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David Brandenberger

THE CREATIVE INTELLIGENTSIA AND THE RISE OF OFFICIAL RUSSOCENTRISM UNDER STALIN

In the mid-to-late 1930s, Soviet society witnessed a major ideological about-face as party propaganda and mass culture assumed an increasingly patriotic, Russo-centric orientation. Heroes, imagery, and legends from the Russian national past were deployed to bolster the legitimacy of the Soviet state and provide a complement to the reigning Marxist-Leninist ideology, then in a trend threatening to eclipse the stress on revolutionary class consciousness that had characterized the Soviet experiment for nearly two decades.

This shift away from proletarian internationalism toward Russo-centric etatism has been a source of considerable scholarly controversy. Some have linked this phenomenon to nationalist sympathies within the party hierarchy, while others attribute it to the Stalinist elite's revision of its Marxist principles, the eroding prospects for world revolution, and the imminent threat of war. I have argued elsewhere that these themes emerged during the mid-to-late 1930s within the context of the decade's increasingly populist ideological orientation.¹ Difficulties associated with grain requisitioning, the War Scare of 1927, and the First Five-Year Plan slowly led party ideologists to conclude that their long-standing emphasis on abstract materialism and proletarian internationalism was hamstringing efforts to mobilize Soviet society for industrialization and war. Searching for a more populist rallying call, Stalin and his inner circle eventually conceded that a new emphasis on Russo-centric etatism would be the most effective way to promote state building and societal loyalty to the regime.

Of course, these changes in the official line did not necessarily imply an abandonment of the party's long-standing commitment to Marxism-Leninism. Indeed, the history of Marxist thought encompasses a strikingly heterogeneous tradition that ought to be seen as accommodating Stalin's "national Bolshevism" alongside other currents dating to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Erik van Ree demonstrates, the line's emphasis on etatism dovetails

¹ For a historiographic overview of the issue, see the introduction to my *National Bolshevism. Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

with positions taken by Georg Vollmar, Karl Kautsky, and V.I. Lenin.² Its Russo-centric dimensions evoke Marx, Engels, and Austro-Marxists like Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, all of whom endorsed the primacy of historically dominant groups in ethnically diverse societies. In other words, although the evolution of Soviet ideology was largely an indigenous development, it was quite consistent with other strains of Marxist thought at the time and no more “heretical” than attempts by Engels, Kautsky, Bauer, or Remmer to adapt the philosophy to the changing international scene.³

But such a nuanced reading of Stalin’s national Bolshevism does not necessarily mean that the Soviet intelligentsia viewed it as an organic outgrowth of the party line. After all, there is a profound difference between the production of ideologically charged propaganda and its reception.⁴ Despite the frequent conflation of the two concepts in the scholarly literature, even elite audiences seldom internalize official ideological pronouncements without some degree of selectivity, misunderstanding, or disbelief.⁵ Determining how the Soviet creative elite actually viewed the emergence of national Bolshevism is important, if only because Russian historians have traditionally looked at the intelligentsia as a barometer of public opinion and as a gauge with which to evaluate official state policy. The issue of reception is also relevant to the study of the creative intelligentsia during the Stalin era, insofar as this group was often implicated in the production of official propaganda, being tasked with the unenviable job of converting the party hierarchs’ banal platitudes and clichés into articulate statements on literature, history, and the fine arts. How then did the Soviet creative intelligentsia understand and react to the rise of official Russo-centrism under Stalin?

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According to most accounts, it was at the start of the 1930s that the Soviet leadership began to augment its long-standing ideological commitment to proletari-

² Although Marx and Engels famously called for the withering away of the state, this was more of a critique of bureaucracy than a renunciation of centralized state power. And while Kautsky and Lenin were far from consistent on the issue, both at times clearly believed that revolutionaries should co-opt existing bureaucracies rather than dissolve them.

³ See Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: a Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2002.

⁴ On the distinction, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, xii-xiii and chap. 3; Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, passim.

⁵ See, for instance, M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, 259-444, esp. 341-346, 411-412. The original Russian article is “Slovo v romane,” *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, Moscow: Khudozh. lit., 1975, 150-170, 221-225.

an internationalism with a new emphasis on populism and state-based patriotism. Such a revival of traditional propaganda techniques apparently required the resurrection of conventional tropes as well, ranging from notions like the “great man in history”⁶ to the aesthetic essence of official Socialist Realism.⁷ State and party decrees between 1931 and 1934 announced that the revolution’s focus on the future was now to be complemented by an emphasis on the past as well – a subject that had literally disappeared from the public schools during the 1920s.⁸

This new focus on famous individuals and their historic feats not only stimulated the development of Stalin’s cult of personality, but it also led to the emergence of a strikingly diverse pantheon of Soviet heroes.⁹ Famous Soviets like Lenin, Stalin, Voroshilov, and Stakhanov stood alongside an assortment of Pushkins, Nevskiis, Suvorovs, and Kutuzovs in a thousand-year narrative that celebrated Russian state building through the ages. Late in the decade, this array of heroes, myths, and iconography from the Russian national past even threatened to overshadow more traditional communist propaganda. Although the party hierarchy never openly admitted to a shift from the workers as the vanguard *class* of Soviet society to the Russian people as its vanguard *nation*,¹⁰ the content of Soviet propaganda and mass culture indicates that such a populist shift was nevertheless underway.

Unsurprisingly, as early as the mid-1930s some acute observers within the creative intelligentsia began to sense the direction which Soviet ideology was headed. Evidence for this self-conscious adoption of “new” tropes is found in the celebration of state power, the proliferation of patriotic imagery in the press, and the gradual reappearance of uniforms, epaulettes, and rank in Soviet society.

