

Michael David-Fox. *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 416 pp. \$55.00 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-0-19979-457-7.

What could be better than to have the opportunity to shape a new, more humane society? The search for utopian communities is not only a twentieth or nineteenth-century phenomenon, but one that stretches back into history and myth, probably as long as humankind has been confronted with the frustrations and challenges of the actual, lived experience. Revolutionary zeal has, itself, long been explained by the undergirding belief that change was the better option, even at the expense of some short-term “regrets” or missteps. Bring these two observations together, and you begin to understand the conundrum with which the founders of the new “Soviet” Russia wrestled. The challenge was not only to bring about social change, but also to consolidate that change – both with external support and internal support. And, what Michael David-Fox’s thorough research and discussion has brought to us, is a glimpse into some of the machinations required to sell the idea of the Soviet Experiment abroad and at home, and of special relationship the country had with Western visitors in the interwar period.

Looking in particular at the role of cultural diplomacy, David-Fox demonstrates how the Soviet authorities – quick to realize that it was not enough to bring about a revolutionary change from Tsarist Russia to the new “Soviet” Russia – set about crafting a vision of a new society and of its possibilities. The Russian people had to have some faith in the potential of the Soviet Experiment to change their lives and provide a much more hopeful future. The perceived and real threats to its existence – both, from within and without – meant that the Russian people needed to support their evolving society, and, that a global cadre of friends would be needed to prevent external forces from trying to destroy it. Hence, the need for cultural diplomacy and its dual role of focusing both outward and inward. Not only were the visitors to take back home positive images of the USSR, but the Soviets used the information of these external contacts and the presence of visitors in the USSR to help solidify the appreciation of the Soviet Experiment’s gains in an internal audience.

From early on, the Soviets wrestled with “love-hate” relationship with the West. This contradiction existed in Tsarist times as well. The earlier Russian leadership often eschewed the indigenous Russian culture in favor of European models of modernity. The Soviets were keen to highlight the exceptionalism of the Soviet Experiment, but they were still troubled by a concern that the new nation might not be taken seriously. They worried that in order to be recognized as belonging among the global political actors, they needed to learn some of the cultural and diplomatic norms of the European societies. Members of the leadership were stung by Western visitors’ comments that the Russians were “boorish.” With the establishment of VOKS (the Soviet

Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), the Soviets began a formal outreach program designed to bring friendly visitors to the country. These were people of some prominence, who were selected because of their potential to influence others back in their home countries in Europe or the US. This is the reason why writers and intellectuals were so prominent in these early groups. VOKS-arranged visits with Lenin and then, later, with Stalin, left a select cadre of these friends with a particularly favorable view of the USSR and their commentaries and writings spread these positive impressions of the Soviet Experiment elsewhere. As David-Fox noted, these carefully-crafted exposures to certain figures and sites in the USSR, left many with an “admiration for Bolshevik theoreticians as ‘men of action’ and . . . a cherished hope invested in the Soviet system” (p. 209).

Otherwise, VOKS was the conduit through which the Soviet leadership learned about the world outside the USSR. Indeed, as David-Fox contends, VOKS’ extensive and self-serving recordkeeping of what people did and said, helped shaped the opinions of the Soviet leadership. It fanned the flames of an often contradictory response: an admiration of things ‘Western’ while at the same time, a suspicion of Westerners. And, Stalin would frequently use the specter of Western industrial strength to spur greater productivity among Soviet workers.

In the later part of the 1920s, a shift in focus occurred which would lead to VOKS’s demise in the estimation of the Soviet authorities. A contest had developed between VOKS and Intourist to see which agency would lead the Soviets’ cultural diplomacy campaign. VOKS traditionally paid particular attention to attracting people of a certain social prestige (and by implication class from whom one could learn the social “niceties” of diplomacy) – focusing in large part on the Western intelligentsia. But, with the incorporation of Intourist in 1927, and the rise of a much more self-assured Soviet leadership, the authorities began to contend that there were other priorities to be addressed. There was no further need for diplomatic ‘polishing’ and with the increased industrial and political strength in the country, no further need to host people who ‘might be useful’ in bridging the Soviet Union with the West. Now, the intent was to bring in people whose political solidarity was intact. They demanded: where was the proletarian presence here? The workers? The “true” leaders of social change? Intourist promised to bring in “foreign workers’ delegations” and develop “social tourism” by bringing in groups of people specifically interested in the Soviet Experiment as a whole.

Also, conversely to VOKS, Intourist’s outreach model proposed to bring in large amounts of hard currency drawn from attracting larger numbers of tourists. The USSR also found itself particularly attractive with the collapse of the stock market in 1929. Capitalism had crumbled, so people wanted to see what Communism offered. As clearly evident in their full names: “Intourist” (State Joint-Stock Company for Foreign Tourism) and “VOKS” (the Soviet Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), there was a clear distinction between the goals of the former cultural rela-

tions, and the later focus on money. Intourist's founders understood that there was a sizeable tourist market out there and that this market could not only generate the sought-after cultural "goodwill," but could bring much-needed hard currency into the country. (It is highly likely that most people did not know the original name and simply saw Intourist's functioning during the Soviet era as the state-sponsored tourist agency.) While VOKS was bringing carefully-selected delegations and individuals, Intourist's numbers rose dramatically – from a little over 1,000 in 1932 to as high as 13,437 by 1936.

