

REVIEWS

Karen L. Ryan. *Stalin in Russian Satire, 1917-1991*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. ix, 241 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 978-029923444-7.

In *Stalin in Russian Satire, 1917-1991*, Karen Ryan provides a detailed and thoughtful examination of how the image of Stalin is constructed *vis-à-vis* the Russian cultural self in satirical works of Soviet and émigré writers. The temporal scope of Ryan's study is vast, encompassing the period between the October Revolution and the fall of the Soviet Union, and the range of texts she discusses is equally broad. The authors whose works are central for Ryan's investigation include, in order of appearance: Vladimir Nabokov, Aleksandr Zinov'ev, Vladimir Maksimov, Kornei Chukovskii, Bulat Okudzhava, Fazil' Iskander, Vladimir Voinovich, Iuz Aleshkovskii, Evgenii Shvarts, Vasilii Aksenov, Mikhail Bulgakov, Evgenii Evtushenko, Anatolii Gladilin, and Andrei Siniavskii. These authors represent, as Ryan points out, an array of perspectives on causes and consequences of Stalinism and contribute to "the serious, often agonizing process of cultural de-Stalinization." (p. 13)

Ryan opens her study with a discussion of key concepts that provide a theoretical foundation for her investigation. She brings to the fore the notion of cultural memory as a useful device in approaching the process of de-Stalinization or lustration (purification) in Russia. Drawing on the theoretical framework constructed by Maurice Halbwachs, Ryan asserts that the approach of cultural memory allows for the establishment of a dynamic connection between the present and the past. Ryan maintains that cultural memory plays a vital role in the formation of national identity, but warns that in the case of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia it is difficult to identify the self in national terms. Hence the locus of cultural memory in relation to the satirical works in question "is sometimes Russians, sometimes Soviets, sometimes a broader community including émigrés." (p. 5) Also discussed in the introduction is concept of alterity, which Ryan uses extensively in her quest to answer what seems to be a central question of her study: "to what degree Stalin was and is 'in us'." (p. 9) Ryan maintains that portraying Stalin as the "other" allows a satirist to draw a distinction between the Russian/Soviet self and Stalinism as a historical catastrophe brought about by outside forces. Since exclusion of the other is often linked closely to identity formation, casting the other as powerful and evil in opposition to the vulnerable, but virtuous self provides fertile ground for the characterization of self as "normatively healthy and good" (p. 10) and merits a certain degree of exoneration. While this argument is well illustrated in several works discussed in lat-

er chapters, Ryan is careful to warn the reader that many of the texts treated in her study lead to more ambivalent conclusions. Indeed, in some cases the line between Stalin and the cultural self is blurred to a degree that the two almost merge, bringing into question the notion of a morally healthy cultural self and weakening the possibility of national exculpation.

While Ryan's analysis of satirical representations of Stalin is unique in its concentration on the ethical debate about the question of responsibility for the crimes of Stalinism, it follows, to a large degree, from Margaret Ziolkowski's 1997 work, *Literary Exorcisms of Stalinism: Russian Writers and the Soviet Past*. The purpose of Ziolkowski's investigation was not to construct a comprehensive survey of literary history of the Stalinist past, but to investigate how the recurrences of certain images of Stalin "shed light on Russian intellectual formulations of Stalinism and its impact on the society." (Ziolkowski, p. 1) Ryan adopts a similar approach and foregoes a chronological analysis of satirical works dedicated to Stalin and Stalinism in favor of identifying and scrutinizing a series of images of the dictator that not only reveal their authors' individual perceptions of Stalin, but also inform "the literary conversation about guilt, complicity, and the possibility of absolution." (p. 6)

Stalin in Russian Satire is divided into six chapters, each devoted to the discussion of a particular image of Stalin, its imprint on the Russian/Soviet cultural memory, and its relationship with the cultural self. Chapter 1 examines the works in which Stalin is portrayed as a madman and provides an impressively scrupulous analysis of the dictator's psychological state during various stages of his political career. Ryan argues that by portraying Stalin as insane, the satirists question whether the Russian people willingly gave license to his madness and thus should share the blame for the crimes of Stalinism. Chapter 2 studies depictions of Stalin as an animal or insect and shows in great detail how the beast metaphor underscores Stalin's alterity and further contributes to the construction of his image as alien to the Russian self. In chapter 3 Ryan discusses the casting of Stalin as a feminine or androgynous entity. She asserts that by feminizing Stalin the authors emphasize the tyrant's otherness in opposition to the strongly masculine Russian cultural self. Chapter 4 is dedicated to satirical texts in which Stalin is treated as a fantastic, unnatural creature. Literary accounts of monsters have tended to endow these creatures with human characteristics and to use them as reflections on the limitations and boundaries of the self. In line with this tradition, the images of Stalin-monsters are constructed as grotesque interlopers who, in the course of their violent relationship with their subjects, become absorbed into the subjects' cultural self. In considering the ambiguity inherent in such portrayals of Stalin, Ryan concludes that

these satirical works warn “of the possible return of Stalinism” and suggest that Stalinism “lurks within the culture itself.” (p. 95)

Chapter 5 is concerned with arguably the most recognizable portrayal of Stalin – as devil or Antichrist. Among texts analyzed in this chapter is, quite predictably, *The Master and Margarita*. Drawing extensively on the works of other scholars Ryan offers a lengthy examination of Bulgakov’s complicated relationship with Stalin and its influence on the portrayal of Stalin in the character of Woland. Although quite comprehensive, Ryan’s analysis largely repeats the findings of earlier studies and the reader is left with the sense that the author could have approached this intriguing topic with a fresher perspective. While in the course of her discussion Ryan raises many thought-provoking questions, her conclusion that “Woland is charming and sympathetic as well as dangerous and frightening because Stalin himself embodied this quality for Bulgakov” seems trivial and does not fully live up to the promise of this chapter.

The final chapter of *Stalin in Russian Satire*, “The Corpse and the Revenant,” examines the works in which Stalin is portrayed as the unquiet dead. The mystery that surrounded Stalin’s death as well as the fact that Stalin’s body was not properly buried contributed the creation of mythology that regarded him as a revenant. Evtushenko, Gladilin, and Siniavsky adopt the imagery of the unquiet dead creating highly unsettling fantastic scenarios in which Stalin returns to haunt the Russian people. Ryan concludes that Stalin’s characterization as a revenant, despite its potential to render him the other, does not provide absolution for the society he tormented:

Following de-Stalinization, the corpse has been removed and the collective is left to reaggregate, to affirm its health. However, genuine catharsis has not been achieved: the body remains unburied; Stalin’s crimes have not been examined thoroughly; and the guilt of collaborators has not been fully acknowledged. Stalin still threatens Russian culture as a potential revenant, and this fictional danger reflects a cultural preoccupation. (p. 178)

While Ryan’s emphasis on the questions of complicity and the possibility of absolution sometimes leads to generalizing, her approach provides an interesting method by which to evaluate Stalin’s relationship to Russian culture and his imprint on Russian cultural memory. *Stalin in Russian Satire* is an extremely accessible, informative and intellectually stimulating work that should appeal to Slavists, historians, and general readers.

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