

Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

Kristin Roth-Ey devotes her book to the most popular and successful forms of media in the Soviet Union - movies, radio, and television. Although many good studies have already been written in both Russian and English about each of these media, Roth-Ey's book is an interesting research experiment, offering a story of all of them together, concentrating mainly on two decades, the 1950s and 1960s (although some of her information partly covers the beginning of the 1970s). Using mainly secondary published sources (especially Soviet and post-Soviet memoirs) in Russian, adding some information from contemporary periodicals and archival documents, she shows how the Soviet Union became a media empire after Stalin. The USSR was fundamentally a "propaganda state": culture in the Soviet context was always in the business of educating, training, motivating, and mobilizing Soviet citizens for building communism. Various media had to be tools in this process, whose major goal was to elevate everyone and fight against the "cheap" mass culture, associated with the capitalist west; and the consumption of socialist art was supposed to further this goal of moral education and political mobilization for the population of the USSR *en masse*.

According to Roth-Ey, during the 1960s, for the first time in Soviet history, the majority of the population lived in urban areas, and urbanization brought unprecedented numbers of people squarely into the orbit of mass media culture. So too did the mass construction of individual family apartments, and the promotion of home-based cultural technologies such as radio and television sets; "the expansion of the educational system and extension of adolescence in the Soviet life cycle; and the substantial increases, across the social spectrum, in both leisure time and disposable income"(14). At the same time, Roth-Ey notes the very important social and cultural results of the rise of home-based cultural technologies, when people across the USSR were "increasingly making their choices in private rather than public settings and on their own time rather than in collectively organized fashion." Although during the 1950s through early the 1970s, Soviet culture still emphasized its pedagogical mission, "but it also grew more entertainment-oriented and more eclectic, faster, more immediate, and increasingly oriented toward daily life – culture in a personal key and the here and now" (15).

Roth-Ey begins her book with two chapters describing "Soviet cinema art as an *industry*" and a rising "Soviet movie culture." By the sixties the Soviet Union had one of the most impressive film industries in the world, which took fourth place after the USA, India, and Japan. But none of these countries approached the Soviets in geographical and linguistic scope. Each of the fifteen Soviet republics had film studios (the Union had a total of forty-two in the sixties),

and together they employed roughly twenty-five thousand people (26). Roth-Ey notes that the most important contradiction in Soviet film industry as an ideological category “was its definition of success and its relationship to markets.” Soviet cinema identified itself as anti-commercial art, but also as drawing huge audiences and generating revenues for the state. Therefore, a success in Soviet film industry “was framed in ways that encouraged people across the spectrum to blur the lines between art and commerce, self-expression and self-interest, and public service and budgetary windfall” (27).

Both radio and television followed the same trajectory, which the Soviet film industry had taken after Stalin, and both failed to offer the elevated form of socialist culture, and became, instead, the major media for mass entertainment. Roth-Ey shows how Soviet radio failed in an ideological and cultural competition with western radio as early as the 1950s and the 1960s. Paradoxically, new technologies (a replacement of wired with wireless radio), and the consumers’ demand for more efficient home-based wireless radio sets exposed Soviet radio audiences to western radio broadcasting by introducing them to new models for media, which were more attractive and more modern than the traditional Soviet ones.

The most interesting part of Roth-Ey’s book is her chapters about Soviet television. Using mainly memoirs as her source, she shows the pioneering efforts of Soviet engineers to organize television broadcasting during the 1950s, when the USSR ranked the fourth country in the world in total number of TV sets after the USA, Canada, and Great Britain. TV sets became the most popular object in Soviet consumption. For Soviet ideologists television became a symbol of modernity. They presented television as “fundamental to a modern lifestyle and as a symbol of Soviet science’s power to deliver that lifestyle and draw together people from across the USSR” (210).

Despite some mistakes and misinterpretations in her portrayal of Soviet television, overall, Roth-Ey is correct to present Soviet TV in the 1970s as “a domestic empire in two senses: an all-Union broadcasting empire ruled from Moscow and an every-day empire based in tens of millions of homes” (281). In post-Soviet Russia, television is still the major medium for millions of Russian consumers of visual culture; it is more popular than movie-theaters, which became very expensive for an ordinary Russian citizen. Roth-Ey’s book is a serious reminder to post-Soviet experts of how important visual culture and cultural consumption are for our understanding of present day Russian society and culture.

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