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Bolshevik Millenarianism as Academic Blockbuster

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Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780691176949. xv + 1128 pp. \$39.95.

Marx was the prophet, revolutionaries were the preachers, ideology was faith, revolution was the Last Judgment. Yuri Slezkine's interpretation of Bolshevism as a millenarian sect in his monumental *House of Government* could be rendered in both soft and hard versions. Both would start with the observation that Bolshevik revolutionaries and religious sects displayed profound faith in the coming of a new world. In a less categorical version, Bolshevik collectivism and the revolutionary trajectory would be analyzed anew in light of remarkable parallels – and differences – with the history of those sectarianisms that attempted to become established religions. The contours of such a “soft” analogy between religion and politics were described in Igal Halfin's well-known work on Soviet Marxist eschatology (remarkably, not cited by Slezkine): “Any comparison I suggest between Christianity and Marxism serves an analytical, not historical function. My reference to biblical terms throughout is no more than a heuristic device intended to evoke the deep plot of the eschatological master narrative.”¹

1 Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2000), 42.

Slezkine's millenary epic (actually 1,104 pages) is inundated with biblical terminology for a more far-reaching, "harder" aim: to establish that Bolshevism was quite literally another millenarian sect in a line from Zoroaster, early Christians, Muslims, Münster Anabaptists, Jacobins, Mormons, Melanesian Cargo cults, and others (180). Chapter titles and references to the Flood, the Last Judgment, the Valley of the Dead, etc. are a rather heavy-handed stylistic device to argue by force of repetition. A soft claim would make the remarkable literary proliferation of religious imagery and biblical analogies among Bolshevik intellectuals into a problem for analysis; the hard version cites it on every possible occasion as proof. As for the Bolsheviks' most relevant French revolutionary precursors, they remain but an entry in the list; other revolutions with their early modern religious-constitutional balance starting with Hus and the Dutch Revolt are not part of the analytical mix. The (secular) adaptation of very old religious concepts such as "new man" or "soul" in Bolshevik ideology and discourse is not a concern; nor is the actual historical traffic among sects, religion, and revolutionaries in pre-revolutionary Russia, which was substantial. Rather, for most of the book Slezkine hews to a hard version of his sectarian thesis: Christian original sin and religious heresy ("thought crimes") were part of an original, religious totalitarianism. All millenarianisms, Bolshevism included, were the "vengeful fantasy of the dispossessed" (99, 957). Bolshevism's nature as an apocalyptic sect, embedded within the history of all the others, explains the course of the Bolshevik Revolution and, by extension, the life of the Soviet Union.

The notion that communism was religious in nature goes back to such inter-war writers as René Fülöp-Miller and Nikolai Berdiaev. The great intellectual historian Andrzej Walicki discussed how "totalitarian ideology is not merely a secularized religion; it is a secularized form of *chiliastic* religiosity." The great Sovietologist Robert C. Tucker called the notion of a total regeneration of man a secular version of Christian salvation, dubbed Bolshevism a millenarian movement, and pointed out the growing resemblance of the party-state to a "church-state."² More recently, a large new literature on political religions and totalitarianism has been incisively critiqued, notably by Erik van Ree, discussed below. It is shocking how few of the most relevant works are included in Slezkine's partial accounting (998 n. 1), and none are seriously engaged.

But Slezkine's mission is hardly historiographical, and his work in this context is novel in several ways. In general, previous treatments focus on mature Stalinism as a political religion, look in particular to the legacy of Orthodoxy,

2 For full references to all these works and others, see Michael David-Fox, "Opiate of the

and examine the structures of the “church-state” rather than the mentality, outlook, and faith of revolutionary believers. Slezkine keeps his considerable analytical firepower trained on the history of sectarian millenarianism. His book’s unprecedented illumination of the personal and intimate lives of Old Bolshevik revolutionaries, traced through the prism of a fascinating swathe of Old Bolshevik elites living in the *Dom pravitel’sstva* across from the Kremlin, aims at grasping the course of Bolshevik “sectarianism” on both sides of 1917. Chapters on the revolutionaries’ youth and education at the start, and the Old Bolsheviks’ relationship with their children and the decimation of the House of Government elites in Stalin’s Terror at the end, are among the most powerful. At its empirical core, this is a tale of two generations whose entire trajectory from the end of Civil War on appears as an extended crisis in an ultimately failed attempt fully to institutionalize and perpetuate the faith.

