformation of human nature was grounded in the very concept of the Superman. Human beings should not be accepted as they are. They are changeable and transitory. They should be overcome. The New Soviet Man was supposed to be fair and fearless; invulnerable to greed, pain, and love; ecstatic about the state and purged of private loyalties; unaware of his own mortality. The image of the Superman is a closer predecessor to this Bolshevik ideal than other intellectual roots that recent authors are trying to excavate, such as Orthodox rituals in Kharkhordin or more general eschatology in Halfin. In my own account of these intellectual mosaics, the Populists and Bolsheviks layered Nietzschean, Freudian, and Marxist influences onto their pseudo-ethnographical reconstructions of the “people” and “found” the desired mix in the Russian sects. This is a complex image, and I share the feeling that a label should be invented to summarize it. “Soviet subjectivity” is a label of choice, among others such as “the New Man” (a term abused by the Bolsheviks themselves) or Homo sovieticus (more recently abused in the agitation of perestroika). I prefer a more neutral one, “the Transformation of Human Nature.” The whole Soviet experience was a great experiment with human nature. (In Russian as well as in French, both meanings, experience

8 This issue requires us to define modernity. In sociology, the attempt to define modernity has a rich tradition that ranges from Max Weber to Anthony Giddens. These definitions have been explicitly Eurocentric and pro-capitalist. In response, Marxists, anti-globalizers, and cultural relativists have constructed the idea of “multiple modernities.” I would rather use a concept of “counter-modernities” or perhaps “anti-modern forces of modernity,” modeled after Isaiah Berlin’s concept of Counter-Enlightenment. Various events, such as 25 October 1917 or 11 September 2001, have been initiated by these forces. For debate on a similar question, whether the Nazis were modern, see Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); and George Steinmetz, “German Exceptionalism and the Origins of Nazism: The Career of the Concept,” in Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison, ed. Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 251–84.

9 Iokhan Khell’bek [Jochen Hellbeck], “Sovetskiaia sub’ektivnost’—klish’e?” Ab Imperio, no. 3 (2002): 399.

and experiment, are expressed by one word, a commonality somewhat lost in the more empirical English language.) As depicted in the great scene from Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (in which the Devil stages psychological experiments with the Soviets and comes to the conclusion that they are just people like anyone else, spoiled only by the question of housing), the experiment produced negative results. While acknowledging the emerging interest in the everyday particulars of the design of this experiment, its results should be discussed in general terms. This is the only way to find a comparative context and an understandable meaning for this experiment/experience and therefore to save some of this meaning for humankind. But universalizing the message of this experience/experiment does not mean normalizing it in moral or historical terms.

Answering their critics in a debate organized by *Ab Imperio*, a journal published by Russian-based, Western-educated historians, Hellbeck and Halfin insist that the concept of “Soviet subjectivity” does not imply a positive appreciation of the Soviet past. If so, they need to understand why this concept is misperceived in just this way. Replacing Soviet terms such as “remaking” (peredelka), “reforging” (perekovka), or “remolding” (pereplavka), which are quite horrible in their application to humanity, with a universal idea of “subjectivity,” Halfin and Hellbeck make the regime look better than it made itself. For a contemporary reader with a liberal heritage, the noun “subjectivity” sounds quite nice—certainly nicer than the adjective “Soviet.” Institutions of Soviet power—concentration camps, personnel departments, or psychiatric hospitals—used a number of rhetorical devices to justify what they did. To be sure, it is important to study rhetoric, but it is wrong to mistake it for practice. Conflation of the two leads to applauding the regime. According to Hellbeck and Halfin, the Soviet project of the New Man was realized predominantly in textual forms. Actually, the project was not about letters at all. It was about flesh, and human nature, and power over the flesh. New Men had to live, struggle, and replace the old men, people as they really

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12 In the *Ab Imperio* discussion, the American literary scholar Svetlana Boym was particularly critical. Boym suggests that Hellbeck and Halfin did not read more than the introductory chapters of Foucault’s books, and she compares the concept of “Soviet subjectivity” with recent attempts by some Russian officials to hide the mass graves of the GULAG; see Svetlana Boym, “Kak sdelana sovetskaia sub’ektivnost’?” *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2002): 290, 295.