The quest for hard currency accelerated in Stalin's Great Break period of 1928-1931. The push to industrialize and overtake the West could not be done successfully without the help of the West in some way. Now, Soviet agents were charged with actively recruiting foreign industrial and agricultural specialists to help develop these sectors in the USSR (whom they paid in part in hard currency), as well as facilitating partnerships with industrial giants, like Ford Motor Company, General Electric, DuPont and other American companies.

But, with the increase in tourism and other special visits, the Soviets were forced to make further adjustments on the domestic scene. These were visitors whose interests went beyond theatres, museums and old churches, but included requests to visits to factories, communes and other sites of Soviet productivity, and unfortunately, the Soviet authorities frequently faced the results of a bad press from poorly-managed work-sites. Thus, they discovered that they needed to ensure that there was a network of reliable sites, including show factories, collective farms and educational institutions, so as to produce the right kind of response on the part of the visitors.

Also, with the push to attract Western capitalists and their factories, as well as to import foreign expertise in the form of the technical and agricultural specialists, the Soviets felt they had to accommodate Western patterns. Thus, they provided these special workers accommodations and other inducements that they did not provide the ordinary Russian worker. These foreigners lived in special communities, had access to special schools and shops, and could travel more freely. (Ironically, during the Great Depression next to none of these specialist workers could have expected such accommodations back home. There were no jobs in the US, not to speak of any special benefits, once one found one.)

But, it is striking to see how differently people could perceive their encounters with the Soviet model. The prism of racism provided a particular paradox. David-Fox writes about the African American artist Paul Robeson's response and alludes to other Black visitors. There were many other Blacks who were powerfully moved by this most welcome relief from the color line. Technical specialist Robert Robinson arriving in 1930 and later, the writer Langston Hughes and the "Black and White" film group arriving in 1932, reported much more favorable initial impressions of the Soviet Experiment in his memoirs, than did some of the white visitors David-Fox records in his book. This pointed to the variability of the motives and personal perspectives

of the visitors. David-Fox reports that Zara Witkin, who was strongly disposed to the Soviet Experiment, reacted negatively to the inefficiencies he saw at the border crossing between Finland and the USSR in 1932. Yet in the same year, Langston Hughes, the black writer, recorded quite a different reaction to the border crossing among the “Black and White” film group with which he was traveling. Whereas Witkin was also disappointed with what he saw in Soviet factories, Robinson, in his memoirs, made a special point of noting how clean and well-tended the machinery was on the Soviet vessel on which he made the crossing to the USSR. He then commented on the tattered clothing and lack of supplies in Leningrad, but quickly pointed out how delightful it was to be treated as an equal. As Robinson and Hughes and most of the film group were Blacks, it is possible that people suffering from racism were willing to turn a blind eye to what they considered the smaller matters – whether people were in tattered clothing – in favor of the more important ones: how they felt the Soviet people were welcoming them.

While racism may not have been a primary concern on the part of many other European or American sympathizers, there was a similar pattern of a willingness to “overlook” certain troubling developments in the mid to late 1930s in favor of the larger purpose of supporting the potential of the Soviet Experiment to lead in reshaping human society. While the Soviets purposefully crafted positive images and avoided having visitors see or hear from unapproved places or people, these fellow traveler visitors were apparently quite complicit in their selective perceptions of the country.

Most of these cultural diplomacy activities were directed at traffic to the USSR; however, VOKS and other officially-approved Soviet outreach agencies devoted considerable energy sending out books and other cultural materials, as well as to sending out selected “cultural ambassadors.” Writers, such as Vladimir Maiakovsky and filmmakers, such as Sergei Eisenstein, were some of these “ambassadors.” These figures would later also serve as hosts to select visitors to the USSR. VOKS also campaigned to have the Soviet Union sponsor exhibits or other productions in international settings as a further means to shape external public opinion. As early as 1926, the Soviets had a presence at the international exhibit in Philadelphia. Calling for “an exhibit ‘worthy of a ‘great power,’” VOKS got significant support from the Politburo. As demonstrated by the Soviet presence at subsequent international exhibits throughout Europe, the Soviets were determined to build respect. Even a rising Stalinist suspicion of foreigners did not prevent an elaborate display at the 1937 exhibit in Paris. World War II prevented further displays, but, notably, in 1959, international attention was again directed to the contest between Soviet and Western achievements with the dual national exhibits (first in New York and second in Moscow) of the Soviet National Exhibit and then American National Exhibit. The Nixon-Khrushchev “kitchen debates” is a surviving image. VOKS itself was disbanded in 1957, when Khrushchev was actively ridding the country of Stalinist relics. But cultural diplomacy was still important and he immediately established the Union of Soviet Societies

of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, along with the State Committee for Cultural Ties (GKKS) to lead these efforts.

In sum, David-Fox's book, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union 1921-1941*, provides an insightful exploration of the layers of expectations and actions on the part of the Soviets and those sympathetic to the new social models being constructed in the USSR. Even with 'friends,' the Soviets in the interwar years and afterwards remained cautious and tried to manipulate these experiences so that their friends would continue to support the Soviet Experiment. They were not always successful. Readers will find it fascinating to look behind the surface and explore details of the cross-border expectations, stretching across German and French ties, to British and subsequently, American ones. And, one cannot help but be intrigued by the glimpses into the expectations and actions around the journeys, such as: Maxim Gorky's return to the Soviet Union in the latter part of the 1920s, the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw's visit in the early 1930s, the French writer and Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland's visit in the mid-1930s, as well as the difference in the visits of André Gide in the 1930s.

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