BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Boris Dralyuk. *Western Crime Fiction Goes East: The Russian Pinkerton Craze 1907-1934*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012. xiv, 182 pp. $133.00 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-9-00423-310-2.

When the Russian Communist party in 1921 initiated the New Economic Policy, it set itself the task of defeating capitalist production and market relations on their own terms. In 1922 Nikolai Bukharin, in a similar formulation, argued that Communists needed to win the attention of the country's youth by creating their own ideologically acceptable detective stories to draw them away from the pablum of Western Pinkertons and Nick Carter tales that had become wildly popular in Russia. Speaking before the Fifth Komsomol Congress, he confessed his own weakness for mysteries and reminded listeners that even Marx had been a fan of the occasional cliffhanger. Bukharin thus advocated the publication of what came to be known as "red Pinkertons," a category of boulevard literature to which Boris Dralyuk has devoted the most sustained scholarly attention to date.

Dralyuk begins his study with a look at the Pinkerton craze in the last years of the tsarist empire, when such well-known writers as Valentin Kataev, Sergei Esenin, Leonid Borisov, and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein were children and avidly consumed adventure serials themselves. The novels reached their peak of popularity following the violence of 1905, when the reaction brought police to nearly every corner of Russia's major cities. Dralyuk sees the popularity of the dime-novel detectives as an expression of the clarity of moral distinctions they offered and their ability to displace anxieties about law and order in chaotic times. Although police chiefs hoped that the fascination with the triumph of fictional sleuths would win popular sympathy for their own struggles with crime, they failed to notice that, in many instances, the fictional heroes succeeded despite official law enforcement rather than because of it. As often as not, state authorities in the serials obstructed the cause of justice, whether by their own bumbling or, as in "The Scourge of Redstone," masterminding criminal networks themselves. (pp. 44-45)

Although Russia's Pinkertons unapologetically lifted plots and characters from their Western counterparts, Dralyuk shows that they did rework key elements to enhance their appeal to the Russian audience. Thus, Nat Pinkerton's role as a union-busting enforcer for capitalist employers was decidedly muted; the police, as often as not, came off as corrupt and incompetent; and the racist stereotypes that were central to Western tales

found little purchase (except, perhaps, regarding the Japanese) in Russian variants. Moreover, the heroes of Russia's serials seemed to be motivated less by the process of identifying their foes than by avenging their crimes. Thus, attention to procedure and logical deduction, so important to Western fans of Sherlock Holmes, took second place to high-speed chases, violent confrontations, and death-defying acrobatics.

The popularity of such low-brow fare generated considerable anxiety among intellectual elites before and after the revolution. While some grudgingly admitted their attraction to adventure fiction, louder still were the voices of those such as Kornei Chukovskii, who repeatedly attacked dime novels for their formulaic plots and abysmal prose. Revolutionary leaders likewise found little of value in them, hoping instead that proletarian youth (and their elders, who made up a sizeable portion of the audience for the stories) would seek enlightenment in more serious, ideologically palatable literature or else in approved literary classics. Pinkertons and other Western serials continued to circulate well beyond 1917, however (curiously, Dralyuk says little about the Tarzan tales, which generated much handwringing of their own), and Bukharin's call for a communist alternative was also an admission that Soviet cultural output offered little in the way of captivating entertainment.

Rather than committed Bolsheviks, the authors of the first "red Pinkertons" tended to be intellectual fellow travelers, who seized the opportunity to indulge themselves in a bit of fun, writing tales of adventure with the endorsement of state authorities. Marietta Shaginian, whose *Mess-Mend, or Yankees in Petrograd*, became the most well-known and well-received of such books, was of bourgeois background and a close associate of the Serapion brotherhood of writers. Dralyuk draws our attention to the close link between the Serapions and Formalists, whose emphasis on plot (*fabula* or *siuzhet*) influenced the red Pinkerton authors in obvious ways and made them targets for the zealous leftist advocates of the Proletarian writers' movement.

By the early 1930s the effort to generate communist alternatives to boulevard serials was widely judged to have been a failure, despite a few notable exceptions and the production of films from them. The 1934 *Literary Encyclopedia* argued that the entire phenomenon of *Pinkertonovshchina* needed to be "liquidated," and that the red Pinkertons amounted to "blatant hack-work which was supposedly revolutionary, but essentially opportunistic." (p. 77) For his part, Dralyuk finds that they lacked integrity as a genre, splicing together elements of detective tales, science fiction, swashbucklers, and comedy and, in the process, leaving their audiences confused and dissatisfied.

Despite their failure, however, Dralyuk asserts that the experiment

should not be written off as a simple curiosity of the NEP era. Arguing that parody (as several of the authors described their efforts) is a means of engaging with, while separating from, an artistic progenitor, he sees the red Pinkertons as a critical stage in the evolution of socialist realism rather than as a literary dead end. Shaginian, like Kataev, Aleksei Tolstoi, and others who penned adventure tales, went on to publish "production novels" and historical romances in the 1930s that employed many of the same techniques of their much maligned predecessors.

Dralyuk's book is a reworking of his doctoral dissertation and bears some of the hallmarks of that exercise. Several of the chapters could stand further development of their main points with more examples; and digressions, such as a look at the fascination with wrestling at the end of the imperial era, need to be more clearly tied to his central thesis. But although he has based his study entirely on published materials (archival records of the red Pinkerton publishers and the more obscure authors tend to be sparse anyway), Dralyuk has nevertheless presented a well-researched and entertaining analysis that redeems the red Pinkerton as an important, albeit unsuccessful, episode in Soviet cultural history.

T. Clayton Black *Washington College*