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- ⁶ See “Beseda s nemetskim pisatelem Emilem Liudvigom,” *Bol'shevik*, 8, 1932, 33; also I. Merzon, “Kak pokazyvat' istoricheskikh deiatelei v shkol'nom prepodavanii istorii,” *Bor'ba klassov*, 5, 1935, 53-59; *Istoriia Vsesoiuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov). Kratkii kurs*, Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1938, 16; F. Gorokhov, “Rol' lichnosti v istorii,” *Pod znamenem marksizma*, 9, 1938, 58-78; L. Il'ichev, “O roli lichnosti v istorii,” *Pravda*, 27 November 1938, 2; P. Iudin, “Marksistskoe uchenie o roli lichnosti v istorii,” *Pod znamenem marksizma*, 5, 1939, 44-73.
- ⁷ On the emergence of the hero in Socialist Realism, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 34-35, 72, 119, 136-148, 8-10; idem, “Little Heroes and Big Deeds: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan,” *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, 205-206.
- ⁸ *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika*, 8th issue, Moscow: Partizdat, 1934, 350-355; “O prepodavanii grazhdanskoi istorii v shkolakh SSSR,” *Pravda*, May 16, 1934, 1; *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika*, 9th issue, Moscow: Partizdat, 1935, 137; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 230-233.
- ⁹ On the role of the mass press in this advancement of everyday heroes and role models, see Matt Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution and Soviet Newspapers*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, chap. 7.
- ¹⁰ A paraphrase of Sheila Fitzpatrick’s memorable statement at the University of Chicago’s “Empire and Nation in the Soviet Union” Conference, October 26, 1997.

It is also seen in the Soviet leadership's transformation from a revolutionary party into a ruling class. Awareness of the party hierarchy's increasingly etatist tendencies is reflected in a comment made by a Leningrad Orientalist, I. Iu. Krachkovskii, in his 1936 response to a rumor that party rule was soon to be replaced by a presidency patterned after the Nazi chancellorship. According to a secret police informant, Krachkovskii declared:

It is clear that in communist circles there is now a struggle going on for the president's seat. I am almost sure that the president will be Stalin, who will be transformed into Joseph the First, the new all-Russian emperor. It's not a question of intentions, but of the general course of history. Communism is becoming the national religion of Russia, just as fascism is becoming the national religion of Germany and Italy.¹¹

Although Krachkovskii clearly exaggerated the degree to which secular ideology was beginning to substitute for religious belief in central and eastern Europe, his identification of ideological trends favoring etatism throughout the region was quite perceptive. A year before Krachkovskii was reported for his incautious remark, the Menshevik editors of the Parisian *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* published a letter from Moscow claiming that a wave of popular patriotism had swept through the capital in 1935 following the announcement of a high-ranking French envoy's impending state visit:

They talk about it in Soviet institutions, factory smoking rooms, student dormitories and commuter trains... it's the sense of *national pride*. Russia has again become a Great Power [*velikoderzhava*] and even such powerful states as France desire her friendship... Narrow-minded bureaucrats in Soviet institutions who had long been quiet now confidently talk of national patriotism, of Russia's historic mission, and of the revival of the old Franco-Russian alliance, [notions which] are greeted approvingly by their Communist directors... There is clear panic among Communist idealists.¹²

While not as articulate as Trotskii's diagnoses of Stalinism as "Thermidor" or "the revolution betrayed," some Soviet citizens clearly grasped the increasingly traditionalist orientation of the Soviet state.¹³

¹¹ Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv istoriko-politicheskikh dokumentov g. Sankt-Peterburga (hereafter TsGAIPD SPb), f. 24, op. 2b, d. 185, ll. 50-2, quoted in Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Propaganda, Terror and Dissent, 1934-1941*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 172.

¹² A., "Sovetskii patriotizm – Legalizatsiia obyvatel'skogo patriotizma," *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*, 25 March 1935, 24.

¹³ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is It Going?*, London: Faber and Faber, 1937.

During the mid-1930s, certain members of the creative intelligentsia – A.N. Tolstoi, B. Levin, A. Stepanov, S. Sergeev-Tsenskiĭ, E.V. Tarle – succeeded in adapting to this new line with surprising ease. Others, however, did not. Indeed, the fact that the party hierarchy never explicitly clarified the nature or extent of its ideological turn-about meant that many members of the creative intelligentsia – especially among former leftists – failed to appreciate the significance of the new national Bolshevik line. One of the most scandalous incidents involved N.M. Gorchakov, the director of Moscow’s Satire Theater, who commissioned a comedy poking fun at Ivan the Terrible from M.A. Bulgakov in late 1935. Despite investing considerable time and effort in mounting the play, Gorchakov was forced to scuttle *Ivan Vasil’evich* after its dress rehearsal in May 1936 on the orders of A.I. Angarov, Ia.O. Boiarskii, and other officials from the Central Committee, due to its disrespectful treatment of the Russian national past.¹⁴ Still more dramatic was the fiasco surrounding Dem’ian Bednyi’s opera *The Epic Heroes (Bogatyri)* later that fall. Although Bednyi had already been censured for derisive treatments of Russian themes earlier in the decade,¹⁵ he apparently saw nothing provocative about collaborating with A. Ia. Tairov in the staging of a comic libretto about the heroes of Russian mythology and the coming of Christianity to medieval Rus’. A ribald, drunken tale, *The Epic Heroes* portrayed Vladimir the Great, the founder of the medieval Kievan state, as an indecisive coward. Notorious highwaymen from Russian folklore were depicted as revolutionaries. Not a surprising interpretation for someone with Bednyi’s radical background, it won the approval of high-ranking cultural authorities like Boiarskii and Orlovskii and opened at Moscow’s Kamernyi Theater in November 1936. But Bednyi’s farce was fated to be staged only a handful of times before an enraged V.M. Molotov shut it down due to its inappropriate treatment of the newly revived Russian folk epic. Overriding the opera’s official sanction, Molotov engineered a Politburo resolution that forced Boiarskii’s superiors at the All-Union Committee for Artistic Affairs to issue a decree condemning *The Epic Heroes* as an “antihistorical and insulting portrayal of... a positive stage in the

