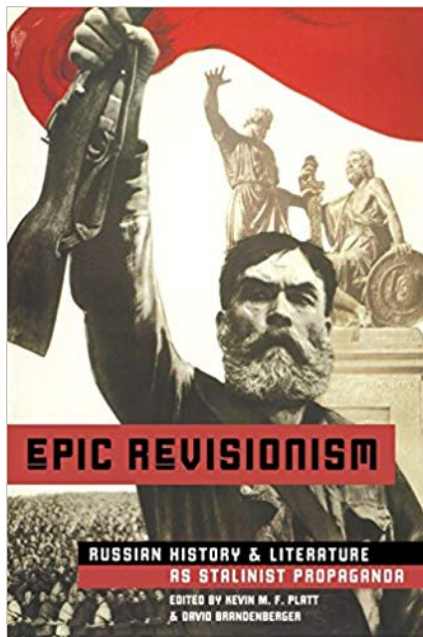


Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda

Edited by Kevin M.F. Platt & David Brandenberger
University of Wisconsin Press, 2006



Epic Revisionism is an investigation of the paradoxical rehabilitation of old-regime heroes and Russian national culture during the darkest years of the Stalin epoch. Focusing on famous individuals and artistic works from the pre-revolutionary era, the chapters in this multi-author book explore the fate of these “classics” during the 1930s and ’40s. It is well-known that many canonical names and titles fell into official disgrace in October 1917 when much of the tsarist past was rejected as alien to the Soviet “experiment.” Less understood is the process by which Peter the Great, Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy and others regained their places at the center

of public culture in the USSR some twenty years later. Indeed, in the most extreme of cases, figures as notorious as Ivan the Terrible rose to universal acclaim, becoming the subjects of triumphalist films and plays, as well as public celebrations, popular histories and lyrical poems. *Epic Revisionism* presents a multi-faceted examination of this fascinating but little-understood “reinvention” of the tsarist past under Stalin.

The volume opens with a discussion of the Soviet elite’s efforts during the mid-1930s to create a new “usable past” out of the debris of tsarist history. *Epic Revisionism* traces this volte-face in official culture to the party leaders’ recognition of an urgent need for a more accessible and compelling pantheon of heroes to populate Soviet mobilizational propaganda. This turn to pre-revolutionary names, imagery and iconography was catalyzed by the purges of the 1930s, which “unmasked” many Soviet-era heroes as enemies of the people and left party leaders with few resources for populist myth-making other than the pre-revolutionary Russian national past.

The case studies that make up the core of *Epic Revisionism* approach this ideological turning point from a variety of angles. Several contributions examine figures whose rehabilitations exemplify a peculiarly Soviet enthusiasm for elaborate “jubilee”

celebrations. William Nickell investigates one of the first Soviet experiments with this genre of public life, the Tolstoy Centenary of 1928, providing insight into the formation of a pattern of official culture that would become dominant during the following decade. In her contribution, Stephanie Sandler examines the traumatic “subconscious” of Soviet public discourse surrounding what was perhaps the most prominent celebration of the 1930s, the Pushkin Commemoration of 1937. David Powelstock capitalizes on both of these accounts in his analysis of the creation of a Soviet image for the notoriously “difficult” poet Mikhail Lermontov in connection with his 1939 and 1941 jubilee years.

Other chapters of the volume examine rehabilitation campaigns of a more drawn-out and diffuse character. David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt offer a comprehensive account of the Soviet “reinvention” of Ivan the Terrible, in which they examine the tension between official intent and historical contingency that ultimately led to the collapse of the rehabilitation campaign. In a separate contribution, Platt investigates the political and textual strategies employed by Aleksei Tolstoy, a key agent in the rehabilitation of Peter I. Brandenberger offers insight into the popular reception of Soviet historical propaganda by means of a survey of public and private reactions to S. M. Eisenstein’s epic 1938 film *Aleksandr Nevskii*.

Finally, several chapters provide counterpoint to these accounts of the revival of tsarist-era historical and cultural figures by examining the backlash, scandal and “reverse rehabilitation” that accompanied the official campaigns of the 1930s. A. M. Dubrovsky chronicles the downfall of Demian Bednyi, a poet who failed to adjust to the new Soviet attitude toward Russian history. A similar case involving Mikhail Bulgakov is explored by Maureen Perrie, who notes that Bulgakov’s comic treatment of Ivan the Terrible missed the moving target presented by official Soviet attitudes towards this controversial historical figure. In his contribution to the volume, Andrew Wachtel provides a fascinating account of how the influence of an earlier revival of Nikolai Leskov’s “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District” had a direct and devastating effect on Dmitrii Shostakovich’s operatic version of this story—nearly costing the composer his career. Finally, Susan Beam Eggers investigates the “reverse rehabilitation” of the Polish interventionists of the seventeenth century, whose vilification was taken to “epic lengths” in the Soviet version of Glinka’s *Ivan Susanin*, rendering them convenient allegories for the rising threat of German fascism.

Adding to the depth of the collection, each of these case studies is complemented by the translation of a primary source—either a contemporary newspaper article, short story, or unpublished archival document—in order to deepen the discussion at hand. Such sources provide students of the period with a clearer understanding of the context and “texture” of Stalinist historical propaganda, rendering *Epic Revisionism* an ideal text for course adoption. Most of these materials appear here in English for the first time, a number having never been published before in any language.

In aggregate these studies greatly enhance our understanding of the intent, design, scope and impact of the Stalinist party hierarchy’s rehabilitation of tsarist-era heroes, myths and

imagery. As James von Geldern observes in his conclusion to the volume, they also help us to define the elusive nature of “public” culture in the USSR during the most repressive years of the Soviet experiment. But beyond their relevance to the Stalinist period, these studies also have considerable contemporary application. Russian political life today is turning increasingly to the myths, imagery and iconography of the tsarist past in a search for authority and legitimacy. Many of the watchwords and catch phrases of present-day mythmaking were last deployed as politically significant symbols under Stalin. Present-day admirers of the pre-revolutionary past no doubt imagine themselves to be reaching back beyond the Soviet era to the roots of the Russian political tradition—to the “true” wellspring of Russian national pride. Yet in reality, this ostensible dialogue with the past, “over the heads” of seven decades of Soviet history, borrows much from the Stalin era. In some cases, works produced between the early 1930s and the mid-1950s are being reissued as part of the current “rediscovery” of the Russian past. Clearly, the Stalinist celebration of the Russian national past must be seen as an important link in the genealogy of current nationalist rhetoric. In this sense, *Epic Revisionism* makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of contemporary political events in Russia as well.

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