Was the Marxist faith of the Bolshevik revolutionaries a religion? Slezkine starts his deliberately elliptical third chapter dealing with conceptual questions, “The Faith,” with the statement: “the most sensible answer is that it does not matter” (73). It does not matter because any definition revolving around the “content” of religion as supernatural or transcendental is untenable: “Just how empirical or non-transcendental are humanism, Hindutva, manifest destiny, and the kingdom of freedom?” (74). Slezkine then appears to tilt toward Durkheimian functionalism, instructing how religion can be defined in terms of how the sacred unites people into moral communities. He doubles down on the impossibility of separating secular from religious: “Whatever one’s understanding of the ‘sacred’ ... it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that every society is by definition religious, that any comprehensive ideology (including secularism) creates and reflects a moral community ...” (75). Having thus strategically muddied the waters, Slezkine proceeds in the next thousand pages to align Bolshevism and the Soviet state not with other ideologies, societies, states, revolutions, or subcultures, but to analyze them in light of a structural identification with millenarian religious sects throughout the ages. The most sensible answer to the question of whether Bolshevism was a religion, in light of that basic move, is that it does matter.

A conventional academic monograph would strive to lay out its thesis in the introduction as clearly as possible, given the usually severe space constraints.

Intellectuals? Pilgrims, Partisans, and Political Tourists,” *Kritika* 12, 3 (Summer 2011): 723–724, and David-Fox, “Religion, Science, and Political Religion in the Soviet Context,” *Modern Intellectual History* 8, 2 (2011): 471–484.

Editors of trade books, by contrast, forbid “signposting.”³ Slezkine modifies and more fully explains his position only in Chapter 33, “The End,” where at long last he pivots away from lumping and embraces splitting: “Why did Bolshevism die after one generation, like sects that have never become successfully institutionalized (let alone conquered much of the world)?” (951). Having apparently argued in Chapter 3 that it is impossible to define the supernatural (or perhaps he was only implying that the difficulty in doing so makes it irrelevant to ask whether Marxism was a religion?), he now declares 30 chapters later that the “core” of the Marxist vision of history was supernatural. The massive literature on the history of Marxism suggests how the tension between determinism and voluntarism played itself out differently in a panoply of Marxist movements, but Slezkine hews to a narrowly religious interpretation of Marx and Marxism. The coming of communism is supernatural because it is “preordained and independent of human will” (951). (Let us leave aside that independent of human will does not necessarily imply supernatural or transcendent, that is outside the natural world in time and space; “scientific socialism” is naturalistic in that communism will come about as a consequence of historical laws independent of human will. This is naturalistic determinism). Yet, Slezkine continues, wrapped around that supernatural, religious core was a sociological and economic vocabulary with “no overt references to magic, mystery, or transcendence.” Wrapping rationality around a religious core gave Marxism a “rigidity” that “explicitly irrational prophecies do not have” (952).

Religious faith cannot be empirically disproved, but the allegedly scientific laws of history can. All this suggests to me that Slezkine, despite blurring distinctions in his lumping phase, ultimately cannot dispense with the notion that religion has a “supernatural” or transcendent content, nor can he avoid contrasting religious and secular or making distinctions based on rationalism.

To be sure, there are plenty of clues along the way that this sect was different from all other sects. Early on, Slezkine points out that in Russia a “conversion to socialism was a conversion to the intelligentsia, a fusion of millenarian faith and lifelong learning.” The intelligentsia proponents of socialism differed from their Christian analogues by their “intellectualism” (36–37). In other words, science and scientism mattered. While the “scientific” non-core of Bolshevik ideology and the intertwined history of science and political radicalism in Russia and the USSR is hardly touched upon, *The House of Government* features a predominant literary *uklon*. The Old Bolsheviks’ devotion to the classics of Rus-

3 Interview with Nancy Toff, Oxford University Press, American Historical Association conference, Washington, DC, 5 January 2018.

sian and European (mostly French, German, and English) literature is passed down to the generation of the “children” largely without its accompaniment of Marxian economics and sociology. Despite that thesis, the intelligentsia’s obsession with “Russia and the West,” the European emigration of the Old Bolsheviks, and the whole tradition of “Russian Europeans” and modernizers never enters in on the level of analysis. It would be as if, say, the Mormon elders spent much of their lives in debates about Smith, Kant, and Flaubert.

