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Being Soviet. Identity, rumour, and everyday life under Stalin, 1939-1953

Taras Kuzio ^a

^a Center for Trans-Atlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University
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BOOK REVIEW

Being Soviet. Identity, rumour, and everyday life under Stalin, 1939-1953, by Timothy Johnston, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 1ii + 240pp., \$99.00 (Hardcover), ISBN 978-0199604036

Timothy Johnston has written a fascinating book that provides an insight into the formation of Soviet identity under Soviet leader Jozef Stalin and pointed to the sources of the decline of Soviet identity under Leonid Brezhnev's "era of stagnation." Official Soviet identity did not attempt to erase other identities, such as nationality.

Residents of the Soviet Union, like most individuals, embraced a number of simultaneous and different identities. They were not simply Soviet, or Russia, or Jewish. A Soviet citizen could define himself as a labourer at the Dinamo factory, a Kievan, a member of the global proletariat, a Ukrainian, or a citizen of the USSR. These identities were not incompatible, and were often complimentary. (xxv-xxvi)

As Johnston points out, these multiple identities exist in many countries (e.g. Canada, Belgium, Spain and Britain) and can harmoniously co-exist. Only when the overarching identity, whether Soviet or British, begins to decline do other identities, such as nationality (e.g. Ukrainian or Scottish) begin to take precedence and may lead to the disintegration of the multi-national state.

Johnston brings together numerous sources to analyse the origins of Soviet identity, particularly in the 1940s when Soviet identity was transformed and after 1947 when the Cold War began and old animosities resurfaced, for example, with Britain. Many of these elements of Soviet identity were viewed in an opposite manner by non-Soviet peoples. The Soviet Union as the liberator state, the most heroic of the anti-Nazi allies, bringing Soviet civilization and freedom resonated with Soviet citizens. The USSR proclaimed itself not only as the "liberator" of the three Baltic and eastern European peoples, but also the standard bearer of all oppressed peoples in Western colonies around the world.

An additional element of Soviet identity became its proclamation as the defender of world peace through front organizations such as the World Peace Council. From 1947 Soviet identity was formulated in opposition to the West as the "Other," a West that oppressed colonial peoples, harbored fascists (both home grown and émigrés from the USSR who had been Nazi collaborators) and was a warmonger seeking to drag the world into nuclear Armageddon. The Soviet attainment of nuclear weapons in the late 1940s was described as a victory in the cause of peace. Johnston describes this as "Soviet exceptionalism" (131–132) of a civilization whose leaders and population believed the USSR was authoritative, gave patronage to oppressed peoples and had moral authority in the world.

Johnston points to three components of Soviet identity that, although he fails to point this out, continue to influence contemporary politics in the three eastern Slavic states. The first is anti-Westernism (particularly anti-Americanism), which is a product of how the West became the "Other" for the USSR from 1947. This can be seen today in cries of "double standards" from post-Soviet leaders when Europeans and Americans criticize human rights problems in Eurasia. Nevertheless, "It was entirely possible to disapprove

of Western decadence but be partial to certain Western luxuries” (122) – both in the USSR and today when Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs live, shop and work in Western Europe. A second legacy is spymania and conspiracy theories. The emergence of American and British spies in Soviet novels began after 1947, but reached its peak in the 1960s. Huge majorities of Russians, Belarusians and eastern Ukrainians are convinced that the Georgian Rose and Ukrainian Orange revolutions in 2003 and 2004, respectively, were organized by American conspiracies, rather than being a product of spontaneous and voluntary popular protests. The third legacy is anti-Semitism, which in the USSR was disguised as anti-cosmopolitanism and anti-Zionism. As Johnston writes, anti-cosmopolitanism in the late Stalin era had “thinly veiled, though unacknowledged, anti-Semitic overtones” (178–179). Jews were linked to world capitalism, they kowtowed to the West and their loyalties were suspicious because of the pull of Israel to which many wanted to emigrate.

Interaction with liberated states in Eastern Europe undermined Soviet identity as it brought knowledge about higher standards of living and examples of European goods into the USSR. Anglo-American films, music, technology and clothes were more glamorous, exotic and luxurious than their Soviet equivalents. “Cowardly decadence and exotic luxury were structural features of the way Soviet citizens imagined the world their allies inhabited beyond the border” (122).

The seeds of the steady erosion of Soviet identity appeared in the 1960s and 1970s under Brezhnev which Johnston points to in the growing disbelief in what the Soviet media was reporting and an ability to read between the lines. Growing contact with the outside world also eroded Soviet identity, including visitors to communist Eastern Europe, especially when the floodgates were opened under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Johnston writes that some elements of Soviet identity have remained in place in Russian foreign policy such as the language of peace, might and patronage. But, at the same time, Johnston underestimates the lingering aspects of Soviet identity in Eurasia more broadly and especially in the eastern Slavic states which are ruled by three *Homo Sovieticus* leaders – Russian President Vladimir Putin, who believes the collapse of the USSR was the biggest disaster of the twentieth century, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The Soviet Union may be dead, but its influence very much remains alive in this region.

One minor correction on the number of anti-Soviet partisans in the Soviet West after World War II: when Johnston writes that there were 100,000 Lithuanian and 40,000 Ukrainian partisans, this is far too low a figure in the latter (135). The fiercest and longest anti-Soviet partisan struggle took place in western Ukraine. A second point that this reviewer is not persuaded by is the claim that nationalism did not lead to the disintegration of the USSR because nationalism was merely a beneficiary of the decline in Soviet identity.

Johnston’s book is highly recommended for those interested in Soviet identity and culture.

Taras Kuzio

Center for Trans-Atlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University

Email: tkuzio@rogers.com

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