

The University of Southern Mississippi
The Aquila Digital Community

Faculty Publications

9-1-2010

The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State

Brian K. LaPierre
University of Southern Mississippi, Brian.LaPierre@usm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

LaPierre, B. K. (2010). The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State. *Journal of World History*, 21(3), 547-550.

Available at: https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/888

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

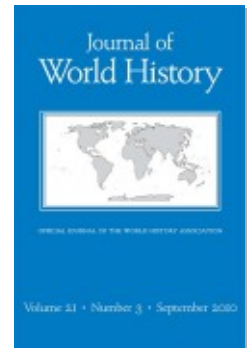
The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State
(review)

Brian Lapierre

Journal of World History, Volume 21, Number 3, September 2010, pp. 547-550
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2010.0025>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/400888>

their national languages, customs, arts, and so forth, while policing the boundaries of what constituted acceptable “national” traits. Naturally, religious practice and belief were outside the bounds. This process created its own un-Marxist dialectic, which reinforced the role of religion as a marker of national identity in opposition to Russian-dominated Soviet identity. As Adeeb Khalid points out in his recent book *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), the Soviets unintentionally solidified local religious practices as markers of Central Asian Soviet national identities. Froese, in part because of his reliance on Western models and in part because he did not read deeply enough in the area, is rather weak when discussing Islam under Soviet atheism.

Similarly, the Orthodox-Catholic divide in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire/USSR has always been inextricable from national identity. Lithuanian Catholic resistance against Russian communism was simply a new iteration of a centuries-old rivalry. Before the Soviet period Russians used the labels *Russkii* and *Pravoslavnyi* (Orthodox) interchangeably. The Russian state and Orthodox Church were deeply entwined with each other long before Peter the Great, in 1721, incorporated the church into his bureaucracy. It was Orthodoxy, not political identity, that united the Russians to drive out the invading Catholic Poles in the early seventeenth-century Time of Troubles, and it was the memory of that bloody period that solidified hating Catholics as a defining trait of being Russian. Understanding this history makes it unsurprising that Boris Yeltsin and even more so Vladimir Putin restored pre-Soviet church-state relations and the accompanying discrimination against dissenting religions. The Western theories have trouble accounting for this phenomenon, since they presume that patterns characteristic of Germany, England, and France are universally applicable. This is a great weakness of the most common theoretical models, one that all scholars would do well to keep in mind.

SHOSHANA KELLER
Hamilton College

The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State.
By TRICIA STARKS. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.
336 pp. \$65.00 (cloth); \$26.95 (paper).

In her book *The Body Soviet*, Tricia Starks examines the propaganda discourse on health, hygiene, and sanitation in Soviet Russia during

the New Economic Policy (NEP) era (1921–1928). Health care, she argues, was an issue of vital importance to an early Soviet state that needed healthy citizens in order to promote population growth, expand industrial production, improve military readiness, and recover from the demographic disaster of almost a decade of total war, civil war, multiple revolutions, mass famine, and epidemic infectious disease. In its concerns over population decline and state power, the early Soviet state, as Starks points out, echoed many of the anxieties of European, American, and prerevolutionary Russian social reformers and public health professionals. Where the early Soviet campaign on health differed, she asserts, from those of its ideological archenemies in the industrial democracies was in its ideological utopianism and in its aggressively invasive nature.

Soviet health and hygiene polices, Starks shows, were part of a Bolshevik project to use science, propaganda, and state power to create a clean-living class of enlightened and orderly Soviet subjects capable of constructing communism and proving its superiority to a capitalist world plagued by ineradicable dirt, disorder, and decline. Starks traces the roots of the Bolshevik romance with hygiene to the utopian socialist writings dear to the heart of Russia's nineteenth-century revolutionary intelligentsia, all of which celebrated science, communalism, and cleanliness. From these popular writings, the Bolsheviks, Starks argues, learned to see dirt and disorder in political terms as symbols of superstitious tradition and of an oppressive capitalist system that had to be conquered to create both a healthy body politic and an antiseptic communist modernity purged of the backward politics, people, and pathogens of the bourgeois past.

To assist in their efforts to both banish dirt and build communism, the Soviet state had, at its disposal, the social hygienists of the People's Commissariat of Health and their grassroots community volunteers. These activists sat at the apex of an institutional infrastructure of dispensaries, sanatoriums, and consultation points through which the Soviet system sought to instill in its subjects the civilizing practices of rational, orderly, and sanitary living. Based on Western and prerevolutionary precedents, these institutions used on-site care, intrusive home inspections, and extensive propaganda efforts (ranging from educational pamphlets and posters to movies and mock trials) to saturate society with the message of Soviet hygiene.

