

Mass Culture in Soviet Russia. Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917-1953. By James von Geldern and Richard Stites, editors. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp. xxix + 489, bibliography, \$49.95 US, ISBN 0-253-32893-4, cloth, 0-253-20969-2, pbk., \$24.95 US, and 0-253-32911-6, cassette, \$9.95 US)

Koozma J. Tarasoff

Volume 22, Number 1, 2000

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087860ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087860ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Tarasoff, K. J. (2000). Review of [*Mass Culture in Soviet Russia. Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917-1953.* By James von Geldern and Richard Stites, editors. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp. xxix + 489, bibliography, \$49.95 US, ISBN 0-253-32893-4, cloth, 0-253-20969-2, pbk., \$24.95 US, and 0-253-32911-6, cassette, \$9.95 US)]. *Ethnologies*, 22(1), 296–299. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087860ar>

strengths of the work. The editors discuss the role of women in Newfoundland storytelling (few of their tellers are women), relationships of narrative to class and occupation, performative aspects, among other more "modern" topics, but this work is not a major source for Newfoundland scholarship on these subjects. But such matters seem beside the point in a work of this magnitude. *Folktales of Newfoundland* is a monument to the text, and thus stands as a counterstatement to other folkloristic approaches.

Garland should be thanked for publishing this book. Few publishers would have attempted such a difficult collection of tales, and it is doubtful that we will see its like again. This book, as the editors state, is meant for a "general academic readership" and thus it will not find its way into the hands of most who enjoy folktales. This collection would, however, seem to be a good candidate for publication as a multi-media CD or web site. Hearing these tales, while reading the transcriptions, or even while reading edited, easy-to-read versions, accompanied by photographs of the tellers (the printed volume includes 16 photographs of tellers), contextual information on Newfoundland, bibliographic references and other information — such a repackaging would make this work accessible to a wider public. For now, however, we are lucky to have the third in a trilogy of great works on Newfoundland folklore and language.

Michael Taft

University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, British Columbia

Mass Culture in Soviet Russia. Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917-1953. By James von Geldern and Richard Stites, editors. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp. xxix + 489, bibliography, \$49.95 US, ISBN 0-253-32893-4, cloth, 0-253-20969-2, pbk., \$24.95 US, and 0-253-32911-6, cassette, \$9.95 US).

This anthology of documents, short fiction, poems, songs, plays, movie scripts, comic routines, and folklore provides a close look at the mass culture consumed by millions in Soviet Russia between 1917 and 1953. The authors represent a time-line study of both the changing sponsored cultural forms and the unofficial culture that flourished beneath the surface from the beginning

of the Russian Revolution and the postwar era ending with the death of Joseph Stalin.

While the authors give us an "insider's view" of mass culture, the editors set the stage with an Introduction followed by a contextual paragraph presenting each piece. The project began some years ago as a seminar in USA on Soviet mass culture; after the Cold War the materials were reworked into an anthology which is also complemented with a companion 45-minute audio tape of fifteen popular songs with such favorites as "Katyusha." Russian texts of the songs are included in the book.

The reader is quickly immersed in the sounds, smells, images, and emotions of the day. For example, the following anecdote concludes one of the chapters:

Kolhozniiks from the sticks are touring Moscow. The guide is reciting standard materials about the "accomplishments of the Soviet system," about its "concern for the human being," about the "expanding needs of Soviet people" and the "abundance of consumer goods."

One of the kolkhozniiks says: "Comrade Leader, I spent the whole day yesterday walking around the city, and I didn't see any of the things you're talking about."

The guide replies with irritation: "You should spend less time walking around and more time reading newspapers!" (284).

The state and the Communist Party attempted to use mass culture as a propaganda device to develop the world's first socialist society by harnessing the artist to provide the approved images for the new state, and by persuading the consumers (the audience) to support the cause. The various tales, poems, song, and images reflect the results of this quest.

Ultimately, the forced industrialization and collectivization almost destroyed folk and popular culture as autonomous environments disappeared, intelligentsia surrendered its independence, and local cultural production was replaced by centralized institutions. Yet the result of this grand experiment was never that which it claimed to be. The Soviet society never became monolithic, inflexible, gray or grim. Largely it was optimistic with a trust that a new Soviet man and woman would evolve who would share one culture that would be accessible to all citizens.

The give and take of internal and external life forces prevented the desired outcome of a centralized mass culture. Officials demanded political orthodoxy

(a harmonious family whose watchword was socialism and whose style was realism), artists desired to have a comfortable studio where they could work (to get this perk, they had to compromise), and the consumer largely wanted entertainment. While each constituency had its own agenda, everyone wanted to survive and each used his or her best cultural habits to bring this about. Often this meant thinking internally one way, and acting another.

The joke, the poem, the song and the play provided comic relief even at the risk of being sent to exile. In prison, the counter culture inspired countless popular songs and beliefs and served as one source of change in Soviet society, as did the *stilyagi*, the young pioneers of “unofficial” culture who listened to American jazz, flaunted Western wardrobe, and spoke in a willfully un-Soviet slang.

The editors of this anthology have provided us an important service by showing (through the words and images of a society talking about itself) that Soviet socialism was not the inflexible ideology it claimed to be; that rather it was “a set of social practices and cultural inclinations in constant flux, which hid the intentions not only from the outside world but from itself” (xxvii).

Let’s face it. Seventy-five years of isolation from each other has created islands of distrust as well as uniqueness. The result is both a caution and at the same time an opportunity for strangers getting to know one another for the first time. Here the anthology provides valuable insights towards an understanding of the unusual historic time and geographic gap. It appears that regimes and leaders were not able to completely subvert mass culture to itself — the bearers of which share the survival instinct common to all humans regardless of ideology.

While traveling to the former Soviet Union on many occasions from 1957 to 1992, I have had professional and personal experience in observing the changing face of this east European society. My grandparents were dissident Russian Doukhobors who came to Canada in 1899, and my mother arrived later in 1926. With empathy and objectivity I have been able to observe the isolation of both the Soviet east and the Democratic west. I have seen how demonism grabbed hold of each camp; how political leaders with the loudest voices sought conformity from ordinary citizens, but often failed to persuade some of its courageous poets, novelists, artists, and intellectuals to its fold.

Mass culture is difficult to define, except that it consists of citizens that make up our nation states along with their values, styles and mores. In this

sense, mass culture is largely a phenomenon of ordinary people expressing uniqueness in their own way. While states, institutions, and charismatic leaders may strive to influence it, in the end, it is the people themselves (with many different agendas) who will have the final say.

It would be interesting to apply this mass culture model to the United States of America at the height of the Cold War. Here, as in Soviet Russia, the mirror image of the enemy reduced complex cultures to a few simple tones. The Soviet Russians were considered to be a threat to western freedom and democracy; while the Soviets in turn saw greedy capitalists as a demoralizing philosophy aimed at destroying socialism. In both ideological camps, propaganda deprived the enemy of all humanity and created demons of each. Many intermediaries and workers for mutual understanding (such as diplomats, negotiators, peace activists, east-west bridge-builders, scientists, and perhaps authors of this anthology) were suspect, yet ultimately necessary to bring down the Cold War curtain.

Koozma J. Tarasoff
Ottawa, Ontario