By “The End,” we learn that the content of the non-supernatural periphery of the faith was in fact crucial: “Focused on political economy and ‘base’ derived sociology, Marxism developed a remarkably flat conception of human nature.” When the Old Bolsheviks’ had their children read Tolstoy but not the classics of Marxism-Leninism, they were “digging the grave of their revolution.” Everyday human morality and new ways of monitoring the family, as in the great religions, were bypassed by the Bolshevik preoccupation with state property rights and the economic base: “The house of socialism – as a residential building with family apartments – was a contradiction in terms” (952–953). Up until now, leaving out the modern state as an analytical factor has also meant omitting the many ways Bolshevik revolutionaries deliberately or otherwise perpetuated lines of continuity with imperial Russia. In Chapter 33, for perhaps the first time, causal weight in the overall argument is given to the legacy of the Russian empire. Having come out swinging with an uncompromisingly hard version of the sectarian thesis, Slezkine at the end pragmatically pulls back toward a “softer” version. But these modifications come too little, too late.

If the state is one missing pillar in Slezkine’s interpretive framework, the other is modernity. Soviet modernity is not important to the discussion, and the author merely notes that “becoming modern meant internalizing a new regimen of neatness, cleanliness, propriety, sobriety, punctuality, and rationality” (276). This is similar to the definition in *The Jewish Century* – except that there, since the goal was to suggest how the Jews were the quintessential moderns, the state had to be brought in: “Modern states are as keen on the symmetry, transparency, spotlessness, and boundedness of the body politic as traditional Jews and Gypsies are on the ritual purity and autonomy of their communities.”⁴ The current work, by contrast, is geared around proving the ancient, enduring sectarian patterns governing the Bolshevik faith. Left out from Slezkine’s invocation of modernity, most notably, are changing conceptions of time and space, state interventionism, the rise of the social, and the

4 Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 30, quotation 45.

entire phenomenon of statism and *dirigisme* so central in Bolshevik ideology and Soviet practices. Bolshevik violence and early Soviet utopianism were stamped indelibly with a cult of utilitarian rationality, quango-mania, and the machine age. While the sectarian thesis has the advantage of taking faith seriously (and, by extension, ideology, since belief can be seen as one of ideology's many faces), it omits the central fact that Lenin's and Stalin's Marxism were both geared around capturing the state and radically upgrading its capacity. Those two residents of the Kremlin are mentioned a lot but as politicians and ideologues the two leaders are not really explicated in terms of the work's sectarian theme.

Compartmentalizing modernity as the internalization of discipline means that the distinction between the premodern and the modern hardly comes into play when folding the Soviet "superstate" (Moshe Lewin) into a continuous single stream stretching back to ancient sects. The fact that a range of non-millenarian revolutions played out with patterns in important ways comparable to the Russian Revolution is also unexplained. Maybe there is no such thing as a non-millenarian revolution, or perhaps the crux of the sectarian thesis, the expectation of the imminent apocalypse, is subject to a certain conceptual inflation: "All revolutions are 'revolutions of the saints' insofar as they are serious about 'insatiable utopias'" (122).

At the same time, Slezkine archaizes the concept of totalitarianism, commonly seen as a modern if not twentieth-century phenomenon. "Christianity," he declares, "is inherently 'totalitarian' in the sense of demanding an unconditional moral submission ... and emphasizing thought crimes over formal legality ..." (106). For the rest of the book, the quotation marks around totalitarianism when applied to religion are removed. Observing that "Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin ... left their disciples no guidance on how to be good Communists at home," the book's conclusions feature a bit of typical Slezkian *épatage*: "the problem with Bolshevism was that it was not totalitarian enough" (953). Even the Grand Inquisitor, if he could look forward to the Soviet state machine and the GULAG, might find that this formulation misses the point. That said, however, one of the work's most meaningful insights is that the protracted, agonizing process of institutionalizing the faith after the revolution is an important, revealing lens for viewing the 1920s and 1930s together.

