

[Beecher on Steinberg, 'Russian Utopia: A Century of Revolutionary Possibilities'](#)

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Mark D. Steinberg. *Russian Utopia: A Century of Revolutionary Possibilities*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. xii + 140 pp. \$16.15 (e-book pdf), ISBN 978-1-350-12722-7; \$16.15 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-350-12719-7.

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This volume is one of the first in the series of “Russia Shorts” published by Bloomsbury. Each book, the publishers tell us, is intended for a broad range of readers and covers a neglected or poorly understood side of Russian history and culture. The first two volumes in the series—this is the third—treated well-defined and relatively narrow topics: the Russian Civil War of 1918-21, and the Pussy Riot group that exploded on the Russian musical scene in 2012. This book is appropriately subtitled “a century of revolutionary possibilities”—and the first question it raises is this: How to convey some sense of this huge and amorphous topic in a book of barely a hundred pages?

I think Mark Steinberg has managed the problem well. He does not attempt anything like a comprehensive analysis of Russian utopianism. Nor does he offer a narrative of the trajectory of utopian thinking in Russia from the earliest times, as do Leonid Heller and Michel Niqueux, who begin their admirable history of Russian utopias with medieval Orthodox visions of heaven on earth.[1] Instead, Steinberg offers a thematic study in four chapters, each focusing on a particular theme or problem. Thus the first chapter deals with wings and the image of flight, linking both to ideas of rebirth and resurrection. Chapter 2 considers the image of the New Person, given currency by Nikolai Chernyshevsky in his immensely influential novel, *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) and by the writing and example of the great Russian radical women such as the populist Vera Zasulich and the feminist Alexandra Kollantai. In the third chapter, on the New City, Steinberg’s accounts of visions of the “artificial city” of Saint Petersburg and the grandiosity of Stalin’s Moscow are reinforced by reflections on the significance of two unbuilt monuments: Vladimir Tatlin’s proposed glass and iron monument to the Third International and Boris Iofan’s 1934 design for the Palace of the Soviets. Finally, in discussing the New State, Steinberg focuses on the nineteenth century, contrasting ideal visions of the tsarist regime as rooted in a special bond of love between an all-powerful tsar and a devoted people, with the multiple alternative visions of revolutionaries from the Decembrists to the Bolsheviks and the anarchists.

One problematic feature of this book is the elasticity of the central concept. Steinberg begins by distancing himself from Thomas More’s notion of utopia as a “good place” that is also “no place.” Instead he offers a forward-looking concept of utopia as “a radical rethinking of possibility ... not as ‘nowhere’ but as ‘not yet’” (p. x). He calls on Ernst Bloch to argue that utopia is “not about a place but a perception, a re-orientation, a method” that seeks to “venture beyond” the “darkness of the

lived moment” in order to discover the “not-yet-become” (p. 2). Then he goes on to discuss as products of the “utopian impulse” both cities and written utopias, both the liberal dreams of the Decembrists in 1825 and the repressive military colonies established a few years earlier by General Alexander Arakcheev, both Stalin’s first Five Year Plan and the practical utopianism of Soviet activists who sought to build socialism in “the everyday space of a shared home” (p. 47).

Obviously Steinberg’s forward-looking concept of utopia works better for Russian radicals than for the conservative and backward-looking utopians who also appear in this book. Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who called on his readers to “bring what you can from the future into the present” (p. 105) clearly exemplifies Steinberg’s concept of utopia in a way that conservatives like Arakcheev do not. But rigor and conceptual consistency matter less in a work such as this than the ability to communicate a sense of the sheer abundance of visions of an ideal social order, past or future, in Russian intellectual history. And Steinberg does this brilliantly. Indeed, in concluding this work, one is inclined to ask whether utopian thinking, conservative and radical, is not a particular feature of Russian intellectual life throughout the long nineteenth century.

Steinberg’s account of Russian utopias does not go very far into the Soviet period. He has a lot to say about the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, but he quotes approvingly Ernst Bloch’s verdict: in 1917 “doors opened; but of course they soon shut” (p. 106). At several points, however, Steinberg offers fascinating discussions of the difficulties the Bolsheviks faced in their attempts to instill in Soviet citizens a sense of collective loyalty and collective responsibility. They found it difficult, in other words, to replace what they regarded as the narrow, self-centered individualism of bourgeois society with what Anatoly Lunacharsky described as a “broad-spirited individualism where ‘the personal I’ is at one with a broad and enduring ‘we’” (p. 41). Particularly illuminating here is Steinberg’s richly detailed account of Maxime Gorki’s initial ambivalence on this issue and Gorki’s ultimate promotion of Stalinist collectivism in terms that left no room for the freedom and the rights of the individual.

In recent years historians have approached the study of Russian utopias from a wide variety of perspectives. Leonid Heller and Michel Niqueux have taken a religious approach, arguing that the common denominator of many Russian utopias is their attempt to realize the Kingdom of God in this world. For Richard Stites, the collision of three native Russian utopian traditions—the socialist, the administrative, and the popular—gave the Russian Revolution “its main spiritual, mental, and expressive forms.”[2] Mark Steinberg does not present a formal argument or tell a single story so much as he provides glimpses into the richness and variety of the forms taken by the “utopian impulse” in Russia between roughly 1750 and 1950.

Unlike his predecessors, Steinberg’s presentation is episodic, and his touch is light. And this leaves ample room for fascinating insights and images and observations. The reader is both enlightened and entertained by Steinberg’s discussion of the links between utopia and dystopia, by his succinct unpacking of untranslatable Russian words and expressions, by his detailed account of the utopian elements in the elaborate costume balls staged by Nicholas II, and by his description of the “green city” proposal of Mikhail Barshch and Moisei Ginzburg, who envisioned Moscow transformed into a “grandiose park” with socialized cafeterias and schools, airy housing, and “plenty of sunlight” (p. 65). Finally, there are also brave and unconventional passages, such as the imagined utopian poems that Steinberg has himself created by stitching together lines and phrases from actual poems in an

attempt to capture the response of Russian workers to city life (pp. 59-61).

This book is what it sets out to be: a rewarding and wonderfully readable guide to the varieties of Russian utopian thinking. More than that, it is a genuinely original work that will give food for thought to readers at all levels of familiarity with Russian history.

Notes

[1]. Leonid Heller and Michel Niqueux, *Histoire de l'utopie en Russie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995).

[2]. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Revolutionary Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3.

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