Marketing Russian History

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A specter is haunting Russian studies: the specter of money. Big money, serious money—sums on the order of $500,000. This is what a handful of Russianists collect as advance payments for book contracts with commercial publishers, contracts that the world's most prominent literary agencies broker for them. More money follows in the form of royalties if the book sells well, yet more if the book is translated, and even more if it is turned into a movie.

Is there anything wrong with that? Not necessarily. There is nothing inherently wrong with a book that sells; indeed, there is a crying need for the kind of good popularization and inspired synthesis exemplified, for example, by James Billington's *The Icon and the Axe* or the works of W. Bruce Lincoln.[1] The productive synergy that is possible between popular culture and scholarship accessible to lay readers was recently on display when the success of Tom Stoppard's theatrical trilogy *The Coast of Utopia* led to renewed public interest in Isaiah Berlin's classic *Russian Thinkers*.[2] There are, however, at least two major reasons to be concerned about recent developments when it comes to the writing of blockbuster works in the Russian and Soviet field. First, evidence is mounting that some of these recent works can be rife with dubious academic practices. It is not surprising that popular history should have broad appeal and address issues and concerns potentially quite different from academic monographs, but to be good, it must also pass scholarly muster. What is especially noteworthy about many recent mass-marketed works is that they are intended as cross-over studies, claiming to make major scholarly discoveries even as they appeal to a mass market. Second, in keeping with this attempt to have one's cake and eat it, too, the last decade or so has witnessed a quiet transvaluation of values in which many university departments and administrators have started to prize mass-marketed trade publishing above traditional works of scholarship.

[1] James Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1966); W. Bruce Lincoln, *The Romanovs: Autocrats of All the Russias* (New York: Dial Press, 1981); and Lincoln, *Sunlight at Midnight: St. Petersburg and the Rise of Modern Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), among other works.

[2] Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (New York: Viking, 1978). Penguin issued a second edition in 2008 in response to the demand.

One practice that may have troubling consequences involves the outsourcing of research by hiring teams of native scholars who scour the archives for finds, turning research into the extraction of "natural resources" that are refined (that is, interpreted) by the Western authors. Again, there is nothing wrong with a research team in and of itself; it is common in the social sciences. For example, Orlando Figes's *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* incorporated the work of three teams of researchers employed to seek out family archives and conduct interviews with surviving family members. Figes has written separately about this research effort, albeit without addressing any of its potential pitfalls. He has won praise from scholars for the research, although others have criticized how the evidence was interpreted and the originality of the analysis.[3] Problems of a different order, however, arise when the author does not know Russian or other relevant languages well enough to conduct research independently. Antony Beevor performed an important service when, with the translation help of Luba Vinogradova, he commented on and made available in English Vasilii Grossman's war diaries (*zapisnye knizhki*). John Garrard, however, has recently written about "the two weaknesses of *A Writer at War:* Beevor does not know the Russian language and must rely heavily on his translator, Luba Vinogradova; secondly, he uses (and often confuses) secondary material without attribution. The general reader will be unaware of both pitfalls."[4] Indeed, problems with source attribution are endemic in many widely distributed works of popular

[3] Lynne Viola gave the work high praise in her review of Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Press, 2007), *Slavic Review* 67, 2 (2008): 440–43; far more critical assessments of Figes's use of sources and interpretations can be found in the reviews by Jochen Hellbeck, "The Ice Forge," *The Nation*, 13 February 2008; and Kate Brown, *Times Literary Supplement,* 8 February 2008. Both the pitfalls of farming out oral history and Figes's "new standard of authorial self-promotion" are discussed by Lewis Siegelbaum in "Witness Protection," *London Review of Books*, 10 April 2008. For the author's own description of the research effort, see Orlando Figes, "Private Life in Stalin's Russia: Family Narratives, Memory, and Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 65 (Spring 2008): 117–35. These debates are not exactly new. Following a blistering critique of "cavalier use of sources" in Rachel Polonsky's review of Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), *Times Literary Supplement,* 27 September 2002, Figes made the following remarks: "Anyone who writes for a general audience is bound to be in debt to academic scholars who have studied their own subject in far greater detail than can be communicated to non-specialists. Perhaps they are suspicious of a scholar like myself who tries to tackle big ideas; perhaps they would not try to make the sort of connections that I make between different subject areas.… Any scholar who writes for a wider audience … who breaks new ground and crosses academic boundaries, must expect some criticism, perhaps some envy too." See Jason Cowley, "Article History," *The Guardian*, 3 October 2002 (www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/oct/03/russia.books, last accessed 18 June 2008).

[4] John Garrard, review of Vasily S. Grossman, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941–1945*, trans. and ed. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), *Slavic and East European Journal* 51, 1 (2007): 167–78.

history. Beevor, for instance, has no numbered notes at all, only commentary on sources in the back that is organized with reference to the book's page numbers. Thus, says Garrard, "the reader cannot tell when Beevor's use of a source begins and where it ends. The general public may not care; those whose own work is being paraphrased without attribution may take exception to this procedure."[5]