13 Hellbeck states this explicitly in his *Ab Imperio* interview, 235.
were, who for this very reason became “enemies of the people.” It is true that the only part of the project that was realized was confined to novels, speeches, and, as Hellbeck argues, diaries. Otherwise, the results were different from those intended. The Soviets were proud of their military victories and technological successes, but throughout the greater part of their history, even they were self-critical about their achievements in the formation of the New Soviet Man. Still, Hellbeck and Halfin compare “Soviet subjectivity” with modern or “liberal” subjectivity. But “Soviet subjectivity” is a failed project, and always was; “liberal subjectivity” is an everyday reality. Essentially, comparing them is like comparing one person’s desires to another’s accomplishments. You want a helicopter, while your neighbor has a car. Are these two cases comparable? Hellbeck is right when he says that Soviet concentration camps were designed as construction sites for the building of the New Man. Is it not important that New Men were never built there, perhaps not even a single one? Making what I think is a similar mistake, Susan Buck-Morss, in her Dreamworld and Catastrophe, observes resemblances between the Hollywood film King Kong (1933), which features the titular beast atop the Empire State Building, and the plans for the Palace of the Soviets (1933), which featured a monstrous Lenin atop a skyscraper. The visual similarity of these icons is striking, but the differences between them are worth noting. The movie was completed, as was the Empire State Building. The Soviet project was not.

Despite my own reservations, it is simplistic to believe that Halfin and Hellbeck are justifying the Soviet past. Of course, interest in historical forms of power does not imply sympathy toward them. The problem is deeper than a Cold War–style ideological debate; it touches the nerve of current discussions in political theory. According to a recent formulation by Seyla Benhabib, this is the dilemma of ethical autonomy versus aesthetic authenticity as components of modern subjectivity: “The right of the modern self to authentic self-expression derives from the moral right of the modern self to the autonomous pursuit of the good life, and not vice versa.” To privilege authenticity as a primary force of subjectivity is anti-modern. Those early Soviets with whom Hellbeck and Halfin are fascinated were free (at least in their diaries) to express their subjective authenticity. They were not autonomous (even in their diaries) in their choice between possible ideas of the good life. They were sincere, but they were not free. Does this qualify as subjectivity? Contrary to

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Benhabib’s dictum, but in partial correspondence to Charles Taylor’s formulations, Hellbeck and Halfin derive “Soviet subjectivity” from documents of self-expression, not from evidence of moral choice.

In the best contribution to the Ab Imperio forum, Il’ia Gerasimov presents his study of the Gulag newspapers, which he regards as instruments for the construction of the New Man. Seeking evidence opposing that of the proponents of positive “subjectivity,” Gerasimov reveals the despair and bitter irony found even in those essays and verses that passed the camp censorship.\(^\text{17}\)

For those “hidden transcripts”—rumors, curses, prayers, and anecdotes—that did not and could not pass censorship, the only sources are the later memoirs, written or oral, that have been collected or published in post-Soviet times.\(^\text{18}\)

Of course, an oceanic difference between the start and the end of the Soviet period is a source of the distortion of memory, for memoirists as well as for scholars.

Hellbeck and Halfin assert that in the early Soviet period, the language of power was fully assimilated by the average citizen, who had no other language to formulate his or her individuality. There seems to be a lot of exaggeration in these assertions. To give one counter-example among many, in a recent interview conducted by the St. Petersburg sociologist Sof’ia Tchouikina [Sof’ia Chuiikina], an old lady recalled that her teacher in high school, who was well-versed in Russian literature, was replaced in 1929 by a new Soviet teacher, a poorly qualified person who spoke in a village dialect. The interviewee’s repulsion was still evident after so many years.\(^\text{19}\)

Which example is more “representative,” Hellbeck’s diaries or Tchouikina’s interviews? They quote what they find trustworthy and typical, but they have no way to prove what is true except to reread these very quotations. Sociological surveys cannot be conducted among the dead. Instead we must rely on anecdotal evidence, which is vulnerable to selective sampling. This sampling, in turn, is based on our contemporary beliefs. We have different memories but take part in one contested discourse, which is history. With regard to “subjectivity,” the intellectual plausibility of evidence counts more than its statistical relevance, which is largely unknown.

