Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside, and: Entsiklopediia banal´nostei: Sovetskaia povsednevnost´. Kontury, simvoly, znaki (review)

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Nataliia Lebina, *Entsiklopediia banal'nostei: Sovetskaia povsednevnost'. Kontury, simvoly, znaki* [Encyclopedia of Banalities. Soviet Everyday Life. Shapes, Symbols, Signs]. 444 pp., illus. St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2006. ISBN 5860074700.

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Readers of the historical magazine *Rodina* will surely recall Nataliia Lebina's series of essays "A Glossary of Everyday Life." Such readers will already be acquainted with the genre (and, at least partly, with the content) of those brief essays about realities of Soviet life and culture: they are informative, witty, and vividly written. Lebina is a well-known historian who published several successful works on topics related to Soviet urban life, especially in the early decades of Soviet power. Her pioneering work is based on a variety of sources and is the result of both extensive work in archives and careful reading of memoirs, the press and periodicals, and other printed sources. The material that now appears as a book is rich and interesting.

In her *Encyclopedia*, Lebina offers readers a sort of a guide to the *byt* of the Soviet age, a true glossary of everyday life. She assigns herself a more ambitious task, however: "to provide a description of verbal symbols and signs" (9) of that time. Rather than engage in a purely philological study of "Sovietisms," Lebina seeks in her work both to establish the moment when a particular word appeared and to depict the "historic-anthropological and social" meaning of the phenomenon denoted by the word. This should contribute, among other things, to an explanation of the mysterious Soviet mentality.

The author regards Soviet everyday life as "a set of things, concepts, signs, and symbols that build up a whole system with its own internal logic," as we can read in the editorial annotation. Happily, deliberations about "the semantic–semiotic system," with reference to the names of Viacheslav V. Ivanov, Vladimir Toporov, Boris Uspenskii, Iurii Lotman, and Dmitrii Likhachev, and the combinations of two difficult words such as "the sign-symbolic connotation" (*znakovo-simvolicheskii ottenok*) are limited to the

introductory chapter. Happily, I say, because at the beginning of the book the author misleads us about the nature of her own work, stating: "the structures of *urban* everyday life are reconstructed [in the book] by means of analysis and synthesis of signs and symbols" (16). What she actually does is something different.

A systematic semiotic study of Soviet everyday culture would be, probably, an interesting though somewhat Glassperlenspiel-like enterprise. Those who still experience enthusiasm at employing the conceptual toolkit of semiotics—and, more important, those who are able to achieve any significant result with these tools—constitute a rather small group within today's academic community. Curiously, only today, when semiotics already seems to be part of the history of ideas more than part of an actual scholar's arsenal, has it been introduced as a mandatory part of master's level philology curricula in Russia.

In spite of this pronouncement, the book does not offer us any sort of properly semiotic study: all "semiotic" terminology in it, including synthesis and analysis of signs and symbols, is purely decorative and applied in a surprisingly superficial, not to say naive, manner. Even though the author places such decorations here and there, they could be safely removed. It would only improve the text—perhaps at the cost of robbing it of its "scholarly" appearance. This façade can deceive only the uninitiated, as it is created by means of pseudo-semiotic wording that brings to mind colloquial expressions from contemporary Russian language such as *znakovaia figura* (or *kul'tovyi fil'm*)—see, for instance, the passage about short sofas that became signs of the age of Khrushchev's reforms (*korotkie divany s vydvizhnymi iaschikami: oni stali znakami epokhi khrushchevskikh reform*, 126), or the lines about men's shoes with pointed toes (*ostronosye muzhskie tufli—znakovyi priznak povsednevnosti 60-kh*, 272), or even about the tape recorder that is *a thing and a sign that characterizes everyday life in the 1960s and early 1970s* (222). Such usage is the only allusion to semiotics in Lebina's treatment of such facts.