In the famous 1949 compilation *The God that Failed*, Arthur Koestler also argued that there is no difference between traditional religion and revolutionary faith. When he joined the Communist Party of Germany at age 26, Koestler much later confessed, he suffered from the "neurotic maladjustment" of the zealot. He claimed his commitment, like that of all true believers, was irrational: "A faith is not acquired by reasoning. One does not fall in love with a

woman, or enter the womb of a church, as a result of logical persuasion.”⁵ *The House of Government* is not shy about political commentary. It makes some sharp forays into U.S. politics and society, for example describing the bizarre American ritual abuse panic in hundreds of U.S. childcare centers in the 1980s just before turning to the witch hunts of the Stalinist Terror. However unconventional, I found that to be an effective device to provoke thought about Stalinist uniqueness (705–710). But in the course of the entire tome, Slezkine never sees fit to mention how the communism-as-religion argument became caught up in Cold War, anti-communist politics in the U.S. and other western countries. By the same token, the revival and development of the political religion concept in the 1990s went hand in hand with a return to the concept of totalitarianism; the journal *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* was launched around the turn of the millenium. For Koestler, identifying revolutionary belief as irrational religion served to explain away his own past actions, thus obscuring agency and his own motivations. For the field of Soviet history, totalitarianism flattened or obscured the explication of causality, either by inflating an all-encompassing ideology into the sole cause of causes or reducing differing explanatory dimensions – and messy reality – to the inexorable development of a mono-causal “seed.”

By distinguishing among the divine, the sacred, and the heroic, Erik van Ree provides the critique of the political religion literature that is also most relevant for Slezkine’s full identification between sectarian religion and Bolshevik ideological belief. “Does heroic utopianism,” asks van Ree, “depend on the impulses of faith and hope, much like religions do? In some fundamental respects: yes. The Marxist project of the Kingdom of Labour is only slightly less fantastic than its Christian counterpart of the Kingdom of God.” But that, van Ree argues, is not the whole story. He goes on to characterize the Soviet order as a “faith-evidence hybrid”:

Whereas the communist utopian goal was a faith-driven fantasy, the process of constructing the new order was not. The new society was being built in the real world, with human hands, and there was nothing otherworldly about these constructive efforts. Heroic belief systems cannot survive on a diet of faith alone. Evidence-based knowledge, science, must be brought into the equation in large doses. The very survival of the revolutionary state depends on it ... Heroic utopianism can be regarded as

5 Arthur Koestler, in *The God that Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949): 15, 17.

a vast project of social engineering. ‘Scientific’ theory was tied in the straightjacket of an activist agenda. Stalin always emphasised that theory did not exist for its own sake, but for practical purposes. In his favourite expression, it was ‘no dogma but a guide to action.’⁶

Millenarian religious communities also needed to survive in the real world and they have also seized power. But by making the rationalist, modernist, scientific, secular bulk of the Bolsheviks’ ideology peripheral, how can we really explain the economic, social, political and cultural transformations that ensued? Slezkine’s description of a religious core surrounded by a rationalist ideology and van Ree’s notion of a faith-evidence hybrid hold differing implications for understanding Soviet history. By definition, a core is central, and according it such primacy engages a reductionist reasoning: to establish the millenarian nature of the sect’s religious core is to explain the dynamics of the Soviet trajectory. To consider a hybrid, by contrast, is to give causal weight to multiple vectors of historical analysis.

In its monocausal maximalism and mammoth form, *The House of Government* was shaped, I would submit, by its contribution to a relatively new and developing genre. I call it the academic blockbuster. The film analogy suggested itself when I saw the book’s Princeton University Press trailer – so it is labeled on the site – set to the haunting soundtrack from “Burnt by the Sun.” At a time when many academic presses are struggling, Princeton competes for those “top-tier books that not only shape their fields but often spark interest outside academia.” Blockbusters are the top tier of what is called in the publishing business by such names as “impact academic” or “ac-trade” books. In 2015, the last year for which figures are available, Princeton Press boasted total revenue of more than \$23 million and net assets of about \$138 million. As outgoing press director Peter J. Dougherty said in a recent interview: “I don’t think of them as Princeton books if they’re not books that teach the teachers and raise the big issues and consolidate the conversations ... These are field-defining books.”⁷ In the historical discipline, the rhetoric of paradigm shifts and game-changers, which “not only” redefine entire fields, favors the most audacious arguments with world-historical sweep, preferably ones that present the keys to big features of the human condition. At the same time, the immediate historical topic

6 Erik van Ree, “Stalinist Ritual and Belief System: Reflections on ‘Political Religion,’” *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 17: 2–3 (2016): 143–161, quotations 152–153, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21567689.2016.1187600>.

