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STALINIST COSMOPOLITANISM

Steven S. Lee

Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941 by Katerina Clark. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. 432. \$38.50 cloth.

It has long been common practice to see Western metropolises like Paris and New York as competing centers of global modernism, as capitals in the “world republic of letters.” Katerina Clark’s magisterial *Moscow, the Fourth Rome* presents an alternate mapping of world culture, with the Soviet Union emerging as another potential center, one beyond capitalist bounds. This is a formidable task, given Clark’s focus on the 1930s rather than the 1920s. Few would dispute Bolshevik claims to worldliness in the earlier decade—the topic of her 1995 *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*—which witnessed the heyday of the Soviet avant-garde and Third International. Not so with the 1930s, typically regarded as a time of terror and retreat—with avant-gardism giving way to socialist realism, and with dreams of international revolution overshadowed by Stalinist realpolitik. By this dominant account, the 1930s marked Moscow’s abandonment of worldly, utopian aspirations—its turn inward in the name of “socialism in one country” amid heightening Russian nationalism.

Clark does not dispute that the 1930s marked various disillusioning retreats. Rather, her project is to “integrate a rather neglected international dimension into the overall interpretation of Stalinism” (6)—in short, to draw connections between Stalinist culture and the rest of the world, particularly Western

Europe. One goal here, of course, is to correct the historical record—to counter the simplified view of Stalinist culture as merely autarkic and totalitarian. Clark shows that, as the Kremlin abandoned avant-garde iconoclasm and centralized state power, Moscow remained “a center for a transnational intellectual milieu” (25). Socialist realism and Stalinist architecture emerged not simply from official decrees, but from cultural currents circulating across East and West. I specify some of these currents below, but Clark’s connection between Moscow of the ’30s and the competing cultural centers of Paris and Berlin undergirds the broader, more provocative takeaway from this study: that lurking in current discourses of *transnationalism* and *cosmopolitanism* is a largely forgotten Soviet legacy—tucked away in the now underused, Comintern-inflected *internationalism*. Ultimately, this is a book not just about the Stalinist ’30s, but an effort to bring the Soviet Union back into models of our globalized, post-Soviet world.

Clark goes about this task partly by following the travels and trajectories of four Soviet intellectual adventurers—filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and writers Ilya Erenberg, Mikhail Koltsov, and Sergei Tretiakov. Clark calls these figures “cosmopolitan patriots,” who pushed for engagement with non-Soviet culture even as they remained committed to the Soviet

state. Throughout the book, Clark resolves this seeming contradiction by emphasizing the ambiguity of cosmopolitanism—the fact that one could be “driven by a desire to interact with the cultures and intellectuals of the outside world” (5) but do so from the vantage of a particular nation. For instance, she shows Tretiakov—the futurist writer who advocated the journalistic writing technique known as the *literature of fact*—in 1930 Berlin, where he was sent by an official organization to assist with propaganda efforts. However, he also used the opportunity to acquaint himself with members of the German leftist avant-garde—many of whom (most prominently Bertolt Brecht) he later hosted in Moscow. A more unexpected example of cosmopolitan patriotism comes in the form of Eisenstein’s exoticist embrace of Chinese writing, which in 1935 he described as “a unique model for how, through emotional images filled with proletarian wisdom and humanity, the great ideas of our great land must be poured into the hearts and emotions of the millions of nations speaking different languages” (201). That is, Eisenstein saw Chinese as a formula for the advancement of Soviet cultural hegemony, and Clark describes how he arrived at this view in part by attending Chinese actor Mei Lanfang’s 1935 performances and lectures in Moscow—which also occasioned Brecht’s “first published

formulation of his theory of alienation” (192)—as well as by his exposure to Lucien Lévy-Brühl’s *La Mentalité Primitive* (*Primitive Mentality*, 1923) and to Marcel Granet’s *La Pensée chinoise* (*Chinese Thought*, 1934). The latter book was a birthday gift to Eisenstein from the African American performer Paul Robeson, who also visited Moscow in 1935. *Moscow, the Fourth Rome* is filled with such exchanges among artists and intellectuals across national and racial lines; taken together, they lend striking credence to the notion of a Soviet-centered world culture.

Accordingly, Clark builds up Moscow as a place that aspired to be world class, as evidenced by efforts to reconstruct it as a “higher order place” (27) in the mold of ancient Athens and Rome. Describing various plans for the building of a “new Moscow,” she notes that the monumental, socialist realist architecture that predominated in the ’30s drew from classical and Renaissance traditions, as well as from contemporary Manhattan. Of course, Moscow was not the only city during the interwar years to claim ancient Rome as a precedent, but, in Clark’s presentation, what set it apart was a unique convergence of art and politics. Moscow emerged as a “lettered city”—able to be read, through its architecture, as a text; and obsessed with the written word and, in particular, literature, which the regime

used to legitimate its postcapitalist, postreligious order. This is a city where words were sacred, where rulers were presented as writers, and, as Clark demonstrates, writers around the world took notice. Most notably, a recurring presence in the book is Moscow’s colony of Germanophone writers and editors who were in exile from Nazism. Prominent among these was Georgy Lukács, and Clark traces his active participation in Soviet intellectual life and particularly in the development of socialist realism—according to him, bound to both the ancient Greek epic and the “great bourgeois realist novel” (165) of Western Europe.