Let us look at the materials. The choice of items for the essays eventually covers the whole field of Soviet everyday life. The idea that this field can be embraced, or at least its lexicon delimited, is promising and potentially fruitful. Although early in the book the author warns the readers that it is in bad taste to criticize a work because something is lacking in it (9), the choice of topics for the dictionary tells us what the author considers banal and what she does not. Thus, Lebina announces that several essays in her *Encyclopedia of Banalities* "dwell upon the problem of death, a stable norm of everyday life (the crematorium, suicide, death, and so on)" (15). With no reference to Lebina's earlier conceptual tools, we can, of course, speak about the norms that Soviet—or any other—society established to give shape to its members'

deaths and related social events.[1] The concept of the "norm of everyday life" expressed in the formula quoted above, however, seems to be rather specific and reveals that the author's eye is focused on large-scale constructions and does not in fact adopt an ordinary person's perspective. Even though people die every day and this is, in a sense, quite "normal"—or, to put it better, a cultural universal deriving from biological constraints on culture—it would be quite wrong to think that in the everyday life of an ordinary Soviet citizen during peaceful periods of Soviet history death was an everyday event. Although the story about the organization of a crematorium in the early 1920s is curious, it has nothing to do with the everyday routines of the urban population and, anyway, it is far from a "banality." This book explicitly states that it excludes those whose everyday life was far from banal (e.g., prisoners of the GULAG) (16).

But then the author does not follow this principle strictly. For instance, Lebina explicitly lists the word *zhidovoz* (149) among examples of *the words coined* [by whom?—I.U.] … *in order to denote the realities of everyday life in Soviet society* (16). I have never heard of this word. More important, I cannot imagine anyone in Soviet society for whom the weekly flights to Vienna that ultimately brought Jewish émigrés from the USSR to Israel could be so ordinary as to become a day-to-day banality of life. Even with a dose of sad irony, those Jews waiting for years in *otkaz* for permission to depart could hardly think of that aircraft in these terms. So, the presence of *zhidovoz* as a separate dictionary item, in the absence of the quite banal *zhid* (not to mention *otkaz*), seems to be a rather arbitrary decision. But let us leave the Jews in peace, because ordinary Soviet people, those who were not Jewish themselves, at least met the *zhid* and had an attitude toward him. Far less banal and, respectively, even less common to Soviet everyday experience are the things having to do with the survival strategies of dissidents (see *khlamofond*, 368).

All these become partly understandable if we recall that Lebina is enthusiastically promoting the idea of a dictionary related to her own experience and research interests. She mentions this idea (16) with reference to the philosopher Vadim Rudnev who, prior to Nataliia Lebina, published a dictionary reflecting his personal understanding of intellectual and cultural developments of the past century.[2]

[1] In her famous book on urban everyday life, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' sovetskogo goroda: Normy i anomalii, 1920–1930-e gody* (St. Petersburg: Neva, 1999), Lebina looked at her material through the lens of "norm vs. deviation," a lens that turned out to be a deplorably poor instrument to deal with such excellent material.

[2] Vadim Rudnev, *Entsikopedicheskii slovar' kul'tury XX veka: Kliuchevye poniatiia i teksty*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Agraf, 2001 [1st ed. 1997]).

An important question for such an encyclopedic dictionary is how the words correspond to phenomena. In Lebina's *Encyclopedia* we sometimes find ourselves suspended between the author's focus on the word and her description of the phenomenon. The usual pattern is this: philologists such as Valerii Mokienko and Tat´iana Nikitina consider that this or that word (e.g., *nesun*) appeared in the Soviet period, but this is not quite correct, because the phenomenon (e.g., theft from one's workplace) was known before the Revolution, too (254).[3] The difference between the philologist's work and the historian's work is irrelevant for this rhetorical construction, which one meets repeatedly in Lebina's *Encyclopedia*.