Soviet attempts to create a clean-living society also involved efforts to instill ideologically appropriate leisure practices and to avoid the contamination of a NEP-era cityscape lurking with petty capital-

ist entrepreneurs, prostitutes, and corrupting Western influences and entertainments. In special institutions like spas and houses of leisure, Soviet citizens could rest and relax in an acceptable environment centered not on chain smoking, problem drinking, and sexual promiscuity but on self-improvement, physical culture, and the construction of clean and incorruptible communist minds and bodies. Attempts to instill appropriate health and hygiene regimes also led to the recruitment and activation of grassroots volunteers to invade and inspect homes for possible sources of pollution.

To aid these policies, Soviet hygienists targeted the overworked wives and mothers who, as the agents of stifling tradition and the masters of the domestic sphere, served paradoxically as both the cause of household dirt and disorder and as the only source for a potential solution to these pervasive problems. As source and solution to the unclean domestic order, Soviet women had to be educated, guided, and assisted by the hygiene establishment and its activist base. As the womb of the proletariat, Soviet womanhood also had to be subjected to the state's pronatalist policies and propaganda devoted to the healthful and ideologically wholesome rearing of children.

While spending much of the text's space analyzing the verbal and visual discourse of the social hygienists' clean-living campaigns, Starks does not lose sight of the many difficulties these enterprises faced. Most urgently, these cash-strapped campaigns faced a constant shortage of human and material resources that forced them to prioritize prestige projects (tirelessly shown to foreign visitors as symbols of enlightened Soviet social policy) and the production of propaganda—both measures of limited effectiveness given the size of the public health problem and the ambition of the hygienists' vision of universal health care. Further limiting their impact, the campaigners were unable to penetrate into the countryside of what was still (much to the chagrin of the Bolsheviks) an overwhelmingly rural and peasant society dominated by tradition and poverty. Perhaps most troublingly, many of the practical suggestions the campaigns pushed to improve sanitation, like the daily washing of clothes and bodies, were either impractical or entirely impossible for NEP-era urban women to realize given the notoriously confined and overcrowded living conditions, the pervasive lack of indoor plumbing and central heating, and the general unavailability of those essential communal social services much heralded in emancipatory socialist rhetoric but rarely realized in concrete reality (communal kitchens and communal laundries most of all). Even if they had been possible to realize, many of the campaigns' suggestions encountered

resistance and outright refusal from workers and women whose definitions of appropriate leisure and healthy lifestyles differed from the discourse of the social hygienists.

Based on a thorough analysis of NEP-era primary sources, especially of propaganda posters, and in close dialogue with the relevant historiography, Starks's study provides a useful and lively addition to the work of Susan Solomon Gross and John Hutchinson on healthcare policies and personnel in Revolutionary Russia. Along with the studies of Frances Lee Bernstein, Michael David, and Paula Michaels, Starks's text shows the centrality of health and hygiene policies and propaganda to Soviet power, the roots that many of these practices had in Western precedents, and the ways the state manipulated health care as a tool to tighten its physical and ideological control over its subject population. One could have hoped for more information on the nondiscursive elements of Soviet social hygiene and health campaigns, especially in peripheral areas outside the capitals and Great Russian core. However, Starks is frank in disclosing that her text is not an institutional study. She is also up-front in disclosing her focus on Moscow. Moreover, the discursive emphasis seems legitimate given that these campaigns' lack of resources and reliance on propaganda ensured that they were enacted more in the realm of verbal and visual symbolism than in the realities of everyday existence. The focus on Moscow also seems defensible given its importance to the Soviet system and its symbolic universe and due to the oversized attention that the authorities lavished on it.

Well-written, provocatively argued, beautifully illustrated, and always interesting, Starks's *The Body Soviet* provides insights not only into the propaganda of Soviet health care and hygiene, but it also provides a fascinating glimpse into the rich everyday life of the urban working class during the NEP era. Those curious about the ways Russian workers lived in the immediate postrevolutionary period will find much information and entertainment in Starks's text. As a discursive analysis of NEP-era health and hygiene and as a study of the politicization of modern healthcare programs, her study will be of interest to historians of health and medicine as well as historians of modern Russia. Both Starks and the University of Wisconsin Press are to be congratulated on the intellectually stimulating and aesthetically handsome volume that they have produced.

BRIAN LAPIERRE

The University of Southern Mississippi