¹⁴ *Dnevnik Eleny Bulgakovoi*, Moscow: Izd-vo “Knizhnaia palata,” 1990, 72, 120-121. For more on the scandal, see Maureen Perrie, *The Cult of Ivan the Terrible in Stalin’s Russia*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, chap. 3; idem, “The Terrible Tsar as Comic Hero: Mikhail Bulgakov’s ‘Ivan Vasil’evich,’” *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*, ed. Kevin M.F. Platt and David Brandenberger (forthcoming). Lur’e’s belief that the play was canceled because the party hierarchy had already lost confidence in Bulgakov seems excessively teleological. See Ia. S. Lur’e, “Ivan Groznyi i drevnerusskaia literatura v tvorcestve M. Bulgakova,” *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoi literatury*, vol. 45, St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1992, 321.

¹⁵ See A.M. Dubrovsky, “Chronicle of a Poet’s Downfall: Dem’ian Bednyi, Russian History, and *The Epic Heroes*,” *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (forthcoming).

history of the Russian people.”¹⁶ The fact that the Soviet artistic community and its liaisons from the party, state, and censor had all failed to appreciate the “subversive” nature of Bednyi’s piece reveals the ambiguousness of the mid-1930s official line. Molotov would recall many years later that Vladimir the Great’s acceptance of Orthodox Christianity “was not just a matter of faith, but a political step in the interests of the development of our state and people.” Claiming that “there was no reason for us to cast it as foolishness,” Molotov was willing to concede that the subversive quality of the piece probably “wasn’t clear to all of... the purest Bolsheviks and communists among us” at the time.¹⁷

Although Bednyi’s reputation was irreparably tarnished by the debacle, Bulgakov’s reaction to the scandals effectively illustrates how other members of the creative intelligentsia attempted to stay in step with the official line. E.S. Bulgakova wrote in her diary that the playwright struggled to understand the fiasco surrounding *Ivan Vasil’evich* for only a month before beginning to explore new possibilities revolving around patriotic subjects drawn from the Russian national past. Between June and July of that year, he composed an operatic libretto for *Minin and Pozharskii* based on the expulsion of Polish invaders from Muscovy in 1612 during the Time of Troubles. Later that November, newspaper coverage of Bednyi’s fall from grace spurred Bulgakov to redouble his efforts to see this opera staged. Official endorsement of medieval folk heroes also led Bulgakov to write a play entitled *Ruslan*, which he flanked with other work concerning Pugachev. He even considered accepting a commission to revive M.I. Glinka’s 1836 *A Life for the Tsar*.¹⁸

Despite his perceptive appraisal of the ideological turnabout, Bulgakov seems to have had problems adjusting to the newly Russo-centric dimensions of the Soviet theatrical world,¹⁹ and party authorities repeatedly had to prod him to

¹⁶ “O p’ese ‘Bogatyri’ Dem’iana Bednogo,” *Fal’sifikatsiia narodnogo proshlogo*, Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1937, 3-4. On Bednyi’s fall from grace, see Dubrovsky, “Chronicle of a Poet’s Downfall”; Edward J. Brown, *The Proletarian Crisis in Russian Literature*, New York, 1953, 188-190; Leonid Maksimenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muzyki: Stalinskaiia kul’turnaia revoliutsiia. 1936-1938*, Moscow: Iuridicheskaiia kniga, 1997, 212-222; N.S. Khrushchev, *Vospominaniia: Izbrannye fragmenty*, Moscow: Vagrius, 1997, 44-45; Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, ed. and trans. George Shriver, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 407.

¹⁷ *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym: Iz dnevnika Feliksa Chueva*, Moscow: Terra, 1991, 269. No less than N.K. Krupskaiia was caught off-guard by the mid-1930s’ revival of folkloric tropes, referring to this “culture” in an unguarded moment as the “balalaika deviation” [*balalaichnyi uklon*]. See RGASPI, f. 12, op. 1, d. 535, ll. 22, 21. The author is grateful to Karen Petrone for this reference.

¹⁸ *Dnevnik Eleny Bulgakovoi*, 120-126, 154, 144.

¹⁹ Note the caustic comment in a trade journal: “up until the present time, directors and critics have ‘been ashamed’ to speak of plays’ national character and in general about Russian art’s national form.” See V. Ivanov, “MKhAT – natsional’nyi russkii teatr,” *Teatr*, 4, 1937, 23.

write with less equivocation.²⁰ Frustrated by the stalling of *Minin and Pozharskii*, *Pugachev*, and yet another piece about Peter the Great, Bulgakov spent the fall of 1937 mulling over whether or not to switch to something entirely new concerning either the War of 1812 or Suvorov.²¹ Ultimately, it was Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* to which he would return, although only in the capacity of a consultant to S.M. Gorodetskii.²² This dogged interest in the Russian national past says quite a bit about the Soviet creative intelligentsia during the mid-to-late 1930s, even if Bulgakov's own efforts in this regard have largely been forgotten.