On the foundation of these concrete physical exchanges, as well as explicit efforts to blur East and West, Clark paints a more abstract, at times impressionistic portrait of the techniques, themes, and fashions joining Stalinist culture to the rest of the world. Dispelling the notion that this culture simply reflected the whims of Stalin, Clark presents a field of cultural options circulating across Europe, from which Soviet intellectuals and (in the final instance) officials picked and chose. For instance, she suggests that the appearance of frescos and mosaics on Soviet buildings in the early ’30s can be related to a simultaneous reaction against Le Corbusier in France (109). Likewise, she posits a transatlantic conservative turn in the late ’30s,

as seen in the coincidence of the Soviet campaign against *formalism*, Nazi attacks on *degenerate art*, and the rise of Hollywood puritanism. To her credit, Clark does not press such connections, nor does she go about the daunting task of explaining their root causes. Rather, these work as heuristic devices to open Stalinist culture to Western culture and vice versa.

The result is disconcerting, particularly as Clark traces how Stalinist culture changed from the early to late '30s—that is, to the peak of the Terror—for it is at this point that this culture becomes most familiar and, in many ways, appealing. Clark argues that the period witnessed a pan-European turn from classicism to romanticism, which in Soviet culture was marked by emphases on interiority, adventure, the sublime, and the lyric. After explaining interiority through the writings of Konstantin Stanislavsky—who by the late '30s had been enshrined by the Soviet state—she proceeds to connect his insistence on “emotional truth” (228) to the show trials’ insistence on unmasking. Likewise, after tying Soviet adventure writing to the Spanish Civil War—comparing, for instance, the works of Ernest Hemingway and Koltsov—she notes how, in his own trial, Tretiakov was forced to write a confession in the mode of a romantic adventure tale. The sublime—“bold disorder” in

Friedrich Schiller’s formulation and “delightful horror” in Edmund Burke’s—is likewise made to dovetail with Stalinist repression; as is the lyric, which Clark associates with the cult of Byron in late 1930s Moscow, a sudden emphasis on personal over politicized poetry, and the feverish introspection found in “purge discourse.” This is Stalinist culture at its most legible for scholars of Western literature, but also at its most bloodstained and terror-stricken.

In short, amid her efforts to open our understanding of 1930s Moscow—to unseat such distinctions as East versus West, socialist realism versus modernism, dissident versus stooge—Clark remains keenly aware of the ever-tightening grip of Stalinism. Two of her four cosmopolitan patriots perished during the purges, the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact repulsed many from the Soviet orbit, and *cosmopolitan* emerged in postwar Moscow as a code word for *Jewish*. Indeed, Moscow’s failure to remain a nexus of world culture is signaled in the book’s title. As Clark explains in the opening pages, the sixteenth-century monk Filofei of Pskov declared Moscow the successor to Rome and Constantinople: “Two Romes have fallen, and a third stands, and a fourth there shall not be” (1). Thus, Clark’s choice of “Fourth Rome” indicates the emergence of Moscow as “the capital of a *different*, post-Christian,

belief system” (2, emphasis in the original), but also “the possibility that the Soviet desire to make the capital a world center was unrealizable” (28). In short, Clark presents both the rise and fall of this center—of this ideal of Soviet cosmopolitanism that was arguably doomed from the start.

The Cold War and such notions as the Iron Curtain and Three Worlds made it possible to forget this ideal. Now that Clark has reminded us of it, the challenge now is to remap the concept of world culture so that it engages the previously cordoned-off realms of really existing socialism. To be sure, many readers will find this challenge discomfiting. In revisiting this 1930s moment, Clark not only broadens the horizon of Stalinist culture, but also hints at the uneasy convergence of Stalinism and Western modernism—for instance, the fact that Soviet-oriented critics sympathetic to the latter (e.g., James Joyce’s *Ulysses* [1922]) used the purges to advance their positions (162). In other words, Clark reveals the troubled, Stalinist legacy of situating culture transnationally, of thinking beyond the nation: As Soviet

historian Michael David-Fox puts it, the book serves as “a cautionary tale for naïve talk about transcending the national or failure to distinguish rigorously among different forms and meanings of cross-border exchange.”¹ On a more methodological level, readers might also be thrown by the book’s frequent use of analogy to bridge East and West, as well as the unclear sense of what determines the sweeping cultural shifts it tracks. Ultimately, however, Clark’s project is to open a whole new field of inquiry—leaving it to others to follow her lead, fill in the gaps, and weigh the consequences for contemporary cosmopolitanism.

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NOTE

1. Michael David-Fox, “The Implications of Transnationalism,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 4 (2011): 885–904, quotation on 897.