In an essay in Language and Revolution, Hellbeck argues that the Bolshevik Revolution produced “a substantial growth” of practices of self-

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reflection and self-concern. According to Hellbeck, the classical genres of
diary and autobiography were appropriated by the Soviet regime as major
instruments of political self-surveillance, psychological self-reshaping, and
the cultivation of “Soviet subjectivity.” He speculates that diaries were
propagated among the Soviets in the same way that Puritans required self-
observation from their followers. I would prefer to see more evidence for
such a claim. Hellbeck provides no numbers to prove it. Indeed, there is no
way to estimate who wrote more diaries, the Symbolist youths before 1914
or the Bolshevik youths after 1924. What we know for sure is that in both
cases, diaries were used for private, solitary self-fashioning. In neither case
were they required or regulated by a disciplinary power. The only technique
of this kind that was institutionalized on a mass scale was “autobiography.”
Autobiographies were routinely collected by the personnel office of any
Soviet enterprise. They were rigidly structured and very far from “subjective.”
Heroes of the Revolution were encouraged to write autobiographies for pub-
lication in Soviet encyclopedias. The explicit function was, of course, not a
reshaping of the aged authors but rather instruction of the young readers,
a function not so different from that pursued by Russian memoirists of the
19th century such as Alexander Herzen and dozens of his followers. In the
1920s and later, diarists from the literary elite—such as Kornei Chukovskii,
Mikhail Prishvin, Mikhail Kuz’min, and Dmitrii Likhachev—focused their
writing on the documentation of their consistent identity. They used the
diary as a document of survival through the most difficult times, not as an
instrument of their self-transformation in compliance with those times. To
be sure, there were opposing cases, such as those published by Hellbeck and
Halfin. Speaking about these specifically Soviet practices of self, including
formal autobiographies or self-criticism produced during party purges, it is
not clear that they were more “subjective” or more “modern” than, say, the
religious confessions of earlier times. Before 1917, during the routine hear-
ing of Christian confessions by millions of Russians, Orthodox priests some-
times informed the police, a shameful activity by modern standards. Priests
could not fire, expel, or kill a person exclusively on the basis of confession,
however, as happened during the purges.

What is obvious is that Soviets who were enthusiastic about Soviet power
internalized various projects of subjective self-transformation, while others
did not. How many Soviets were as engaged as the authors of the documents
collected by Halfin and Hellbeck? How did the proportion of those trans-
formed change with time and other variables? Did those who detested the
Soviet state have no subjectivity? Was their subjectivity structured by entirely
different mechanisms? There were ranges of experience that were not reflected
in any autobiography, such as sexual experimentation clubs among provincial
Komsomol youth, documented by the NKVD and recently discovered in the
declasified files. There was a mix of public support and hidden protest that escapes any attempt at straightforward description. The crucial question is, how do we combine the interest in subjectivity with interest in the everyday? How was the Nietzschean quest to reshape oneself combined with Darwinian survival in daily struggle? And what was Marxist about all that?

Soviet practices produced a lot of peculiar “psychology.” Leonid Brezhnev famously said that he was not an economist. Psychology and personnel work were his strong points. Was this type of psychology indeed one of individualization and subjectivation? There is some truth to the thesis of “Soviet subjectivity,” even though this understanding of subjectivity twists the original, Hegelian definition of the term beyond recognition. The main purpose of specifically Soviet personnel procedures, from party purges to investigative torture to the oral exams in universities, was to extort highly individual, idiosyncratic, unrepeatable responses from the “subject,” authored by him- or herself in a personal, subjective way. Though the results were fashioned for bureaucratic use, these practices were neither cold nor rational. They were hot, emotional, and passionate; and this was a matter of Soviet pride. One might wonder why the new paradigm of Soviet subjectivity has not produced heartbreaking research on tortures and confessions. The most welcome confessions were those where the content had not been induced or predicted by the torturer and his superiors. One can argue that pain was inflicted in order to produce “subjective,” “sincere,” even “free” confessions. One cannot argue, however, that these are the same “sincerity” and “freedom” that we, modern people, understand by these terms.

In From Darkness to Light, Halfin goes beyond the idea of subjectivity and asserts that Russian Marxism transformed the Judeo-Christian anticipation of the desired End into political theory and social practice. This combination of Foucauldian emphasis on textuality with a theological interpretation of ideology as eschatology causes many problems. Halfin explicates at length his basic intuition about (Russian) Marxism, producing such hybrid concepts as “salvation consciousness,” “the class Messiah,” and even “eschatological techniques.” The identification of revolutionary Marxism with eschatological (apocalyptic, millenarian) heresy is not entirely original. Nikolai Berdiaev drew this analogy in a moment of disillusionment almost a century ago.

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21 N. A. Berdiaev, Sud’ba Rossii (Moscow, 1918). Berdiaev repeated this idea many times: see, for example, his “Russkaia religioznaia mys’ i revoliutsiia,” Versy (Paris) 3 (1928); and Russkaia religioznaia psikhologiiia i kommunisticheskii ateizm (Paris: YMCA Press, 1931).
and Herbert Marcuse did the same half a century ago. Unfortunately, it is not clear from Halfin's account whether he believes such appropriation of eschatology to be a general rule in Marxism, a distinctive feature of Russian radicals, an extraordinary quality of the Bolsheviks, or maybe a special trait of a subgroup of them.