The logic of Lebina's dictionary shows that a phenomenon is recognized to exist only if there is a word denoting it, and if the word belongs to ordinary speech or to the ideologically tinted clichés from propaganda discourse. There is solid ground beneath this approach, which is reasonable if we limit ourselves to the descriptive level. But the approach turns out to be inconsistent when we observe everyday life as researchers—not to say semioticians—operating with concepts not all of which are "experience-near," as the late Clifford Geertz termed them. For example, Soviet people did not use a word like "privacy." Should you try to translate it into the ordinary Russian language of the Soviet period, you will, of course, find some highly context-dependent equivalents such as (and this is my favorite example) *bytovoe samoograzhdenie*—but there was no general term for this concept in Russian.[4] Nevertheless, this was one of the most acute everyday concerns of Soviet life. However peculiar the patterns of privacy in the life of Soviet citizens may have been, the concept of privacy is relevant for understanding this culture, and to my knowledge we have no other concept taken from ordinary Russian language that would enable us to deal with those patterns. No theoretical reconstruction of everyday life in the USSR can disregard the problem of privacy, and we can see good examples of this in the second book under discussion here.

Culture is capable of self-reflection, and there are embedded in it categories that imply certain forms of reflection. Thus, in speaking of *byt*, we use a term that involves awareness of a certain understanding of the world where the sphere of ordinary everyday life is opposed to the sphere where a

[3] V. M. Mokienko and T. G. Nikitina, *Tolkovyi slovar´ iazyka Sovdepii* (St. Petersburg: Folio-Press, 1998).

[4] This is taken from a letter of complaint from a citizen who was trying to obtain permission to construct a plywood partition in order to separate his private space from that inhabited by his former wife after they had divorced but were still living in the same room in a communal apartment, with no hope of moving elsewhere (see details in I. Utekhin, "Proiski 'postoronnego' (iz materialov po zhilishchnomu voprosu)," in *Obraz vraga* (Moscow: OGI, 2005), 230–47.

person's true self-realization can be achieved. Such abstractions—even such experience-near ones as *byt*—are not, however, represented in Lebina's work. Instead, we find essays on much more specific concepts from official Soviet discourse impregnated with ideology, such as *veshchizm* and *Eseninshchina*.

Among a number of concise and convincingly written chapters about different sorts of *dom*—including *dom modelei, dom kolkhoznika*, but, strangely enough, no *dom kul'tury*—we find *dom byta*, one of the few chapters where the problem of *byt* is discussed (see also *meshchanstvo*). A hotel for the *nomenklatura* from early Soviet times, *dom sovetov,* is a topic that may interest almost any reader, but here again everyday life is not viewed from the perspective of an ordinary man, who had no access to such places.

It is impossible to check all the data in such a huge and encyclopedic work. In some cases, however, more attention should have been paid to the selection and evaluation of sources. Thus, a curious detail about the early, unofficial penetration of Western pop music into the USSR is that pirated sound recordings made on x-ray films ("jazz-on-the-bones") were one of the few media, along with shortwave radios, that allowed young people to keep up with the latest tendencies in popular music. In the corresponding chapter, Lebina obviously borrows information from someone's memories that, again, are far from ordinary: she writes about "young people who meet at someone's apartment to watch movies like *George from Dinky-Jazz* and *Sun Valley Serenade* on 16mm film" (123) Who are these people who had a 16mm projector at home and, more significantly, had access to such films in the late 1940s and early 1950s? Beautiful tales about Moscow's "golden youth" are clearly in need of a special comment on how widespread such practices were; otherwise, they are misleading. This misconception cannot, by the way, be verified from Lebina's personal experience. It becomes evident as she affirms, for instance, that Soviet young people of the late 1940s were mad about Glenn Miller, Ella Fitzgerald, and Willy Kannovera (sic!). This mysterious pop star Kannovera is, of course, the Voice of America Jazz Hour disc jockey Willis Conover, whose voice was actually known, even in the 1980s, to all jazz lovers in the USSR who happened to be owners of shortwave radios; as for Ella Fitzgerald, she became really popular in this country not earlier than the mid-1960s.

