



W&M ScholarWorks

---

Arts & Sciences Articles

Arts and Sciences

---

2010

## Manufacturing Truth The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture

Frederick C. Corney  
*William & Mary*, [fccorn@wm.edu](mailto:fccorn@wm.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/aspubs>

---

### Recommended Citation

Corney, F. C. (2010). Elizabeth Astrid Papazian. *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press. 2009. Pp. xiii, 282. \$39.00.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts and Sciences at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Articles by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

and Leo Tolstoy, to mention only a few. In addition, an increasing number of books written in Yiddish dealt with secular subjects.

A central theme in the book is that these new cultural interests of a growing number of East European Jews served not only to transform the community but also to promote a new level of unity within Russian Jewry, because, as Veidlinger notes on the last page of the book, “the task that united the community is the construction of a public cultural object” (p. 291). The enthusiasm of the people for the various cultural activities was remarkable. When the writer S. Y. Abramovich (known generally as Mendele Moykher Sforim) visited Warsaw, he was treated as a celebrity. A large group of admirers met him at the railway station, and a banquet in his honor continued throughout the night and did not end until six o’clock in the morning. When Sholem Aleichem arrived in Lubava (Courland Province) at two a.m., he was “shocked” to notice the large crowds that waited for him. “There were many women there,” he noted, “one of whom seemed to be seven months pregnant” (p. 150). In another town, enormous crowds greeted him in the streets even though the weather was miserable. The hunger for secular culture seemed to be insatiable.

Toward the end of his study, Veidlinger devotes two substantial chapters to the new field of secular history, which paid special attention to the legal position and rights of Jews in the Russian Empire. One motive behind the interest in history clearly was political, to buttress the claim that Jews deserved rights of full citizenship, but the interest mushroomed into a scholarly discipline, Jewish history. Several important journals and books were published, some of which are still worth reading today. The most eminent scholar of the period was no doubt Simon Dubnow, to whom Veidlinger devotes several pages, but there were others who were at the forefront of the discipline.

Veidlinger is to be congratulated for having produced a compelling and important study on a cultural development that transformed East European Jewry and that has been crucial in the history of world Jewry over the past century. It is hard to conceive of the various tendencies of present-day Zionism and of other contemporary cultural and political trends—in Israel and among Jewish communities elsewhere—without the emergence of a Jewish public culture in the late Russian Empire.

ABRAHAM ASCHER  
Graduate Center,  
City University of New York [All reviewers of books  
by Indiana University faculty are selected with the  
advice of the Board of Editors.]

ELIZABETH ASTRID PAPAZIAN. *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press. 2009. Pp. xiii, 282. \$39.00.

Scholars of early Soviet culture have sought to examine the cultural and political implications of what Elizabeth Astrid Papazian terms the “crisis of representation” that the Bolshevik Revolution brought to traditional forms of artistic expression in the 1920s. Artists could not be cultural navel-gazers, nor could they be critical realists of Soviet culture “from outside,” but instead they had to be producers of the new communist truth. Ultimately, they were called on directly by Joseph Stalin in 1932 to become “engineer[s] of human souls” (p. 187) for the good of the socialist future. Artists thus had to confront key issues that were existential to their calling: the very role of the artist; the definition of truth or criticism; and the form, content, and purpose of their art. Papazian is interested in the strains placed on the Soviet age of experimentation by the “opposing aspirations . . . [of] objectivity vs. transformation” (p. 53).

Papazian notes the revolutionary authorities’ almost obsessive efforts to concretize progress toward socialism by recording its every step. She concentrates on this “documentary aesthetic” (p. 4) as it pertained to four contemporary actors: the polymath writer Sergei Tretyakov, the avant-garde filmmaker Dziga Vertov, the critical realist-turned-socialist realist Maksim Gorky, and the novelist and humorist Mikhail Zoshchenko. She traces this “documentary moment” through its collapse with the adoption of socialist realism at the first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.

Papazian problematizes the part played by documentary sources in selected works of each author and the dilemmas presented by such sources in the authors’ own roles as manufacturers of truth for the new Soviet reality. Tretyakov, through his publicist journal articles and original plays, questioned the form and purpose of traditional narrative writing, seeking to replace the novelist as “author-creator” (p. 47) with the “*faktovik* [worker in facts], whose material is reality itself” (p. 47). Still, in the late 1920s, Tretyakov moved away from the idea of the author recording the objective facts around him to the idea of the author taking “an *active* role within the observed reality” (p. 48). Vertov, through his newsreels and feature-length films, sought to move away from the fictional form that dominated film-making, regarding it as the product of the oppressive conditions of the prerevolutionary age. He aspired to use the camera lens to “see and know life” (p. 71) and to establish a network of cameras so that the newly evolving Soviet life could be “caught unawares” (p. 71). Gorky, through his travelogues (especially his visit to the Solovki labor camp) and his activities with the History of Factories project, examined the conflict between what he called “two truths” (p. 133): the truth of the past that weighed so heavily on the new truth that should be nurtured for the nascent Soviet society. Gorky was no longer the gadfly critic of past (tsarist) injustices but the producer of the “truth of the future” (p. 134). Zoshchenko, through materials from newspapers, autobiographies, and readers’ letters and through participation in group writing projects, cast himself as the “substitute proletarian writer” now doing his part

for the Soviet project by engaging mass readers in a literary dialog. His goal was to transform the reader, to reconstruct the reader as an “authentic proletarian” author (p. 168).

