

## Review Essay

**NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: ROCK MUSIC COUNTER-CULTURE IN RUSSIA**, Thomas Cushman, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 403 pp., \$59.50 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

**IN THE SOVIET HOUSE OF CULTURE: A CENTURY OF PERESTROIKAS**, Bruce Grant, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, 225 pp., \$49.50 (cloth), \$15.95 (paper).

The pace of change in the Soviet Union caught Western observers off guard, played havoc with many studies in progress, and sent former Sovietologists scrambling to redefine their field. The study by Thomas Cushman, *Notes from the Underground*, is a case in point. His project was conceived in the late 80s when the Soviet regime, rejuvenated by reforms, seemed to be moving briskly into a new era. In 1990, Cushman traveled to St. Petersburg, where he immersed himself in the city's rock counterculture and geared up to write a book about the complex relationship between the communist establishment and Russian rock music. By the end of 1991, however, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and the aging rockers gained full freedom only to discover that the emerging market placed even harsher constraints on their creativity than communist ideologues did. Making the best out of the changed circumstances, Cushman refocused his study, turning it into a far more demanding inquiry into cultural freedom and creativity under socialism and capitalism. While there is always a danger with such ambitious projects that they will be too theoretical for those interested in a specific historical case (in this case Russian rock music), and too awash in empirical detail for theory lovers, every reader will find something rewarding in this richly textured, theoretically grounded, poignant study of Russian culture in transition.

The author makes a theoretical claim that capitalism and modernity need to be decoded: the two terms are often used as synonymous, yet bureaucratic rationalization comes in different shapes. There is a capitalist path and a socialist path to modernity. The modern impulse

to rationalize the world took even harsher forms under socialism, as the communist leaders were struggling to squeeze within the span of two generations historical transformations that took a few centuries in the West. With outward social life forced into rigid ideological forms, the pressure built up to retreat into the lifeworld, to reconstitute the meaningful wholeness of the demystified universe with alternative sense derived from unofficial cultural pursuits, like poetry, painting, theater, and music. The Stalinist machinery of repression put a lid on such activities, but Khrushchev's liberalization encouraged dissenters and opened up the country to the Western influences. Alternative communities of interpretation sprang up throughout the nation, nurturing along the way the vibrant rock scene where musicians, scornful of the officially approved tastes, began to experiment with the Western musical idiom. Derivative and mimetic at first, Russian rock music came into its own in the early 70s, when the parroting of Western groups gave way to more ingenious Russian rock. While the Western prototype continued to inform the Russian rock's musical syntax, the musicians began to experiment with original lyrics, fusing Russian rock with unmistakably Russian poetics.

The unofficial rock culture flourished, propelled by semilegal, secretly organized concerts. Such gatherings, held in buildings' basements and rarely exceeding 100 people, gave a unique sense of togetherness and strength to the alienated and powerless Soviet youth. The growing availability of tape recorders helped fan out the new cultural form and would become a staple for the entire Soviet youth culture. Unable to stamp out the phenomenon, the Soviet authorities resolved to control it by co-optation. In 1980, the Leningrad Rock Club came into existence, where informal groups were given a chance to perform for their fans under the watchful eyes of the Young Communist League's leaders. Soviet rock stars developed a huge following; some emerged as saintly figures whose personal examples popularized alternative lifestyles among the young and gave headaches to the KGB. Even though the rock lyrics mostly remained apolitical, the pointed refusal to engage in propaganda of any kind was perceived (correctly) as a repudiation of the system in the hyperrational world of Soviet ideology.

The transition to a market economy proved painful for Soviet rockers. The lack of copyright protection, the breakdown in distribution networks, the need to think of their beloved art form in business terms, and, to no small extent, the change in popular tastes, presented Russian rockers with a harsh dilemma. Some chose to become