7 Jennifer Howard, “The Character of its Content: How Princeton University Press has Thrived in a New Publishing Landscape,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 6 December 2017, 34–38.

at hand must be gripping to a wide audience, hence it is most often biographical or personal in nature. What the alluring combination of those two disparate registers largely leaves out is the crucial, scholarly, meso-level scale of analysis.

The generic factors helping to shape what is most valued at the pinnacle of academic publishing should provoke some introspection among historians about both their positive and negative implications. It was not so long ago that senior scholars at the peak of their powers would either write more influential academic studies or perhaps turn to general histories and textbooks; popularizations in many fields such as U.S. history, which played a large role in the advent of the blockbuster, were often penned by mediocre hacks. As a crossover work, the blockbuster must impress specialists and appeal to the public. It is far from the worst development that our most talented historians are making far-reaching arguments that attract a broader audience, while at the same time they are rewarded for their achievements in scholarship. Is it surprising that the most talented academic historians today turn to blockbusters, which universities now also seem to value more than conventional scholarship? Slezkine's book, no matter how different in content from Princeton historian Stephen Kotkin's first volume of his Stalin biography, displays some structural similarities.⁸ Kotkin's work is three books in one, reaching with breathtaking boldness to narrate both global and Russian history around and through the immediate topic at hand, the biography of Stalin; Slezkine's triad is comprised by humankind's experience with millenarianism and religion, the entire history of the Russian Revolution, and the subject of the book, the House of Government (built in 1929). Both really focus in on their central topics only about halfway through massive tomes.

Some academic cultures, such as the German, traditionally favor an exhaustive accounting of existing scholarship in order to demonstrate that it has been assimilated and is being built upon; the U.S. historical community has traditionally favored a strong dose of originality. But most blockbusters including this one, hewing to trade press conventions, go further to eschew historiography, definitions, technical analysis of sources, and careful and consistent exposition of the argument – all features of conventional scholarship that scholars but not others find valuable or interesting.

The monstrous length of the blockbuster involves a certain paradox: as conventional academic studies involving years of research must be cut shorter and shorter, it is de rigeur that blockbusters on such topics as the revolution,

8 Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, 1: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

Stalin, and war must be physically imposing. Is this because these doorstoppers will be displayed on coffee tables and not fully read by that vital educated public? *The House of Government* would have actually been more effective shorn of several hundred pages. Its size is extended largely through biographies and descriptions of literary plots, which are marked by dazzling bursts of stylistic brilliance but not infrequently by a lack of sharp or consistent analysis. The listing and chronicling that are far from absent here diminish the book's appeal even as the blockbuster by definition is designed to appeal to greater numbers. Doggedly reading two chapters a day every day for a peripatetic three weeks, I actually suffered a lower back injury from my backpack's extra weight. As a physical artifact, the book was not up to the task: its binding broke 900 pages in.

A successful academic blockbuster must also impress the academics. Many attempts do not, and their effect on a field turns out to be similar to a flash in the pan. In this department, however, Slezkine succeeds to the point where his work might even be seen as a very positive innovation for the genre. The depth of the knowledge and material he acquired about the building – including its construction, its apartments, their residents, family lives, personalities, material culture, friendships, and generational relations – was culled from many years of research in a wide array of archives that included private collections and, notably, the archive of the “Museum of the House on the Embankment” itself. This makes the work of lasting importance for scholars in the field. Much of the personal correspondence Slezkine brings to bear is not only unforgettable as biographical history, but unusually revealing because it displays the writers' belief systems not in doctrinal tracts but as they were intertwined with the passions and tragedies of everyday life.