Papazian’s monograph reveals very well how the individual artists, themselves often unsure of the nature of their experimentation with artistic form and function, sincerely wrestled with their artistic approaches in this new and challenging Soviet context. She also identifies a basic contradiction between their championing of documentary aesthetics (to record or document Soviet reality) and their embrace of their own utopian aspirations to participate in the new Soviet project of modernization (to construct that reality). Given this contradiction, the eventual turn of Tretyakov, Vertov, and Gorky in the direction of socialist realist strictures looks less like an imposition from on high than an outgrowth of their own conflicted aspirations. “The documentary moment,” concludes Papazian, “played a major role in the formation of socialist realism precisely because of its twin promises of objectivity and instrumentality” (p. 210). I find Papazian’s conclusion less convincing in the case of Zoshchenko, who does not, by her own analysis of his work, appear to have given up his ironic stance even late into the game. Indeed, his efforts in 1944 to argue for the positive effects of his satire on the Soviet project ring particularly hollow in this reader’s ears.

Papazian’s monograph is a mature, well-argued, and provocative addition to the recent wave of works on in early Soviet culture.

FREDERICK C. CORNEY  
*The College of William & Mary*

#### MIDDLE EAST AND NORTHERN AFRICA

CHRISTIAN LANGE. *Justice, Punishment, and the Medieval Muslim Imagination*. (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization.) New York: Cambridge University Press. 2008. Pp. viii, 290. \$99.00.

Punishment is a grotesque spectacle. When state-based violence is visible, it either looks like a relic of the past (lynching), a glimpse from tribal societies (Taliban tribunals), or a motif in horror movies. The sensationalism associated with punishment often draws our attention to the punishing act and away from what the punishment signaled for the given society. By focusing on the historical significance of punishment employed by the militarized Seljuq state (511/1118–590/1194), Christian Lange remedies the propensity to generalize and sensationalize punishment and offers the reader the first book-length treatment of punishment in Islamic society. He discusses types of punishment (strangling, drawing a needle across the eye, public executions by sword, gibbeting, infliction of severe pain, executions, imprisonment, floggings, ignominious parading, and banishing and exile), those who can punish (ruler, judge, police, and market inspector), and the different realms of punishment (private within the ruling

class, penal tribunals before the ruler, and public punishments). He also argues that studying punishment at the hands of the Seljuq military rulers offers a way to understand how legal reasoning and eschatological reflections often were the results of attempts to temper or come to terms with the power of the state.

Lange divides his book into three parts. The first part, “The Politics of Punishment,” classifies punishment during the Seljuq era. It uses punishment as a lens into the social and political order of the realm and demonstrates the reach of the state within subjects’ lives. One of the most interesting discussions within this part is—the historical significance of punishments that remained within the realm of the court and out of sight from the public. Punishment for the elite—could reprimand and control and still maintain the honor of the punished. By contrast, punishments such as the ignominious parading around town (*tashhir*) were particularly shameful. The second part, “The Eschatology of Punishment,” offers a description of punishments in Hell. After discussing the range of punishments in the afterworld, Lange argues the far-reaching influence of punishment was so extensive that it may have also informed the eschatological imagination. He suggests that reflections about punishments in Hell— are less about the fascination with eschatology than they were ways for the subject population to come to terms with punishments in earthly life. While the first two parts of the book deal with the impact of punishment in the political and eschatological realms, the third part, “The Legal Dimensions of Punishment,” demonstrates that even though punishments during the Seljuq time were based on political realities, as opposed to *shari’a*, jurists still found ways to influence conceptions of punishment. In a fascinating chapter, Lange discusses the status of analogous reasoning for divinely ordained (*hudud*) punishments and differing Hanafi and Shafi’i interpretations of whether sodomy should be punished in the same way as fornication. He also illuminates the ways jurists attempted to limit the arbitrary power of the state. For example, jurists concurred that only offenses committed in the public realm could be subject to *ta’zir* or discretionary punishment.

Lange makes two interesting methodological choices. First, he situates his consideration of punishment within the period of Seljuq rule. As Lange discusses in his introduction, the Seljuqs offer a useful case study not only because they were a Turkish elite who imposed a military administration over society, but also because their aim to centralize the state included the creation of educational institutions (*madradas*) that reinforced the connections between theology, law, and the power of the state. His analysis— not only offers a generalized vision of punishment in Islamic society but also allows us to contemplate state-based violence against its subjects during the time of what is often considered the revival of Sunni Islam. Second, Lange develops an approach based on “cumulative evidence” (p. 172) in order to recover the cultural imagination surrounding punishment. In this sense, he offers taxono-