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## Denis Kozlov, Eleonory Gilburd, eds., *The Thaw, Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*

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## REFERENCES

Denis Kozlov, Eleonory Gilburd, eds., *The Thaw, Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*, Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2013, 512 p.

- 1 The edited volume under review has as its main aim the examination of the defining issues that transpired during the Thaw era, a period spanning the post-Stalin 1950s and most of the following decade. Justifying their focus on a relatively brief period of Soviet history, the editors characterize the years in question as a “paradigmatically defining moment for the entire period from Stalin’s death until – and largely also beyond – the collapse of the Soviet Union” (p. 3). The essays included in this volume support Kozlov and Gilburd’s assertion that the Thaw, although not overtly revolutionary, “produced crucial shifts in policies, ideas, artistic practices, daily behaviors, and material life” (p. 3). Unsurprisingly, approximately a third of the essays deal directly or indirectly with the legacy of the Gulag and Stalin-era repressions against intellectuals, nationalist insurgents, and ordinary citizens. The remaining essays tackle a wide range of subjects that include the Virgin Lands Campaign, the internationalization of Soviet daily life as well as the globalization of the Soviet film culture. Because of the variety of topics covered and because all the essays are uniformly thoughtful, expertly argued, clearly written, and informed by first-rate archival research, it is evident that this collection ought to become a go-to resource for anyone researching and teaching this dynamic period.
- 2 The historiographic and conceptual essay “The Thaw as an Event in Russian History,” penned by the volume’s editors, stands out even among these well-crafted

contributions because it offers a well-defined, bold, and multipronged agenda for investigating the Thaw. Kozlov and Gilburd's masterful piece should be read widely because it not only deftly outlines the evolution of the Thaw's multiple interpretative paradigms but also because it shows that scholars across disciplines have only scratched the surface in investigating this era. Western and Russian scholarship—before and after the USSR's demise—has generally shied away from ascribing unequivocal historical significance to changes ushered in during the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, Kozlov and Gilburd note that the Thaw has for too long been associated and even equated to the processes of de-Stalinization. Kozlov and Gilburd rightly advance the notion that the conceptualization of the Thaw should be expanded beyond its association with Stalinism and de-Stalinization and ought to be more openly recognized for its transformative, if not revolutionary, effects. In order to better appreciate the nuance, magnitude, and, most importantly, the uniqueness of the Thaw, the editors suggest two approaches. First, they speak to the ways in which the country's own (cyclical) past—whether imperial or Soviet—defined the momentum and meaning of the Soviet 1950s and 1960. In addition to establishing how Soviet citizens utilized the nation's sociocultural legacy to make sense of their contemporaneity, Kozlov and Gilburd correctly maintain that the Soviet national conversation did not occur in a vacuum and should therefore be considered in an international context. By taking into account the era's national specificity while placing it in a dialogue with transnational trends, the authors evoke this period's chronological depth and geographical breadth, its temporal and spatial echoes. The volume's editors are ultimately correct in arguing that the many momentous Thaw events “were not momentary happenings causing short-term reactions conditioned by, and sinking back into, the mire of a certain “Stalinist mentality,” but, rather, represented developments which “had a transformative impact, catalyzing long-term historical processes” (p. 31). Although (or maybe because) not all essays in this collection go as far to reconfigure the meaning and significance of the Thaw, Kozlov and Gilburd's assertions provide a compelling framework for a bold rethinking of the era.

- 3 The four chapters that deal with the Stalinist legacy of terror, the fate of the Gulag, and the experience of amnestied Gulag prisoners afford an intriguing look into the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the Thaw. These four contributions collectively show the incalculable impact the Gulag and its metamorphosis had on various dimensions of Soviet life : Marc Elie discusses the inconsistent and often conservative evolution of the Gulag's socioeconomic role under Khrushchev ; Alan Barenberg's essay reveals that Gulag prisoners' reintegration into civilian life proceeded in paradoxical and often unexpected ways ; Denis Kozlov's study reflects on the Soviet readers' conflicted responses to A. Solzhenitsyn's novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and I. Ehrenburg's memoir *People, Years, Life* ; finally, Amir Weiner's analyzes what the mass amnesty and repatriation of anti-Soviet nationalist agitators tells us about Moscow's resolve to stay in control of its restive western borderlands. All these essays speak to a certain level of distancing from Stalin-era policies but also differ in their estimation of just how wide the chasm between Stalinist and post-Stalinist policies had become. Perhaps the most cautious in depicting Khrushchev's regime as breaking with Stalinism is Marc Elie, as he characterizes the Gulag of the Thaw as a hybrid construct. He asserts that the inertia of the Stalinist model predominated as late as 1964 and that camps continued to serve as significant links in the country's economic chain. Barenberg, too, focuses on the limits of de-Stalinization by describing the former Gulag