Although there is some reason to suspect that Bulgakov was steered toward this new creative focus by several Stalinist insiders and party officials,²³ his re-orientation also took place against the increasingly Russo-centric backdrop of Soviet mass culture. In early 1937, with the centennial commemoration of Pushkin's death, the leading lights of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia – Belinskii, Repin, Surikov, etc. – were increasingly valorized. Press accounts announced that these and other famous tsarist-era personalities anticipated key aspects of Soviet culture, from the social and political to the aesthetic.²⁴ The subsequent launch in 1937-1938 of a new generation of theatrical works and the release of films like V. Petrov's *Peter the First* (based on Tolstoi's novel) and S.M. Eisenstein's *Aleksandr Nevskii* cleared up much of the cultural elite's confusion regarding the direction of the official line. V.I. Vernadskii reported in his diary even before the release of *Peter the First* that "among the intelligentsia, the conviction is...widespread that the Stalin-Molotov line is Russian and that it is necessary for the state." Vernadskii then touched upon the increasing vulnerability of those unreformed leftists within the artistic world who still clung to their internationalist convictions, noting that such people not only risked being labeled

²⁰ *Minin and Pozharskii*, for instance, apparently depicted the Polish invaders of the Time of Troubles in insufficiently harsh terms. The new atmosphere was apparently strained enough that Angarov even lost his temper with the playwright at one point, asking: "why don't you love the Russian people?" See the April 7, 1937 entry in *Dnevnik Eleny Bulgakovoi*, 138. Angarov's denunciatory report is at RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 256, ll. 9-10.

²¹ *Dnevnik Eleny Bulgakovoi*, 170-172. Perhaps because of failing health or despair at being denied recognition as an accomplished playwright, Bulgakov instead focused on *Don Quixote* and *Batum*, the latter of which was to center on Stalin's childhood and youth.

²² *Ibid.*, 157, 176-178, 373-374.

²³ See comments by M.A. Dobranitskii and Angarov and a letter from B.V. Asaf'ev in *ibid.*, 146, 138; *Mikhail Bulgakov – Dnevnik, pis'ma, 1914-1940*, ed. V.I. Losev, Moscow: Sovremennyi pisatel', 1997, 420-421.

²⁴ "Velikii russkii kritik," *Pravda*, 14 June 1936, 1; Igor' Grabar, "Velikii russkii zhivopisets V.I. Surikov," *Pravda*, 28 December 1936, 2; V. Kemenov, "Ilia Repin," *Pravda*, 7 October 1936, 2. Scientists were valorized as well, including M.N. Lomonosov: "Genial'nyi syn velikogo russkogo naroda," *Pravda*, 18 November 1936, 1.

“enemies within the party” but “enemies of the Russian people, according to this statist expression.”²⁵

But it wasn't just domestic elites like Bulgakov, Tolstoi, Eisenstein, and Vernadskii who sensed the shift in emphasis toward the patriotic past. Émigrés across the political spectrum – from G.P. Fedotov and N.A. Berdiaev to Vera Aleksandrova – also made note of the campaign's selective rehabilitation of the prerevolutionary heroic past. Declaring in 1937 that Soviet patriotism was “simply Russian patriotism,” Berdiaev grudgingly acknowledged that the Stalin regime was having unprecedented success in mobilizing popular support by deft use of historically oriented appeals.²⁶ But it was *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik's* Aleksandrova who offered perhaps the most cogent analysis of the official line's on-going evolution. According to this famous leftist critic,

the most characteristic aspect of the newly-forming ideology... is the *downgrading* [ottesnenie] of socialist elements within it. This doesn't mean that socialist phraseology has disappeared or is disappearing. Not at all. The majority of all slogans still contain this socialist element, but it no longer carries its previous ideological weight, the socialist element having ceased to play a *dynamic role* in new slogans. It is most possible to see these subtle moves in minor but representative examples. At first, one was to speak of the USSR as the “country of the proletarian dictatorship,” and then the “motherland of socialism” and the “motherland of toilers of the whole world.” During the “socialism in one country” construction period, the USSR was referred to officially as the “socialist fatherland.” Toward the end of the First Five-Year Plan, the more intimate [term] “socialist motherland,” or “soviet motherland” appeared, while today [the USSR] is referred to over and over [splosh' i riadom] as simply “our motherland.” According to our contemporaries' perceptions, “our motherland” sounds warmer and more joyful, less official and bureaucratic [kazemno], than “socialist motherland.”

In Aleksandrova's view, the heresy of this abandonment of internationalism was aggravated by the revival of non-Marxist patriotic imagery and neglect of class analysis. Aleksandrova was particularly incensed by the fact that “*props from the historic past* – the people, ethnicity, the motherland, the nation and patriotism – play a large role in the new ideology.”²⁷ Even far away in exile, she

²⁵ Diary entry from July 19, 1937, published in “Iz dnevnika V.I. Vernadskogo,” *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 5, 2002, 63.

²⁶ See Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, trans. R.M. French, London: G. Bles, Centenary Press, 1937, 171-77. Berdiaev in some ways was echoing a statement made during the previous year by G.P. Fedotov, reprinted in his *Sud'ba i grekhi Rossii: izbrannye stat'i po filosofii russkoi istorii i kul'tury*, vol. 1, St. Petersburg: Izd-vo “Sofia,” 1992, 124.

²⁷ V. Aleksandrova, “Ideologicheskie metamorfozy,” *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*, 27 April 1937, 14. A historian who taught at Kiev State University in the 1930s made a similar point about

clearly sensed that the retrospective nature of the official line was beginning to eclipse its earlier progressive dimensions.

Aleksandrova's analysis was echoed a year later by I. Garvi, another *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* correspondent, who contended that "the motherland cult, instilled from above and inseparably connected with the cult of the all-powerful great leader, the 'father of the peoples,' answers the needs of the society's new elites." Garvi continued that the campaign represented a major new phase in Soviet propaganda efforts, as previously internationalist priorities were shifting toward an emphasis on "the national distinctiveness of the peoples who inhabit [the USSR], especially the Great Russian tribe which founded the Russian state..." Peasant rebels like Razin and Pugachev and heroes associated with organized labor and the working class such as the Chartists and Paris Communards had given way to newly populist forms of mass mobilization. "Now," wrote Garvi, "the search for historical forefathers has brought about the exaltation of Saint Vladimir, Dmitrii Donskoi, Aleksandr Nevskii, Ivan Kalita, and Peter the Great – royal builders and organizers of the Russian state and, later, the Russian empire... Now [Stalin] wants to trace his political lineage from Vladimir Monomakh, Aleksandr Nevskii, and Peter the Great."²⁸ According to Garvi's admittedly jaundiced evaluation, little remained of the revolution's early ideological promise.