In the last two centuries, myriad Marxists have emphasized the difference between the “old” religious sermon and the “new” secular ideology. The exceptions were many, and they themselves made the rule. Some practitioners of international revolution, such as the Russian Mikhail Bakunin in Europe or the German Wilhelm Weitling in America, were eager to make a compromise with Christian heresies as “natural allies” of secular rebels. A self-proclaimed heir of the Enlightenment, Karl Marx denounced “Bakuninism” and similar ideas as “reactionary.” Beginning with Georgii Plekhanov—that is, almost from the beginning—the mainstream of Russian Marxism fought hard to escape alliances with religion. But such alliances were nonetheless prominent, and they provided Russian Marxism with the energy of dissent. Populists and Socialist Revolutionaries, heirs of the 1874 “Going to the People” movement, were all but obsessed with Russian sects. Inside the Social Democratic party, “God-Builders” planned an attempt to create a new religion for the Russian people. These apostles of the Revolution believed that the peasantry, unlike the proletariat, could not understand the language of scientific Marxism. Therefore, under Russian conditions, the revolutionary message had to be translated into religious forms. After a temporary closeness to Lenin, the “God-Builders” were ideologically demolished, but after repenting they led the educational (Anatolii Lunacharskii), ideological (Aleksandr Bogdanov), and cultural (Maksim Gor’kii) efforts of the early Bolshevik regime. Less known but no less important, Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich pursued his lifelong program of mobilizing Russian sects for the cause of communism from the very top of the revolutionary regime.

Halfin barely mentions these phenomena. He fails to examine the religious underpinnings of socialism that were developing in revolutionary Russia. In a hermeneutical effort, Halfin wants to uncover the hidden religiosity of those who were self-consciously secular but unconsciously eschatological. Halfin does not listen to the voices of his historical subjects, does not hear them as subjects. He looks for meanings available to interpretation. Thus, as promised, Marxism is transformed from the “subject” of the study into its “object.” In Halfin’s hands, eschatological hermeneutics proves to be a powerful tool—a bit too powerful for my taste. If a secular text (a piece of propaganda, denunciation, or autobiography) contains no specific reference

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to the Messiah or the End, it may be wrong to categorize such a text as “eschatological” for the same reason it may be wrong to categorize peasant utopias or Luddist rebellions as “Marxist.” Not every act of social protest is Marxist in nature, though some historians have believed so. Analogously, not every promise, anticipation, or hope is “eschatological.”

Halfin may be right when he attributes secularized “eschatology,” as he understands it, to all Russian radicals. But this purpose, reshaping humanity, is too common a denominator. Socialist Revolutionaries also called for tectonic change, although they believed that its engine would be not social engineering but the peasant commune. This represented a world of difference. The transformation of human nature—the idea of the New Man—was central to the Bolsheviks’ ideological, educational, punitive, and medical teachings and practices. This is the kernel of truth in Halfin’s “eschatology” and “subjectivity.” Whatever nonsense the Bolsheviks preached and practiced, from psychoanalytic kindergartens to eugenics to urine therapy to collectivist pedagogy, they imagined these procedures to be “scientific,” not magical. But the Bolsheviks mixed industrial metaphors such as “remolding” and “reforging” with religious terms such as “regeneration” and “second birth” (more intellectual than his colleagues, Trotsky wrote about the “second edition” of mankind). The spiritual, behavioral, and corporeal change of humankind that was required by Bolshevik thinking was close to popular magic or, in the best case, to transformative versions of Christianity. To the extent that this is true, there is a space for such analysis as Halfin’s.

The ideas of New Man and New Woman, albeit usually in more relaxed forms, have been common to many respectable projects for a better life, whether religious, secular, humanitarian, or scientific. Was Bolshevism different from other transformative projects because it was extremist? Halfin definitely wants to say something more. Does the idea of the New Man ultimately mean the End of History? Perhaps not, because the desired transformation could be imagined as a work-in-progress, even an infinite one. If so, what is the difference between Bolsheviks and, say, Jesuits? Bolsheviks and psychoanalysts? Bolsheviks and educational reformers? The differences are immense, but they are not captured by Halfin’s concepts. If transformative projects may not be eschatological, should an eschatological project be at least radical? Not long ago, we learned that eschatology can be well combined with liberalism. Interestingly enough, the intellectual roots of Francis Fukuyama’s vision of the End of History draw more or less on the same sources as the Bolsheviks’.²³ Fukuyama’s Russian mentor, Alexandre Kojève (Kozhevnikov), wrote his dissertation on Vladimir Solov’ev, though as a French bureaucrat he managed to convert his Solov’evian training (and his

Stalinist sympathies) into a project of the European Union. Unfortunately, Solov’ev—an important guru for the Russian revolutionary generation and their main source of the knowledge of the End—is absent from Halfin’s book.