While some dates may be contestable, being a matter of memory or personal experience, others can be questioned and verified using available sources. Thus, although the essay about Fish Day (*rybnyi den'*, when in public dining-rooms and restaurants less meat or no meat at all was served) dates the introduction of this novelty to a directive from the Council of Ministers and CPSU Central Committee in October 1976, those who remember Fish Days from earlier dates can find out in other sources that the idea was originally introduced by Anastas Mikoian in another directive, issued by the People's Commissariat of Supplies (Narkomsnab) on 12 September 1932.

I do not want to create the wrong impression: there are not many mistakes in this book. Generally, the information—at least to the extent to which I can evaluate it—is accurate and reliable. What I miss here is a list of the numerous official documents mentioned in the text. Imagine a complete and annotated list of the party and governmental documents that directly concerned *byt*; this would be exciting reading and a useful source.

Lebina's passion for interesting stories and details from the past gives some of the opinions in her essays an openly evaluative character and subjective bias. Had it been a scholarly exercise, we could have asked about criteria for, say, "inedible cookies." But the absence of such criteria is hardly noticeable in this encyclopedia that can be read as a book, one essay after another, starting at any point. The reader is never bored and always wants to read more. For an encyclopedic dictionary this is a precious and seldom-encountered quality.

What is the target audience for this book? In Russia, it is a relatively broad section of the public: those who remember at least some of the bygone Soviet times with a tint of nostalgia, as well as the younger generation who never experienced any of the book's banalities but probably have an assignment for their college history class. All of them will enjoy the book greatly, will recommend it to their friends, and probably will buy one more copy as a present for a friend or relative, as they did earlier with Daniil Granin's catalogue of everyday things.[5] The book's shortcomings from an academic standpoint are simply the obverse of its strong points: ordinary readers are not much interested in pseudo-semiotic deliberations but instead appreciate style and carefully selected illustrations (a total of 113). For the international scholarly public, the same strong point works equally well, but what may unexpectedly turn out to be the most helpful feature is that Lebina relies heavily on the way in which everyday life was represented in Soviet mass culture, the cinema first and foremost. So along with a fascinating mosaic of the small things of Soviet life, we get a good directory of illustrative sources.

Lebina also organized the conference on everyday life in Soviet Russia held in 1994 in St. Petersburg that gave rise to the volume edited by Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman, which is dedicated to scholarly reflection on the internalization of new values by Soviet citizens in the early USSR. The conference and some later work by its participants were the departure points for *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia*—which has, compared to Lebina's encyclopedia, a different scope and involves a variety of approaches.

Within a few years after the Revolution, life changed significantly in terms of how much it was influenced by ideology. "Early Soviet Russia," in

[5] Daniil Granin, *Kerogaz i vse drugie: Leningradskii katalog* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2003).

the title of this book, refers to the period when, with all the changes that took place in official policies during this time, citizens internalized new values: words became tools for understanding reality. As we can conclude from the selection of topics in this book, the main theme that is specific to the realm of early Soviet everyday life is the absence of confidence—constant fear and vigilance shape specific regimes of privacy and even intimacy.

Sheila Fitzpatrick offers a story about contested identity or, more exactly, the practice of unmasking, or revealing the true face of a person, in Stalin's Russia. Anastasia Plotnikova, since 1935 the chairman of the Petrograd district soviet in Leningrad, faced accusations that she had concealed her true class identity. We can observe the work of identity production in a situation where the narrative produced by Plotnikova is challenged and defended, most probably as the result of a denunciation by some vigilant citizen.

