Book Review

Reviewed work(s): Making the Soviet Intelligentsia, Universities and Intellectual Life under Stalin and Khrushchev. Benjamin Tromly. New Studies in European History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

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Benjamin Tromly’s study Making the Soviet Intelligentsia is a remarkable work of intellectual history, offering an innovative view on the relationship between Soviet higher learning and society in the postwar and Thaw eras. The author starts from the paradox that, although universities occupied a prominent position in postwar USSR, they tended to be oriented towards the pursuit of non-utilitarian knowledge – an objective that sat uneasily with the regime’s ideological priorities. The expansion of higher education after 1945 raised the challenge for the state of shaping a growing layer of educated specialists into service-minded citizens who would fulfill vital functions for the state. Tromly’s work focuses primarily on three universities, in Moscow, Saratov and Kyiv, representing the contrasting perspectives of the Soviet capital, the Russian province and the Ukrainian republican center. Based on 49 interviews with former students and a broad array of archival sources, he explores two crucial decades in the formation of the Soviet intelligentsia. The historian defines this key concept of his research as “an ‘imagined community’ defined by its close connection to culture and the enlightenment mission of the Soviet state” (7). As centers of knowledge production where the new intelligentsia was formed, universities were laboratories of student identity construction and appropriation of this valued mode of self-representation.

As Tromly shows, representations of the intelligentsia were in constant flux throughout the period examined. From the early ideal of a “toiling intelligentsia” emerged a more pragmatic Stalin-era compromise, which not only designated intellectuals as agents of enlightenment of the masses, crucial for the building of Communism, but also interpreted this identity in a number of ways, sometimes at odds with the state’s priorities, yet predominantly within the confines of a common worldview shaped by their university experience.

However, in the second part, focusing on the years 1948–1956, Tromly shows how the postwar ideological campaigns, aimed at raising the intelligentsia’s “militant Soviet-patriotic spirit” (80) or to enforce “Marxist” conceptions in science, upset this status quo by dividing academic communities. Quite controversially, through his unconventional periodization, Tromly seems to put the destabilizing impact of Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” on a par with these Stalin-era campaigns. By failing to clearly define the boundaries of acceptable criticism of Stalin’s legacy, the party sowed confusion in the minds and fostered a revisionist brand of dissent among students.

Yet de-Stalinization also coincided with the onset of the Thaw and the emergence of new modes of self-fashioning through culture – a “wellspring of civilized values” (138) to be carried to the masses – which helped students face the uncertainties of the post-Stalin era. But Khrushchev’s reforms also presented further challenges for the intelligentsia’s fragile identity construct. His project of “reclaiming the intelligentsia for the people” (161) through social engineering placed this increasingly elitist, “self-reproducing caste” into a defensive position, as the new policies questioned the legitimacy of its access to higher education. As new modes of cultural expressions blossomed during the Thaw, universities also found themselves at the center of novel identity construction projects, such as nationalism, giving new content and sometimes contradictory meanings to the intelligentsia’s mission of bringing culture to the masses.

To conclude, the Stalin era compromise had made intellectuals feel “like they belonged” to the Soviet state (8) and had helped to “entrench Soviet intelligentsia” by attributing them the role of “bearers of state-sanctioned models of enlightenment and culture” (12). Students interpreted this identity in a number of ways, sometimes at odds with the state’s priorities, yet predominantly within the confines of a common worldview shaped by their university experience.

Benjamin Tromly’s research deserves high praise on a number of grounds. First, it provides an accessible, yet intellectually innovative account on two particularly eventful decades in the history of Soviet academic communities. The author successfully challenges a number of usually accepted notions, in a convincing and subtle way. His original take on the much-discussed issue of the relationship of Soviet intelligentsia to its pre-revolutionary predecessor and his deep analysis of the fluctuations of this group's complex
identity make this study an essential reading on the question. Moreover, by blurring the conventional boundaries between the Stalin era and the Thaw, the author convincingly draws attention to the continuities between the two periods, contributing to a more nuanced appraisal of both. No less perceptive and novel is his treatment of the birth of Ukrainian and Russian nationalisms within universities, which he links to processes of identity formation related to the Thaw-era construct of the intelligentsia’s cultural mission. Tromly’s aversion for clear-cut dichotomies is also perceptible in his treatment of the processes of change within universities and reactions to it. Far from ascribing resistance to political dissent, he shows how the appropriation of identities and idealized conceptions of one’s role within Soviet society led various actors within academic communities to adopt conflicting stances. Finally, Making the Soviet Intelligentsia stands out as a remarkably well-researched monograph, based on a variety of published and unpublished archival sources, interviews and memoirs. Furthermore, it draws on very extensive secondary literature, in particular Russian language works less well-known from the public.

Nevertheless, a question one may raise is the influence of the interviews on the author’s perception of the period. Although Tromly’s caution in relation to his interviewees’ words is commendable, one may wonder whether their personal recollections did not tend to over-emphasize the continuities between the Stalin and Khrushchev eras, conflated into a whole in their youth memories, or to highlight positive memories at the expense of negative ones.

Overall, however, Benjamin Tromly’s monograph offers a very substantial contribution to the study of late Stalin- and Khrushchev-era Soviet society. Researchers of Soviet history will find it a fundamental text to understand the relations between the state and intelligentsia in an age of upheavals and reforms in the academic field.

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