To give just one example how biographical depth can impart exceptional insight into sources, the book contains an unforgettable sequence involving the letters of Tania Miagkova, wife of Ukrainian finance official Mikhail Poloz (apartment 199), arrested with former Trotskyists in January 1933. Miagkova's prison correspondence to her party-minded mother and soon-to-be-arrested husband intertwines news about her intense prison study program, her physical tribulations, her ever-more precarious family relations, and her attempts at political-ideological rehabilitation. Slezkine suggests how the censors also formed part of her audience: “The Bolsheviks – like most priests, historians, and the participants of the [House of Government] State New Theater's production of *The Other Side of the Heart* – had no clear doctrine on how to judge the sincerity of contribution. It was – and is – impossible to be sure on what occasions Tania resorted to *mentalis restrictio*, but it does appear likely that, for the most part, she tried her best to erase the distinction between her yearnings

on the one hand and her mother's Party-minded expectations, her daughter's happy-childhood entitlements, and her censors' inscrutable ways, on the other" (576).

On the other hand, the blockbuster genre mostly excludes the technicalities of sustained questioning of sources, which means untold numbers of the ego-documents brought to bear. In conventional academic histories, the historian usually does not go so far as to discuss explicitly how sources and knowledge are acquired. But sustained source criticism serves as a reminder that there always lies a space of uncertainty between the author and his conclusions. At a few points, Slezkine pauses to note the most obvious biases in his sources, as in the case of hagiographic memoirs or interrogation records, but since Bolshevik myth-making or the conventions of the Stalin cult suit the sectarian thesis he goes on to use them anyway. This becomes most problematic in the early sections of the work, when memoirs provide material for narrating the broader history of the Revolution and Civil War.

Source criticism forms one part of a broader issue, reflexivity and the role of the author in the narrative. Slezkine brings an anthropological eye to bear on observations about such issues as the workings of household economies, relations between Bolsheviks of intelligentsia and plebeian origins, House residents and the *Boloto* neighborhood surrounding it, peasant maids and household economies, furniture and space. The author's previous work on the far North, nationalities policy, and Judaism benefitted much from engaging anthropology. But in one respect the current work is very un-anthropological. Not only does the author tell no arrival story; the narrative strives for *literaturnost'* with the reflexivity left out. Slezkine decided not to reflect on how his own involvement in the topic affected his "fieldwork." Instead, the reader is placed fully in the hands of an omniscient, supremely confident narrator who appears to know his subjects better than they knew themselves. The main thrust of that narration, of course, continually posits the Bolshevik atheists' false consciousness. The text's tone toward its Bolshevik subjects is ironical, detached, at times witty, at times sharply mocking; the irony recedes a bit when tragedy strikes. Kate Brown, more than any other Soviet historian, has pushed against just this kind of remote, seemingly uninvolved academic narrator and pressed for the advantages of acknowledging the narrator's presence in the story.⁹ Why should authorial reflexivity not match well with the needs of the academic blockbuster? It took an anthropologist, Sergei Oushakine, to invite Slezkine and

9 Kate Brown, *Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of the Places Not Yet Forgotten* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

other historians of the Russian Revolution publicly to relate their arrival stories. Straining to understand Slezkine's grainy-sounding podcast, we must conclude that authorial relexivity hardly seems irrelevant – from the formative influence on the author of his disillusioned Bolshevik grandmother, to his early and complete lack of exposure to religion, to his longstanding interest in finding the “broken link” between his grandparents' ideals and his own generation.¹⁰

In the marvelous concluding sections on the generation of the “children” and the epilogue on Iurii Trifonov, who wrote about the House in his novels, Slezkine argues that the Bolshevik project foundered on the family in two ways. The parents never passed down the study of Marxism-Leninism, and they were formed above all by the realist novel and such contemporary historical fiction as Rolland and Feuchtwanger – which added up to “antimillenarian humanism” (954). The parents “lived for the future; their children lived in the past” (955). Second, the “Bolsheviks never worried very much about the family, never policed the home, and never connected the domestic rites of passage – childbirth, marriage, and death – to their sociology and political economy” (952). While the sectarian thesis may be one-sided, scholars will be mining this book's unprecedentedly rich materials on revolutionary lives for years to come. In addition, the book's generational theme, its arguments about the family, and especially its treatment of the generation of the children offer new ways to bridge what is now the Soviet field's most important divide: between the study of the interwar decades and the emergent field of postwar history.¹¹

10 Yuri Slezkine, “The Russian Revolution: A Personal Journey,” lecture delivered at Princeton University, 28 September 2017, <https://october1917-2017.princeton.edu/podcasts/>, last accessed 2 January 2018.

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