Eschatology did hold importance for Russian radicals, and its impact was more historically rooted than Halfin indicates. An important though sometimes forbidden subject of Russian Orthodox theology, the Apocalypse was popular reading for Russian Old Believers as well as religious sectarians and their admirers among the intelligentsia. The Bolsheviks invented themselves as atheists, scholars, and commissars who had nothing to do with the mystical Populism and “decadent” activities of the turn of the 20th century. We know very well now that these distinctions never worked. To give just one example, Nikolai Bukharin publicly recalled how he had, in his youth, identified himself with the Antichrist, about whom he read in Vladimir Solov’ev’s personal version of the Apocalypse. The prose and poetry of the Symbolist era was so saturated with eschatological imagery that one of the leaders of the movement, Valerii Briusov, wrote a sharp parody of it, called “Poslednii den’” (The Last Day). Vasiliy Rozanov entitled his book about Russian sectarians Apokalipscheskaia sekta (The Apocalyptic Sect). When the Revolution occurred, Rozanov wrote his last book, Apokalipsis nashego vremen (The Apocalypse of Our Time). The apocalyptic themes of prerevolutionary literature are well known to scholars; and it is a pity that Halfin, with his well-grounded interest in textual influences, missed this area of readily available research. Historiography aside, it was the best Russian philosopher of revolution, Nikolai Berdiaev, who was the first to interpret Bolshevism as an eschatological movement. René Fülöp-Miller, in his well-known though well-forgotten book The Mind and Face of Bolshevism, followed in his (and Sergei Bulgakov’s) steps. Berdiaev, Bulgakov, and Fülöp-Miller produced a non-Marxist genealogy of Russian Marxism, deriving it from the Russian


26 V. V. Rozanov, Apokalipscheskaia sekta: Khlysty i skuptsy (St. Petersburg: Tipografia F. Vaisberga i P. Gershunina, 1914); and Rozanov, Apokalipsis nashego vremen (Sergiev Posad: n.p., 1918).

religious “mentality” and, more specifically, from Russian sects.\textsuperscript{28} For reasons that he fails to explain, Halfin cuts the local, national input away from the intellectual genealogy of Russian revolutionary “messiahs.” Instead, he repeats the narrative of the wholesale importation of Western Social Democracy by Russian Marxists, slightly complementing it with a recognition of its multiple “distortions.” If so, is it not precisely these “distortions” that merit analysis? I hope that the next generation of historians will find their clue to the Russian Revolution in its original, highly local mix of ideology, mysticism, and sexuality, which Halfin compresses and partially represses in his notion of “eschatology.”

To some extent, this hope is redeemed by the collected volume Language and Revolution, devised by Igal Halfin in a broader comparative perspective. The volume is very interesting and equally uneven. Experts on the French Revolution and German Nazism commit themselves to general reviews of their subjects while Russianists go into weird Russian details. In the most memorable essay in the book, Eric Naiman examines one of those early Soviet developments that was as much fantastic as it was characteristic of the times. In Naiman’s account, a Soviet doctor, Aleksei Zamkov, achieved rejuvenating effects by injecting the urine of pregnant young women into the buttocks of Bolsheviks (usually old men). Though this sounds quite bizarre, we know of even more adventurous anecdotes. My favorite is that of Il’ia Ivanov, who in the mid-1920s attempted to breed a New Man by hybridizing old Russian men with chimpanzees; his project was funded by Anatolii Lunacharskii’s Commissariat of Enlightenment. No Soviet story has been told with such interpretive brilliance as Naiman’s. His narrative works as a classical synecdoche, whose rhetorical purpose is to show the whole in its part, the greatest in the smallest. An additional effect is achieved by comparing the effects of urine therapy to the better-known example of the Soviet union of sexes and classes produced by Zamkov’s wife, Vera Mухhina, in her famous sculpture, “Worker and Collective Farmer.” Another metaphor juxtaposes Dr. Zamkov’s career with that of his rival in the use of urine, Dr. Dmitrii Pletnev—better known for his role in the Moscow show trials, where he was alternately accused of poisoning Soviet officials and molesting female patients.