Vigilance was supposed to be needed even in relations between spouses, as Soviet cinema audiences could feel upon watching a movie. The contribution by Liliya Kaganovsky contains an analysis of Ivan Pyr′ev's film *The Party Card* (1936) where the plot is organized around the party membership card that was stolen from the young faithful Communist Anna by her husband Pavel, whose true enemy identity was not detected by his wife before the film's final scenes. Kaganovsky shows the key role of sexualized terms that are used in the film—particularly, to represent Anna's dishonor at losing the card.

Following the theme of public involvement in private life—that is, surveillance that transcended privacy, family relations, and friendship—the chapter by Cynthia Hooper draws a picture of mass mobilization in surveillance activism during the Great Terror and provides illustrations of how attitudes toward unmasking traitors inside the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) shifted between 1937 and 1939 (data quoted in the chapter are taken from archival sources, mostly on Nizhnii Novgorod). The author provides a helpful discussion of the differences in vigilance policies between Nazi Germany of the 1930s and the USSR.

Boris Wolfson provides a subtle analysis of how Stalinist theater conveyed meanings. His case study is about the embodiment of *Fear*, the play by Aleksandr Afinogenov, in a model Soviet spectacle—in Leningrad (in the former Aleksandrinskii Theater) and in the Moscow Art Theater. Fear is the main motive driving the Soviet population, according to a theory proposed by *Fear* protagonist Professor Borodin, who later undergoes conversion into a faithful Soviet *intelligent*, not without some help from the United State Political Directorate (OGPU).

Less successful was the story of another play that is discussed in the book, because its message was much more ambiguous and intriguing. Sergei

Tret´iakov's play *I Want a Child!* (1926), which did not appear in print in its entirety before 1988, raised questions of reproduction, eugenics, and sex in the future socialist society. This play (and the movie script based on it) contains a radical *Lef* version of *novyi byt* with rational industrial production under scientific control as a model for reproduction. Christina Kiaer, in her contribution, disentangles the controversies of Tret´iakov's "placing love on the operating table" in this censored "discussion piece."

Sexuality and the private sphere are among the objects of reflection in Walter Benjamin's writings related to his experience in Moscow. Evgenii Bershtein casts light on the personal circumstances that influenced Benjamin's understanding of the transformation of everyday life taking place in the USSR, particularly the idea that "Bolshevism has abolished private life" which, as Bershtein remarks, meant that Soviet citizens, in Benjamin's eyes, "were being liberated from sexuality" (226).

In another chapter that deals with the sphere of sex in early Soviet Russia, Frances Bernstein investigates the epidemic of male sexual dysfunction revealed in the mid-1920s in Soviet Russia by psychiatrists and neurologists who were engaged in the treatment of sexual disorders. She traces the link between "nervousness" and sexual (im)potency that was considered a key explanation by writers of sexuality of that time, and analyzes the experience of the Counseling Center for Sexual Hygiene opened in Moscow in 1925, as well as numerous publications on sexual hygiene, particularly those published in the special sexual enlightenment periodical *Toward a Healthy Lifestyle*. Bernstein's chapter also covers Soviet nervousness as a cultural construction and the disregard for the problems of female sexuality in debates on sexuality in the second half of the 1920s.

Consumption and the meanings of consumption as they were expressed in and shaped by Soviet advertising during the New Economic Policy (NEP) period are the subject of Randi Cox's chapter, titled " 'NEP without Nepmen!' Soviet Advertising and the Transition to Socialism." She shows how motifs from political propaganda—both textual and visual—were used in advertisements, and what values were appealed to, in a situation of ambiguity between "consumption for survival" and "consumption as decadence."

A similar tension is present between the ideology of *novyi byt* and the persistence of such "ideologically anachronistic" phenomena as domestic service in postrevolutionary urban Russia. Rebecca Spagnolo's chapter about domestic servants' experience in the 1920s dwells on the efforts to regulate this sphere, which employed hundreds of thousands of women, mostly those who had recently arrived from the countryside. Quite convincing is the idea that these efforts were "undermined by the conflation of workplace and home" (245).

