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).


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
commercial, tailored their output to the market demands, and were castigated by the old-timers as traitors to the cause. Others sought to remain true to the original spirit of rebellion and soul searching but found inspiration lacking and the logistics of carrying on the torch daunting. A good example of the woes that befall Russian rockers in the brave capitalist world was the disaster at the 1993 Berlin Rock Festival, where the Russian musicians belatedly discovered that their promoters would not pay them until after all the concerts were over, and even then only if their hosts made enough profit.

This is the basic story about socialist modernity and its capitalist successor that the reader gleans from Cushman’s book. There is much in it that rings true, that is born out by abundant, strategically used ethnographic material—one of the book’s most attractive features. Indeed, Western capitalism as conceived by Weber is not the only path to modernity. Socialism evolved its own ways of harnessing human spirit to the utopian rational formula. But I suspect that there are more than two ways of reaching modernity, with capitalism and socialism being very broad theoretical abstractions that mask considerable historical diversity. Think of the Japanese paternalistic system, German welfare state, the Singapore state capitalism, Swedish socialism, or Chinese experiments with markets—each country travels to modernity in its own way and none develops the same compliment of modern features. The things that draw these countries apart are at least as important, and in many ways more interesting, than what they have in common. The capitalism/socialism binary formula obscures as much as it reveals. What the Russian case helps us understand—and here Cushman renders an important service—is that we need to examine each country on a case-by-case basis, centering on its unique sociohistorical setting and resisting the temptation of lumping it into a theoretically overfull category such as “capitalist modernity,” or for that matter, “socialist modernity.”

Which brings us to the theoretically most pregnant issue raised in the book: what breeds cultural creativity under the conditions of zastoy (political stagnation) and impedes it in the market-driven environment of today’s Russia? The answer would have to be found at the intersection of the unique historical forces that shaped both Russian cultural sensibilities and the social conditions common to one-party socialist states, including their emphasis on culture as a way to compensate for the impoverished material sphere, concerted efforts to nourish the intelligentsia, the blockage of channels for political expression, the narrow choice of cultural options available to the
population, and so on. Whether or not readers find the answers proffered by Cushman convincing, they are likely to appreciate the author's valiant effort to raise those important issues to the level of theoretical analysis they deserve.

Like Cushman, Bruce Grant is keenly interested in the "headlong rush of modernity" that animated the Soviet nation builders who "carried the many faces of modernism to their furthest and most compelling extremes" (p. 3). His book, In the Russian House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas, also takes up cultural production as its primary concern, but dwells less on countercultural expression than on the official cultural policies that were brought to bear on non-Russian ethnic groups. The author is primarily concerned with the Nivkhi people of Sakhalin Island. The book is part history, part ethnography, and part social commentary on some 90 years of cultural building in Russia. The skillfully woven narrative starts in the late imperial times, when the Russian government set out to modernize what the Russian missionaries perceived to be a hopelessly backward and uncultured people, ripe for the expert treatment of social engineers. The story moves to the Soviet kulturtragers who took over where their predecessors left off, seeing in the people under their control little more than "blank slates onto which a new Soviet way of life could be inscribed" (p. xi). We learn about Stalin's ruthless policies of "Russification," the Khrushchev era's fateful decision to eliminate small villages deemed to be "nonviable," the general neglect of the Northern people under Brezhnev, and finally, the chaotic perestroika currents that swept through the land during Gorbachev and his successor, Boris Yeltsin. Nothing is more constant in Russian history than attempts at reform. But "the Russian's propensity for perestroika," as Grant makes abundantly clear, has been a decidedly mixed blessing for the Nivkhi and four other native groups residing in Eastern Siberia. There were a few bright moments in this history that the natives seem to appreciate. Lenin's nationality policy gave a strong impetus to the development of national languages in preliterate peoples. The Nivkhi were furnished with their own alphabet, which happened to be Latin-based on account of its widespread internationalist appeal. Ethnic schools proliferated in the 1920s, hospitals were built, private farming and cooperative movement encouraged. These initiatives were welcome by many Nivkhi, who developed pride in their ethnic heritage and learned to talk about their native culture.

The situation took an ominous turn in the early 1930s when the early policy of nurturing local cultures was supplanted by Stalin's
campaign to "Russify" ethnic minorities and accelerate the formation of a monolithic Soviet nation. The Latinized Nivkh script was condemned as a bourgeois diversion. The ethnographers from Leningrad and Moscow who helped create it came under fire, while ethnography itself was condemned as a pseudo-science encouraging bourgeois nationalism. The entire generation of "ethnic cadres" brought up during the early years of the Soviet Power was exterminated. In 1937-38 alone, one third of all Nivkh men were murdered by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. Amidst the mayhem, Stalin remained a popular figure among the Nivkh, who continue to look longingly on those years and the Second World War ("The Great Patriotic War") as the period of high-minded struggle, valiant work, and personal sacrifice.

Khrushchev's "Thaw" brought new headaches to the Nivkh. The fateful decision to abandon small villages and to relocate people into bigger and presumably more economically viable centers displaced the natives from the land of their ancestors. The number of towns and villages in Sakhalin dropped from about 1,000 to 329 between 1962 and 1985. Gorbachev's glasnost stirred the local passions over the issue of cultural and political autonomy. But as the author wryly notes, "After nearly 70 years of Soviet administration, what constitutes tradition?" (p. 143). With less than 10 percent of the population still having a command of their native language, this is not a frivolous question.

The trip from Moscow to Sakhalin that the author undertook in the summer of 1992 paints a hilariously absurd picture of life in post-Soviet Russia. I cannot resist the temptation of quoting a passage that gives a taste of the anarchy enveloping the country thought to have found a shortcut to modernity:

The cabin was stuffed to overflowing, with baggage in the aisles and spilling off open racks overhead, as no one would trust the airlines' baggage handlers not to steal their possessions. . . . The normal respite, a walk to the back of the plane, was out of the question, since the aisle was clogged further by drunken passengers in the process of getting still drunker from the bottles they had brought with them. The bathroom floor was soaked with water and urine, rank with ammonia that had been spattered about indiscriminately. Lunch, rock-hard chicken with hair still on the skin, was impervious to knife and fork. . . . This was the Aeroflot I had known and loved. (p. 145)
There is much insight and subtlety in this volume that today's ethnographers will find refreshing, on both substantive and methodological grounds. The book makes a strong case against the black-and-white rendering of colonized people as innocent victims of ruthless foreigners. The Nivkhi took an active part in the metropolitan campaigns, from which they suffered and benefited in equal measure. Their hybrid identities defy an easy characterization as artificial and juxtaposed to some notion of authentic cultural selves. The book is also admirable in its reflexive tone. The author is fully aware that his narrative could have taken him in a different direction, that he could have written a different book were he to visit the site at any different point in time, that we always reconstruct the past from the vantage point of the present and inform it by our present concerns. The book will greatly benefit students of Russia and practitioners of contemporary ethnography alike.

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