internees' halting and incomplete reintegration into the civic body. He demonstrates that ex-inmates had a better chance of re-assimilating into civilian life if they stayed in their former places of interment. Freedom, in other words, came neither easily nor cheaply although it was possible. In contrast to Elie and Barenberg, Kozlov and Weiner emphasize that the break with Stalinist past was so decisive that it created an alternative discursive regime as well as a new ethical framework for reaching and implementing various types of state policies against perceived national threats. Kozlov focuses on Ehrenburg's memoirs and Solzhenitsyn's novella to demonstrate how the Soviet writers and their readers—once faced with the task of coming to terms with the Stalinist terror—not only began constructing a new discourse to describe the horror of the past but also advanced a new system of values to explain it. By doing both, Soviet authors and the reading public began a long and uncertain road away from Stalinist criminality. Weiner's essay shows a similar type of historical rupture as he discusses the authorities' refusal to subdue anti-Soviet nationalist movements through mass terror. Instead of relying on brute force, the center depended on the local and regional organs to reintegrate the ethically unstable and unassimilated borderlands through a mix of propaganda and communal policing.

- 4 Much in the way the Thaw era witnessed varied and distinct approaches to framing the country's (criminal) past, it also produced distinct visions of the nation's future. The forward-looking dimension of the period is best seen through Thaw's commitment to its openness to the outside world. As Gilburd accurately points out in her essay "The Revival of Soviet Internationalism," there was nothing predestined about the new diplomatic course that mandated cultural and diplomatic openness since a new course "required a profound rethinking of the relationship between culture and social order" (p. 364). In examining the 1957 Moscow International Youth Festival as a reflection of the broader attempt to establish continuous cultural diplomatic relations with non-Soviet nations, Gilburd concludes that it was this singular event that routinized the formerly exotic "until the chain of foreign inflections in Soviet culture would become endless." Fashion emerges as one such foreign inflection in Larissa Zakharova's essay "Soviet Fashion in the 1950s-1960s: Regimentation, Western Influences, and Consumption Strategies." Part anthropology, part ethnography, and part history, Zakharova's piece shows exactly how the Thaw led to a heterogeneous consumer environment despite the fact that the relationship between consumers and the state remained static and generally unidirectional. Like Gilburd, Zakharova deduces that interaction with the West effectively Westernized Soviet daily life and thus undermined the communist project. Oksana Bulgakowa's essay on Soviet Thaw cinema in the international context complicates Gilburd's and Zakharova's interpretations as she asserts that the post-Stalinist film industry updated its image but did not fundamentally alter its ideological tenets. Thaw cinematography featured unambiguous changes in the physiognomic criteria of film without breaking down Soviet cinema's meta-narrative. In Bulgakowa's estimation, it would be a miscalculation to mistake the Westernized appearance of Thaw film with Western values.
- 5 This engaging volume offers plenty of food for thought ; two questions in particular emerge for this reviewer. The first question has to do with more clearly identifying the driving force behind Thaw-era restructuring. While all the authors do a commendable job of noting reforms actualized and denied, less evident is the impulse for said reforms. Although it is clear that both the populace and officialdom contributed to the post-Stalinist upheavals, it is less apparent whether popular or official initiative

predominated in driving the speed and contours of the Thaw agenda. Defining more precisely the impetus for, and the source of, Thaw reforms would go a long way in revealing the extent to which the Soviet system organically deviated from Stalinist norms and practices. Second, while the essays do a terrific job of demonstrating the extent to which the USSR followed international trends and embedded itself within transnational networks, the volume could have more explicitly stated whether Thaw trends paralleled the trends that characterized the Sixties in Western Europe and the United States. Can we put an equal sign of sorts between the rebelliousness of the Sixties counterculture in the West and the contentiousness of the Thaw-era reform movement? Sheila Fitzpatrick's afterword raises this intriguing question but the intellectual and historic conundrum of whether the Thaw could be considered to be a culturally specific but comparable version of the Sixties remains tantalizingly intangible.

- 6 This edited volume is not only enlightening but also a pleasure to read. The essays speak to each other in a productive fashion to construct a meaningful portrait of the Thaw. Even as more and more monographs and essays emerge to wrestle with this enigmatic era, this collection of essays will surely remain a source of reflection and inspiration for some time to come.

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## AUTHORS

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