But if this national Bolshevik line met with grudging respect among émigré circles abroad, its popular reception at home was surprisingly varied and equivocal. To some – particularly among the left-leaning creative intelligentsia – propaganda grounded in the Russian national past seemed an embarrassing retreat from the idealism of Soviet societal mobilization during the 1920s and early 1930s. This criticism suggests something important about the society's reception of the official line: few seem to have realized that Soviet ideologists' use of etatist, Russo-centric imagery was designed to support to Soviet state-building efforts rather than Russian nationalism or ethnic self-determination.²⁹ Perhaps overlooking the decade's increasingly routine internationalist propaganda, these observers were struck – consciously or unconsciously – by the state's co-option of Russian heroes, myths, and imagery from the tsarist era and began to fear that the new ideological current was on the verge of endorsing explicit Russian chauvinism. For instance, after it appeared in print in *Znamia* in

the shift from Soviet patriotism to "Russian great power nationalism" – see Konstantin Shteppa, *Russian Historians and the Soviet State*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1962, 136, 134.

²⁸ I. Garvi, "Patriotizm i diktatura," *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*, 14 June 1938, 2-3.

²⁹ Soviet ideology aimed for the attainment of "Great Power" status and not Russian self-rule, meaning that it falls short of the Gellnerian definition of a nationalist movement. The latter notes first and foremost that "Nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy" in Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, 1, etc.

late 1937, the screenplay to Eisenstein's *Aleksandr Nevskii* was attacked for its "faux patriotism" [*susal'nyi patriotizm*],³⁰ a charge that implicitly compared it to a more genuinely "Soviet" sense of loyalty. A year later, N.K. Krupskaiia expressed her misgivings over the infamous 1938 Russian language decree in a personal letter to Stalin: "I am very troubled by *how* we are going to carry out [plans for union-wide Russian language instruction]. It seems sometimes that the small horns of Great Power chauvinism are starting to show."³¹ Both of these statements reveal even major figures among the Soviet intelligentsia considered the changes underway as a imperial Russian redux of sorts.

But perhaps the most articulate domestic critique of the turn-about in party ideology is found in another letter addressed to Stalin by the literary critic V. I. Blium.³² By the time he wrote his fateful letter, Blium was already not a young man, having worked as a high school history teacher, theater critic, and social commentator since the early years of the twentieth century. Blium joined the party after the February 1917 revolution and became deeply involved with Bolshevik journalism and arts shortly thereafter. During the second half of the 1920s, Blium served in organizations like the RSFSR's Main Repertory Committee,³³ where he attempted to prevent the staging of works he found insufficiently revolutionary. He was particularly famous for his opposition to the Moscow Art Theater's 1926 production of Bulgakov's *The Day of the Turbins*, which he condemned as "a blatant apology for the White Guards."³⁴ After the restructuring of the artistic establishment during the early 1930s, Blium worked within the Dramaturgy Section of the Soviet Writers' Union, as well as within the Group Committee of Dramaturgists.³⁵

A radical communist-idealist, Blium was dismayed during the mid-to-late 1930s by the rising tide of what he saw as old regime nostalgia and "Great Power" chauvinism within Soviet mass culture.³⁶ At a meeting of the Dramaturgy Section in mid-December 1938, Blium openly protested against the prolix-

³⁰ P. Pavlenko and S.M. Eizenshtein, "Rus': literaturnyi stsenarii," *Znamia*, 12, 1937, 102-36; A. Akhutin, "Za khudozhestvennuiu pravdu," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 30 May 1938, 3.

³¹ See "Dorogoi Iosif Vissarionovich" (7 March 1938), in *Izvestiia TsK*, 3, 1989, 179.

³² For more on Blium, see my "'Vse cherty rasovogo natsionalizma...': internatsionalist zhaluetsia Stalinu (ianvar' 1939 g.)" (co-authored with Karen Petrone), *Voprosy istorii*, 1, 2000, 128-133.

³³ Glavrepertkom RSFSR.

³⁴ "Vypiska iz protokola soveshchaniia Glavnogo repertuarnogo komiteta s predstaviteliami MKhAT 1-go ot 25 iunია 1926 goda," *Neizdannyi Bulgakov: teksty i materialy*, ed. Ellendea Proffer, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977, 82; A. Smelianskii, *Mikhail Bulgakov v Khudozhestvennom teatre*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1986, 143-144.

³⁵ Gruppkom dramaturgov.

³⁶ Other committed internationalists seem to have felt similarly. See Vs. Surganov, "Slovo o Fedore Panferove: k 90-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia," *Moskva*, 10, 1986, 194; L. Dymerskaia, "Demarsh protiv Stalina: o povesti Bruno Iasenskogo 'Nos'," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 3, 1998, 155-174.

feration of new patriotic plays like A.E. Korneichuk's *Bogdan Khmel'nitskii*³⁷ and F. Finn and M. Gus' *Keys to Berlin*,³⁸ which he felt were inappropriate subjects for socialist audiences. Invoking M.N. Pokrovskii's famous maxim that "history is politics projected into the past,"³⁹ he denounced the Soviet rehabilitation of tsarist-era heroes as ideological heresy.⁴⁰ A month later, at a meeting of the Critics' and Theater Specialists' Section of the All-Union Theatrical Society, Blium again rose to his feet to repeat his objections, attacking Eisenstein's *Aleksandr Nevskii* as well as the plays by Korneichuk and Finn and Gus. *Literaturnaia gazeta*'s bitter account of the session illustrates the tone and breadth of his assault:

