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In this important and impressive book Professor Katerina Clark charts the “evolution of Stalinist culture as seen through Moscow intellectual life” (p.4) during the 1930s. In a sequel to her study of post-revolutionary Saint Petersburg, Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution, Clark re-examines Moscow as a beacon for a new trans-national, cosmopolitan Soviet culture, with aspirations of becoming a world culture. Filofei of Pskov’s famous sixteenth century pronouncement, popularised in the nineteenth century, claimed for Moscow the status of a “third Rome”, a new centre for Christendom following the demise of Rome and Constantinople. In Clark’s analysis Soviet Moscow in the 1930s becomes a “fourth Rome”, the emblem of a new post-Christian socialist culture.

The central argument of Moscow, the Fourth Rome is that in the 1930s proletarian internationalism was not supplanted by Great Nationalism Russian, but rather that “nationalism, internationalism, and even cosmopolitanism were not distinct but to a significant degree imbricated with each other in a mix peculiar to that decade” (p.5). Simultaneous to the growth of nationalism was a flourishing internationalism. This represents a challenge to the conventional historiography of the 1930s, in particular to Nicholas Timasheff’s classic notion of the “The Great Retreat”, and David Brandenberger’s more recent work on “National Bolshevism”. Overall the book attempts to inject a “rather neglected international dimension into the overall interpretation of Stalinism” (p.6). As Clark puts it in one of the books most memorable phrases, which plays with her previous work on Socialist Realism; “‘Boy’ was not just meeting ‘tractor’, he was encountering Western culture” (p.139).

In its nine illuminating and ambitious chapters the book develops this argument by exploring architecture, literature, film, theatre, sculpture, photo-journalism, mass spectacles, as well as theoretical and official statements on culture. It is a mark of both Clark’s erudition, as well as the enormous cultural complexity of the 1930s, that the book encompasses subjects as diverse as the ornamentation of building facades, Soviet productions of Shakespeare, Mei Langfang and the Peking opera’s visit to Moscow from mid March to mid April 1935, personal narratives of the Spanish Civil War, and the romance of Arctic exploration. Clark guides her readers through this bewildering array of material through regular reference to four “intermediaries”: Sergei Eisenstein, Ilya Ehrenburg, Mikhail Koltsov and Sergei Tretiakov. All four were highly placed cultural functionaries and active producers, who spent time in the West, interacted closely with western intellectuals, and proselytised for Soviet culture as a genuine expression of “world culture”. In addition to these central cosmopolitan protagonists the reader regularly encounters a host of other intellectual inhabitants of a “pan-European intellectual space” (p.31) including, amongst others, Georgy Lukács, Bertold Brecht and Walter Benjamin.
The result of this carefully constructed and closely argued analysis is a new impression not only of Stalinist culture, but the 1930s as a whole. Paradoxically as the Soviet Union became a relatively closed society, in a period of purge and terror, the state and Soviet intellectuals increasingly laid claim to European cultural traditions. 1935, a year marked by Ilf and Petrov’s well reported visit to America and multiple Shakespeare productions, turns out to be one of the highest points in Soviet internationalism and cross cultural transfer. In late 1935 and early 1936 Soviet culture experienced a radical shift, with a tightening of cultural expression and an increasing role for the secret police. Yet even between 1936 and 1938, as the worst purges gathered pace, Soviet intellectuals were never completely isolated from the West or western intellectuals. Clark’s cultural intermediaries serving as cultural emissaries in the Spanish Civil War encountered foreign intellectuals, and wrote about their experiences, in the case of Koltsov writing Spanish Diary, arguably Moscow’s most widely read book of the period. Even after 1937 as a more forceful spirit of Russian nationalism took hold in the cultural circles a surprising volume of western literature, including works by Proust and Joyce, appeared in translation. As Clark argues the cultural turn under Stalin throughout the 1930s was arguable a transnational phenomenon.

The richness of Clark’s challenging argument and provocative material can make her writing dense. In places it can be difficult to pick one’s way through complicated theoretical discussion. Yet for the persistent Moscow, the Fourth Rome offers valuable and sometimes surprising insights into Soviet culture and the 1930s. Professor Clark should be congratulated for once again producing a remarkable book, which will have a profound impact on the future study of Stalinist culture amongst scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum.

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