Urine therapy was an offspring of endocrinology, a respected branch of modern medicine. Zamkov, Pletnev, and other Soviet doctors read or heard about endocrinology, modern medicine, and modernity. But if you are an endocrinologist without supplies and equipment, the urine of pregnant woman might be an option (this was also true, of course, for the German doctors of

the Weimar era). Similar though less amusing events occurred around the Bolsheviks’ reinventions of other disciplines, such as psychoanalysis, social hygiene, pedology, and genetics. A metaphor for these Bolshevik appropriations might be cargo cults, discovered by anthropologists among savages who worshiped tin cans that were left to them after their first contacts with modernity. (In fact, I remember cans of Coca-Cola that were proudly kept in a collection of rarities in a remote Russian village in the 1970s.) There are two elements to such situations: a tribe eager to worship an unusual object; and a modern visitor who observes the events with proper irony and, upon his next visit, writes a nice book. Eric Naiman left no cargo for Dr. Zamkov, but his narrative shines with the typical mixture of biting wit and a sense of recognition: “Wow, this is the same stuff that we left here, and now look what they’re doing with it!” It is up to the reader to think about further implementation of the same cargo-cult approach to Soviet intellectual history. One might go so far as to read the Soviet nuclear bomb in these terms, re-invented by a team of spies, officials, and NKVD prisoners.

Naiman’s usage of Zamkov’s urine therapy provides a vignette for the whole project of “Soviet subjectivity.” Denunciations, Gulag, and urine therapy certainly were manifestations of people’s subjectivity. The question is, whose? The work of Halfin and Hellbeck is seminal in deconstructing the false consensus among historians of Soviet Russia. Thanks to their studies, we realize that key issues of revolutionary history are still unresolved. Was the Revolution of 1917 a brief moment followed by a “normal totalitarian” era, which was in turn suddenly interrupted by a new revolution in 1991—or did these long decades constitute the permanent revolution prophesized by Trotsky? Were changes in the worldviews of several generations of Soviets so insignificant that a generalization across them, such as the concept of “Soviet subjectivity,” is possible or useful? Even if we forget about the double-thinking intelligentsia of the 1970s or the terrorized population of the 1930s, the initial question about “Soviet subjectivity” is still with us. Thinking only about the revolutionary people of the 1920s, how can we combine data on their enthusiasm, self-sacrifice, and will to believe with the evidence of discontent and protest among them? The Soviet Terror itself, one of the few facts of Russian history that we have no reason to doubt, testifies to the failure of the project of Soviet subjectivity. There would have been no need for the Terror if all these millions had enthusiastically retailed themselves. There is something of a reverse cargo cult in the very concept of “Soviet subjectivity”: the lost civilization left occasional traces that do not make much sense to those who find them. We worship the remains but frame them in our terms. Still, cultural contacts produce creative results, the idea of “Soviet subjectivity” being one of them.

One reads a similar ironic motif in an essay by Katerina Clark, also in *Language and Revolution*, which gives a stunning reading of the classic
1930s Stalinist movie *Volga-Volga*. Like the American musical after which it was modeled, *Volga-Volga* celebrates the victory of oral folk culture over its codified professional counterpart. But if American musicals dimly hinted at revolution, *Volga-Volga* applauded the Revolution that had happened and had already created its own bureaucratic world. Interpreting the plot of a musical competition on the banks of the Volga, Clark refers to Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* and to Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridization. But in contrast to these paradigmatic sources, the Soviet movie shows people of one and the same race, ethnicity, and language on both sides of the cultural conflict. The struggle in this Soviet musical is between the cultural traditions of two classes that efficiently replaced the American musical’s obsession with race. Races and classes are nothing but cultural categories, but they were never recognized as such by the ideologies that created them. Racism naturalized races, Marxism naturalized classes, but both were creations of authors, texts (including musicals), and readers. Certain themes have migrated from one cultural continent to another. They are still migrating, and they have been invariably “distorted” on their way. It is these “distortions” that give word and flesh to creativity.

All this being said, Igal Halfin’s *From Darkness to Light* is a bold attempt to throw new light on a subject that has suffered from too many repetitive and shaky illuminations. *Language and Revolution* is full of lively material and, in contrast to previous work, avoids streamlining it. The overall result is creative, unbalanced, and incomplete. No eschatology whatsoever.

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