[Blium] was not too ashamed to say that A. Korneichuk's play *Bogdan Khmel'nitskii* would have received the eager endorsement of Shvartz, the most reactionary of Nicholas II's ministers of education; he was not too ashamed to mockingly refer to S. Eisenstein, nor to assert that Purishkevich, Guchkov and Miliukov would have fawned all over the authors of the play *Keys to Berlin*.⁴¹

Blium's hyperbole ultimately precipitated the publication of a number of articles in the central press that month which rebuked him in no uncertain terms for his apparent lack of patriotic sensibilities and his conflation of Soviet propaganda efforts with those of the old regime.⁴² The court historian A.V. Shestakov was even recruited to refute Blium's invocation of Pokrovskii's discredited formula and to reproach him for his failure to appreciate the nature and intent of the new historical line.⁴³

³⁷ "Novye postanovki Malogo teatra," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 1 December 1938, 3; S. Nagornyi, "'Bogdan Khmel'nitskii': zametki o p'ese," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 2 March 1939, 5; A. Fonshtein, "Bogdan Khmel'nitskii v Malom teatre," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 15 April 1939, 3; B. Leskov, "Bogdan Khmel'nitskii na trekh stsenakh," *Teatr*, 7, 1939, 111-123.

³⁸ Reviewed by Blium in manuscript form in 1938, K. Finn's and M. Gus' *Kliuchi Berlina* was staged only in September 1941 – see I. Kruti, "V gody Otechestvennoi voiny," *Sovetskii teatr*, ed. M.S. Grigor'ev, Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe ob-vo, 1947, 199. The delay was likely a result of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty that August, which precluded the staging of anti-German material for eighteen months.

³⁹ Pokrovskii was considered the father of Soviet materialist historiography during the 1920s. In January 1936, four years after his death, his theoretical legacy was "exposed" as non-Marxist, ahistorical, and "national nihilist." Reversal of the so-called Pokrovskii School paved the way for the return of a more conventional state-school style of historiography.

⁴⁰ V. Golubeva, "Neudavshiis razgovor," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 20 December 1938, 5.

⁴¹ "Snova Blium...", *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 26 January 1939, 5.

⁴² For instance, A. Shin, "Na sobranii dramaturgov Moskvy," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 20 January 1939, 2.

⁴³ A. Shestakov, "Propaganda vrednogo tezisa," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 10 January 1939, 5. A.V. Shestakov was the celebrated author of the seminal 1937 *Short Course on the History of the USSR*.

Frustrated over this public scolding (and by a more private censure meted out by the Dramaturgy Section⁴⁴), in late January 1939 Blium was bold enough to protest directly to Stalin, detailing his principled objections to the emerging populist Russo-centric line.⁴⁵ He also appended to the letter copies of lengthy reviews he had written concerning *Bogdan Khmel'nitskii* and *The Keys to Berlin* – manuscripts that apparently he had read out loud at the two meetings earlier that month. Blium's letter and reviews assailed these plays for their hagiographic focus on the past and for their lack of anything resembling communist idealism or proletarian internationalism.⁴⁶

Importantly, Blium objected not only to this propaganda's reliance on pre-revolutionary imagery but to its tone as well, which he alleged was reminiscent of the tsarist regime's shrill nationalism during World War I.⁴⁷ Blium wrote to Stalin:

The character of Soviet patriotism has...been distorted and nowadays is sometimes beginning to display all the characteristics of racial nationalism. It seems to me that this situation is all the more serious because the people of the new generations – those who have grown up within the context of Soviet culture and who have never “seen” for themselves the bourgeois [pre-revolutionary] patriotism of the Guchkovs, Stolypins, and Miliukovs – simply cannot differentiate between these two sorts of patriotism. This all began (that is, in the arts, and in particular, in dramaturgy) with a search for “our” heroes of the bygone ages, a hasty, blind search for historical “analogies.” Publishing houses and the All-Union Committee for Artistic Affairs are interested in all kinds of “anti-Polish” and “anti-German” material [these days] and authors are throwing themselves at the task of fulfilling this “social commission” [*sotsial'nyi zakaz*].⁴⁸

Criticizing members of the creative intelligentsia like Eisenstein and Korneichuk for promoting “a simplistic, pseudo-socialist *racism*,” Blium complained bitterly about Soviet mass culture's apparent retreat from internationalism to nationalism. Although there is no evidence that Stalin himself ever read the letter, his chancery did forward it to Agitprop for investigation. Looking into

⁴⁴ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstv, f. 631, op. 2, d. 349, l. 9.

⁴⁵ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter RGASPI), f. 17, op. 120, d. 348, ll. 63-67.

⁴⁶ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 348, ll. 68-71ob; 72-75ob.

⁴⁷ On nationalism between 1914 and 1917, see Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003; Hubertus Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1995.

⁴⁸ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 348, ll. 63-64. “Anti-Polish and anti-German material” refers to Korneichuk's *Bogdan Khmel'nitskii*, Eisenstein's *Aleksandr Nevskii* and Gorodetskii's adaptation of *Life for the Tsar* into *Ivan Susanin*.

Blium's charges, a staffer named V. Stepanov judged the critic's observations to be one-sided hyperbole and concluded that Blium had failed to appreciate the progressive dimensions of the historical heroes under discussion. Blium, however, stubbornly clung to his idealistic position, despite being summoned to Agitprop for what must have been a thorough dressing-down.⁴⁹

Part of Blium's refusal to fall into line may have stemmed from the fact that he knew he was not alone in his views. Shortly after Blium was called on the carpet, the famous Soviet *feuilletonists* A. Raskin and M. Slobodskii published a short story that poked fun at the awkwardness of the "democratic tsar" line in official propaganda that valorized figures from Ivan the Great to Ivan the Terrible. Raskin and Slobodskii's unmistakable point was to question the relevance of such medieval subjects to the Soviet experiment.⁵⁰ These dissenting voices hint that – as late as the spring of 1939 – the Soviet elite remained divided over the merit of the new propaganda line.