Catriona Kelly's contribution, "Regulating the Daily Life of Children in Early Soviet Russia," also has to do with ideologically driven regulation.

It is a part of her large-scale project on the cultural history of childhood in Russia from 1880 to 1991. Here we become acquainted with the Soviet version of the orientation toward a rational upbringing with rigorous regimentation that became dominant after the early 1920s as a part of the fight for *novyi byt*. The author discusses some aspects of children's "time literacy," as well as competing attitudes toward fairy tales and toys. Kelly draws on a variety of sources to give us impressive details of how children were indoctrinated through the discipline imposed on everyday life—and of how children themselves were used as a means of indoctrination. Interestingly, data from recent oral history interviews are used to present a more multifaceted vision of Soviet childhood than can be deduced from other, mostly prescriptive, sources.

The concluding chapter in the volume is written by Natalia Kozlova and contains a rather empathetic treatment of documents from the famous collection of Tsentr dokumentatsii 'Narodnyi arkhiv' (the People's Archive Documentation Center) which today, unfortunately, is no longer available to researchers.[6] Kozlova was a pioneer in publishing and studying materials that can be classified as "naive literature."[7] The main theme in this essay is how ideological clichés and categories became tools for the Soviet person to understand the world. Kozlova says about one of her heroes that "the linguistic mask seems to have grown onto the face, and there is nothing behind the face" (285). To describe the personal transformation from peasant to cultured Soviet person, Kozlova draws on the diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, which is also known from Jochen Hellbeck's studies and is treated by Kozlova in a more detailed way, along with many other documents, in her last book, which appeared three years after her death.[8]

The case of Podlubnyi is an exemplary illustration of the metaphor of internalization that the editors employ in the subtitle of the book, "Taking the Revolution Inside." This is, actually, the unifying idea of all the contributions to this volume—except, probably, the Benjamin story and the analysis of *Fear* on stage. The former depicts the sources of illusions that the philosopher had about life in Soviet Russia, whereas the latter discusses the means used for representations on stage of the hero's "rebirth." Both of them, however, contribute to the complicated picture of communist ideology as it influenced the everyday life of citizens and shaped their words and deeds.

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[6] The archive, which existed as an independent organization for almost 20 years, is now closed for lack of funds, and the collection is being transferred to the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, according to information from the archive's founder, Boris Ilizarov.

[7] See, particularly, N. Kozlova and I. Sandomirskaia, *Ia tak khochu nazvat´ kino: Naivnoe pis'mo. Opyt lingvo-sotsiologicheskogo chteniia* (Moscow: Gnosis-Russkoe fenomenologicheskoe obshchestvo, 1996).

[8] Natal´ia Kozlova, *Sovetskie liudi: Stseny iz istorii* (Moscow: Evropa, 2005).

It is not easy to study everyday life—whether through historical, sociological, or anthropological approaches or as part of cultural studies. The topic is so special that disciplinary borders become blurred. The materials representing the details of everyday life are difficult to interpret, but sometimes they are so tasty and colorful that simply presenting them is enough to impress readers and spectators. Conceptualist artists have tried to do just that with the Soviet legacy in some of their post-socialist works: most notably, Il′ia Kabakov. Obviously, Kabakov's inventive and well-thought-out installations conveyed both aesthetic and philosophical messages with a meaning broader than specific statements about Soviet man and his world. Deciphering this world is an important and challenging task in itself. Kiaer and Naiman's volume contributes to this scholarly endeavor, approaching early Soviet everyday culture from different angles, using a variety of sources and methodologies. Lebina's book belongs to another type of publication, although it, too, is dedicated to the everyday dimension of the Soviet past. Collecting (or simply recollecting) the facts and details of Soviet life, if done systematically and reported in an entertaining way, usually produces a good book. Mystifying readers about one's methods and scientific approach, however, does not automatically make a book a significant scholarly achievement. This means that these two volumes will not often meet each other on the same shelf.

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