The University of Chicago, Department of History, Fall 1998

STALINIST CULTURE

Dr. Vadim Volkov
10 weeks, 11 lectures, 9 discussion sessions, Hist 139

1. Conceptions of culture in different traditions of social thought. Culture as meanings, symbols, values, material / spiritual products, etc. Culture critique and cultural studies.


4. How Russia became “the reading country” (chitaiushchaya strana). Popular literacy and the Soviet powers in the 1920s. Reading practices in the 1930s: from folklore to high literature.

5. Popular culture, mass culture and the carnival. “1936 – the year of carnivals”.


8. Culture and the personality cult. Symbols of Stalinism. The cultural technologies of Stalin’s personality cult.

9. Boundaries, differences, and divisions: public / private; collective / individual; formal / informal, etc. Their structuring force and civilizational significance. Public and private in Stalinist culture and society.

10. Continuation. The individual and the collective; formal and informal spheres in the Soviet society. The privatization and individualization of life.

11. Concluding remarks. Was there a unified cultural logic of Stalinism? The general and the particular features of Stalinist culture in comparative perspective.

Evaluation

Two essays, one mid-term, one final, 2500 to 3000 words each. Students are encouraged to invent an essay title of their own; alternatively, they can select one from the list below.
The mid-term essay will cover topics 1-6; the final 1-11. Mid-term essay topics should be agreed by 10th November, essays due in by 12 o'clock 17th November. Final essay topics should be agreed not later than 8th December (but preferably on the 3rd of December); deadline for submission Monday, 14th December 12 o'clock.

Some suggestions for essay topics:
- The early-Soviet culture was as much a field of resistance as it was the instrument of domination of the party-state. Do you agree?
- Explain the centrality of culture to the building of socialism
- Did mass literacy facilitate social control or did it enable critical attitudes?
- What is socialist realism?
- How can one explain the high authority of the writer in the Soviet society?
- Cultural revolution betrayed: reflect on the mass popular culture and entertainment of the 1930s
- Did Bakhtin refer to Stalinist culture when he explored the world of Francois Rabelais?
- Compare the interpretations of kul'turnost' given by different authors (Dunham, Fitzpatrick, Boym, Volkov) and give their critical account
- Using a concrete personality, assess the role of heroic individuals in Stalinist culture
- Explain Stalin's personality cult, its origins and its functions
- How did it happen that socialism that started from a rejection of private life gradually admitted and supported its existence?
- Assess the significance of the informal and 'shadow' sphere of the Soviet society

Readings for discussion sessions

* - Compulsory reading

**Session 1, 13 October**
*J. Alexander (Ed) *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates. Cambridge, 1990,
Introduction;
S. Hall “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms”. In N. Dirks et al (eds) *Culture / Power / History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory. Princeton, 1994;
I. Davies *Cultural Studies and Beyond: London, 1995;

**Session 2, 20 October**
V. Dunham *In Stalin’s Time: Middle-class Values in Soviet Fiction. Cambridge, 1976, p. 3-38;
H. Gunther (ed) *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, 1992;
A. Gleason et al (eds) *Bolshevik Culture*, 1985;

**Session 3, 27 October**
*V. Volkov “Limits to Propaganda: The Soviet Power and The Peasant Reader in the 1920s”. In J. Raven (ed) *Non-Commercial Uses of Print in Comparative Perspective*, 1998 (manuscript);
E. Dobrenko *The Making of the State Reader*. Stanford, 1997;
*F. Miller *Folklore for Stalin*. New York, 1990, p. 3-24

**Session 4, 3 November**
*R. Stites *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*. Cambridge, 1992, p. 65-97;
*R. Robin “Stalinism and Popular Culture”. In H. Gunther *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, 1992

**Session 5, 10 November**
*V. Dunham *In Stalin’s Time: Middle-class Values in Soviet Fiction*. Cambridge, 1976, p. 41-58

**Session 6, 17 November**
M. Walzer *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study of the Origins of Radical Politics*, NY, 1968 (Conclusion);
Session 7, 24 November
*N. Tumarkin *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*. Cambridge, 1983 (selected pages);

Session 8, 1 December
*V. Dunham *In Stalins' Times: Middle-class Values in Soviet Fiction*, Cambridge, 1976, p. 3-38;
V. Shlapentokh *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People*, NY, 1989;
M. Buckley "The Untold Story of Obshchestvennitsa in the 1930s, Europe-Asia Studies, 1996, Vol. 48, # 4, p. 569-586;

Session 9, 8 December
*S. Fitzpatrick "Blat in Stalin's Time", *Bribery and Blat in Russia*, Ed. by S. Lowell and A. Ledeneva, London, 1999 (manuscript);
J.P. Willerton *Patronage and Politics in the USSR*, Cambridge, 1992