Confirmation of this schism appeared only weeks later in early April when A. A. Fadeev called for more robust criticism within the Soviet artistic world at the Eighteenth Party Conference. A coincidence rather than an explicit signal "from above," this speech nevertheless touched off an utterly unprecedented wave of public debate over the direction of the official line.⁵¹ Within days of Fadeev's speech, S. Dikovskii rose to his feet at a meeting of the All-Moscow Writers' Assembly to ask why *Peter the First* and *Aleksandr Nevskii* had received such an uncritical reception in the Soviet press. According to *Literaturnaia gazeta's* April 20th edition, Dikovskii complained that the films' protagonists had been cast monolithically and lacked character, depth, and nuance.⁵² Such a characterization did not correspond to the tenets of Socialist Realism, which (at least theoretically) championed complex characters contextualized within a *Bildungsroman*-like narrative.⁵³ Dikovskii's point was apparently judged to be an important one, insofar as the *Literaturnaia gazeta* board incorporated it directly into that day's lead editorial as well.⁵⁴

Similar comments were made about a week later by two other critics at a meeting of the presidium of the Soviet Writers' Union. Implicitly responding to Fadeev's call for more aggressive criticism of Soviet mass culture, F. Levin ex-

⁴⁹ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 348, ll. 65-77.

⁵⁰ This book was sent to press on March 20, 1939. See A. Raskin and M. Slobodskii, "Sozvuchnyi feodal: opyt istoricheskogo stsenariia," *Parodii i fel'etony*, Moscow, 1939, 48-51.

⁵¹ "Doklad tov. A.A. Fadeeva ob itogakh XVIII s"ezda VKP(b)," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 20 April 1939, 4. See also "'Voplotit' v zhivyykh obrazakh velikiu pravdu kommunizma": Doklad tov. A.A. Fadeeva na partiinom sobranii v Soiuze sovetских pisatelci," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 10 April 1939, 2.

⁵² "Rech' tov. S. Dikovskogo (na obshchemoskovskom sobranii pisatelci)," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 20 April 1939, 4.

⁵³ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 14-15, 57.

⁵⁴ "Patrioticheskaiia tema v iskusstve," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 20 April 1939, 1.

pressed discomfort with aspects of the new propaganda line and voiced his support for “those readers who are sending critical comments to *Pravda* on account of *Peter the First* and *Aleksandr Nevskii*.”⁵⁵ A.S. Gurvich picked up on this line in his speech, assailing the latter film for its indulgence in both “Kuz’ma Kriuchkovism” and “shtamp” – a damning indictment that alleged that Eisenstein was recycling official nativist tropes from World War I tsarist propaganda.⁵⁶

Although the authorities rebutted such criticism later that May,⁵⁷ debate continued during the summer of 1939 before the party hierarchy intervened that August, resolving the dispute with a Central Committee resolution that precipitated a series of stern articles in the central press.⁵⁸ Eisenstein, Korneichuk, et al. were right and their critics were wrong. The editors of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, mortified by their recent endorsement of now “unpatriotic” views, took the lead in assailing the communist idealists for their failure to differentiate between a historically grounded sense of Soviet patriotism and the jingoism [*kvasnoi patriotizm*] of the tsarist era. The paper’s lead editorial on August 26, 1939 declared that it was entirely proper for Aleksandr Nevskii, Peter the Great, and other historical epics and folklore to occupy center stage in contemporary Soviet mass culture. After all, “the peoples of the Soviet Union – and most of all the great Russian people, the vanguard of the socialist revolution – have the right to take pride in their genuinely heroic history.” This truth was apparently so self-evident that anyone suggesting otherwise was to be silenced, despite Fadeev’s call for precisely such debate only months earlier:

We must rebuff those “Ivans” who’ve forgotten their heritage and the various bourgeois lackeys dressed in leftist clothing who are trying under the rubric of “Kuz’ma Kriuchkovism” to ridicule the honorable work of talented Soviet historical novelists, playwrights and film directors.

It is well known that in the hands of the bourgeois and monarchist press, the celebration of Kuz’ma Kriuchkov’s supposed (or even genuine) ex-

⁵⁵ “Iz rechi tov. F. Levina (na zasedanii prezidiuma SSP s aktivom),” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 26 April 1939, 2.

⁵⁶ “Kuz’ma Kriuchkovism” (*kuz’ma-kriuchkovshchina*) is a reference to a low-brow propaganda campaign during the First World War celebrating the semi-mythical exploits of the Cossack Kuz’ma Firsovich Kriuchkov. “Iz rechi tov. A. Gurvicha (na zasedanii prezidiuma SSP s aktivom),” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 26 April 1939, 3.

⁵⁷ B.M., “Vladimir Blum i Il’ia Muromets, Boris Baks i Mikhail Lermontov,” *Teatr*, 4, 1939, 143; A. Fonshtein, “O chuvstve mery,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 8 May 1939, 3.

⁵⁸ See the articles accompanying an unpublished party resolution: “Istoriia i literatura,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 26 August 1939, 1; “O literaturno-khudozhestvennykh zhurnalakh,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 30 August 1939, 2; “O nekotorykh literaturno-khudozhestvennykh zhurnalakh,” *Bol’shevik*, 17, 1939, 51-57. Only the resolution’s supporting materials directly mention the controversy. See RGASPI, f. 17, op. 116, d. 9, ll. 2-3; *ibid.*, op. 117, d. 19, ll. 54-58. Both are published in “*Literaturnyi front*: istoriia politicheskoi tsenzury, 1932-1946 – sbornik dokumentov,” ed. D.L. Babichenko, Moscow: Entsiklopediia rossiiskikh dereven’, 1994, 40-44.

plots during the first imperialist war served as a way of hiding from the broad mass of laborers the true nature and aims of the predatory war.

What else, aside from an active rebuff, can the term “Kuz’ma Kriuchkovism” inspire in us when it is used in relation to works concerning the heroic past of our people, who have built a socialist society and who have demonstrated genuine feats of heroism in defense of their socialist fatherland, both in labor and on the battlefield?

It is true that both now and in the future, our criticism must unmask any and all attempts to distort history or to promote various sorts of pseudohistorical whitewash [*maznia*], faux patriotism [*susal’shchina*], anecdotalism, or conformist timeserving laced with chauvinistic undertones.

But it is also necessary to recognize that enemies of the people are trying to discredit talented works about the heroic past of our people in a desperate attempt to undermine Soviet patriotism.⁵⁹

This stinging rebuke evidently quashed all dissent in regard to the official line, as there is little evidence of further grumbling about the issue within the creative intelligentsia during the remainder of the interwar period.⁶⁰ In a sense, of course, this rebuke was probably not even necessary, as those concerned about the regime’s ideological commitment to socialist internationalism now had something else to worry about: the August 23, 1939 signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty.

* * *

The glimpses of popular opinion examined above indicate much about how members of the artistic elite responded to the emergence of official Russocentrism during the late 1930s. Some were confused by the about-face, while others – especially among the ranks of the communist idealists – believed that the changes were indicative of an ideological retreat, a retreat from proletarian internationalism to Russian nationalism.

To be sure, others in society found the new line quite appealing. Indeed, on the mass level, this propaganda can be seen as functioning as a *modus vivendi* with the USSR’s Russian-speaking population on the eve of the war.⁶¹ Some sensed precisely this effect. For instance, the future academician N.N. Inozemtsev wrote in 1944 during a lull in the fighting at the front, “one notices with such happiness how the notions of motherland, fatherland, and patriotism have

⁵⁹ “Istoriia i literatura,” 1.

⁶⁰ For a rare example of dissatisfaction with the official line regarding the rehabilitation of Ivan the Terrible, see B.L. Pasternak’s 1941 correspondence in B.M. Borisov and E.B. Pasternak, “Materialy k tvorcheskoi istorii romana B. Pasternaka ‘Doktor Zhivago,’” *Novyi mir*, 6, 1988, 218.

⁶¹ Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, chap. 6.

changed before our very eyes. After all, it's only recently that all these words have received the right to be heard and to display their truly noteworthy colors." Reflecting further upon this point, he attempted to make sense of the ideological transformations he had witnessed since his childhood:

In overthrowing Russian backwardness, the revolution was forced to temporarily "annul" such concepts [as patriotism and the motherland] because they were too closely associated with the [ruling] class that had ceased to exist. But now, with a new state structure, built by the blood and sweat of an entire generation, there are all the preconditions necessary for the "motherland" and "fatherland" to become beloved, lofty, integral elements [of our culture] for the greatest stretches of the masses, who will pass them on to future generations in their mother's milk. Our generation was "retrained" in the flame of war – the difficult years at the front gave to us what school wasn't always able to provide. We are the Motherland. The Russians are the most talented, the most gifted, and the most vast people in the world in terms of our feelings and inner-abilities. Regardless of all our shortcomings, excesses, etc., Russia is the best state in the world.⁶²

As evidenced by such statements, the ideological about-face of the mid-to-late 1930s divided the Soviet intelligentsia into two camps – those who appreciated traditional notions of patriotism and Russo-centrism and those who remained committed internationalists.⁶³ Although this ideological metamorphosis was technically consistent with broader trends in Marxist thought, communist idealists in the USSR found themselves profoundly troubled by the way these transformations undermined the proletarian internationalist ethic that had defined their lives for the first twenty years of the Soviet "experiment."

⁶² Italics added. June 10, 1944 entry in N.N. Inozemtsev, *Tsena pobedy v toi samoi voine: frontovoi dnevnik*, Moscow: Nauka, 1995, 164. It would be a mistake to say, of course, that no one on the mass level was frustrated or confused by this exchange of symbols. For instance, the announcement of the Comintern's dissolution in 1943 led to the following questions in Leningrad: "Will the anthem 'The Internationale' remain as before the anthem of all freedom-loving countries?" "Does the slogan 'Workers of the World, Unite!' remain in force?" More cynical were comments attributed to workers in Sverdlovsk, where rumors circulated that the singing of the "Internationale" had been banned. Workers sniped among themselves: "What will we sing now? 'God save the Tsar?'" Elsewhere, there was grumbling to the effect that: "First epaulets, then priests, and now the [closure of the] Comintern." See TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2v, d. 6258, ll. 206-208, published in *Leningrad v osade: sbornik dokumentov o geroicheskoi oborone Leningrada v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny, 1941-44*, St. Petersburg: Liki Rossii, 1995, 480; RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 181. l. 4.

⁶³ Needless to say, internationalists within the Soviet intelligentsia included both communist idealists and people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who objected to the russocentric national Bolshevik line for more personal reasons. L.N. Seifullina confided to Ilya Ehrenburg during the war: "my father was a russified Tatar, my mother was Russian, and I have always considered myself to be Russian, but when I hear such things, I feel like saying that I am a Tatar." See Il'ia Ehrenburg, *Liudi, gody, zhizn': Vospominaniia v trekh knigakh*, vol. 2, Moscow: "Sov. pisatel'," 1990, 257.