All three issues—employment of native researchers, an apparent inability to speak or conduct high-level research with original documents in the relevant foreign languages, and a confusing if not untraceable system for citing sources—seem to come together in Simon Sebag Montefiore's recent blockbuster *Young Stalin*. One reviewer has referred to Montefiore's "legions of helpers" who unearthed new material on the young Stalin.[6] But who were these legions, and precisely what role did they play in the research and the translation of sources? How did the reviewer know about them? The book's statements on sources and research aid are difficult to decipher on this point. For example, the acknowledgments in *Young Stalin,* positioned at the end of the book, credit, among others, two Georgian historians, Nestan Charkviani and Nino Keresilidze, the first for enormous help in the archives and the second as an "impressive translator from Georgian"; the introduction merely states: "This book is the result of almost ten years of research on Stalin … mainly in the newly opened archives of Moscow, Tbilisi, and Batumi." The "Note on Sources" exclusively uses the first person in boasting about the discovery of new archival sources and conducting interviews.[7] According to the reviewer Kevin McDermott, "all too often" memoir and other sources are "taken at face value" and cited in a confusing way. "Rather than adopt a conventional framework, the author tends to elide several direct quotations, usually across one or more paragraphs, into one long footnote listing multiple references. This means that the reader is rarely absolutely sure which source refers to which quotation."[8]

More devastating still is the evaluation by Alfred J. Rieber, who finds Montefiore "not much interested in Stalin's politics or his ideas" but more in the "salacious details of Stalin's sex life." Rieber also has trouble with the notes:

[5] Ibid., 168. The same reliance on Vinogradova and the same citation method were present in Beevor's two previous works dealing with Soviet history: *Stalingrad* (New York: Viking, 1998); and *The Fall of Berlin, 1945* (New York: Viking, 2002). For strikingly similar criticisms of an author's lack of linguistic training, uncritical use of sources, and "vague or inaccurate references," see Istvan Deak, review of Dan Kurzman, *A Special Mission: Hitler's Secret Plot to Seize the Vatican and Kidnap Pope Pius XII* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), *The New York Review of Books*, 12 June 2008.

[6] Kevin McDermott, review of Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin* (New York: Knopf, 2007), in *History* 93, issue 310 (April 2008): 301.

[7] Montefiore, *Young Stalin*, xxii, 380, 385–87.

[8] McDermott, review of Montefiore, 301.

> In a short chapter called, typically, "Boss of the Black City" he portrays Stalin as running protection rackets and kidnappings. The problem with evaluating the evidence is that the author offers three footnotes; the second lists thirty-one different sources, some archival, some secondary. There are many smoking guns in this account; the question is who is holding them. There is no question that Sebag Montefiore has control over his sources; the details give an overwhelming impression of verisimilitude. But all too often the dubious becomes possible, the possible probable, and the probable certain within the space of a single episode.

When it comes to Stalin and the Revolution, Montefiore follows, according to Rieber, "standard interpretations and provides no surprises. For the reader who enjoys a highly spiced biography with an emphasis on Stalin as gangster and lecher, this is the book. Readers seeking more serious fare will want to look elsewhere." In a practice common in the world of commercial book and movie advertising (an appropriate analogy, since the author's website tells us that Miramax and some other studios are working on a film version of the book) but not yet fully accepted in academia, this passage is rendered on www.simonsebagmontefiore.com in the following fashion, employing quotation marks: " 'For the reader who enjoys a highly spiced biography this is the book'—Alfred Rieber, *Times Literary Supplement*."[9]

At issue are not merely the decisions of an individual author but the conventions and constraints of big publishing. Since trade publishing has become prestigious within academia and some of the profession's most talented practitioners are therefore choosing to devote more and more of their time and talents to it, it is imperative carefully to weigh these contraints. At all stages in the making of a book, from research to writing to circulation, the author's literary agent exerts a major influence. This impact begins with finding an agent, which invariably involves compromises, such as tailoring one's research interests to the perceived needs of an agency: topics that attract the attention of commercial publishers or, increasingly, the trade lines of the best-endowed university presses (Yale, Oxford, Harvard, and Princeton).[10] The topics a Russian historian in search of a mass audience can write about

[9] Alfred J. Rieber, review of Montefiore, *Young Stalin*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 August 2007; www.simonsebagmontefiore.com/youngstalin_acclaim.aspx, last accessed 13 June 2008.

[10] For an interesting article about Princeton University Press editor Brigitta van Rheinberg suggesting the line between "general trade" and "academic trade" publishing may be blurring at the best-endowed university presses, see "Murder at Princeton University Press," 28 January 2007 (georgetownbooks.blogspot.com:80/2007/01/squib-in-publishers-weekly-about.html, last accessed 20 June 2008). Here also see "The 'Impact Academic Book,'" 30 March 2008 (georgetownbooks.blogspot.com/2008/03/impact-academic-book.html, last accessed 20 June 2008).

are circumscribed: Ivan the Terrible; Peter the Great; Catherine's lovers; 1812; Rasputin; the Russian Revolution; the biographies of Lenin, Trotskii, Stalin, and Beriia; the Great Terror; World War II; the Cuban Missile Crisis; and a few more.

Different agencies have varying degrees of clout. The New York– and London-based literary agency of Andrew Wylie, known as "The Jackal" in the publishing world, is at the very top.[11] Its only Russian historian is Stephen Kotkin; its (South) East Europeanists are Jan Gross and Mark Mazower.[12] These are indubitably some of the top practitioners in the field; when they produce works at once scholarly and marketable, we are the first to applaud. For the system does impose constraints. Once an agent has signed with an author, the agent reads and comments on the text as it is being written, though there are different degrees of involvement and many agents advertise themselves as being more hands-on than others, arguing that they do the kind of work on a text that editors no longer do because of downsizing. The more powerful an agency, the more seriously publishing houses take the manuscripts it proposes, the greater the effort the publisher invests in marketing the book, the greater the sales, and so on. It is a powerful business concept, executed by a well-oiled machine.

What follows is an impressive excercise in marketing. A website with the author's first and last name ending in .com (e.g., www.orlandofiges.com, www.antonybeevor.com, or www.simonsebagmontefiore.com) lists upcoming readings and public speeches; offers downloadable radio and television interviews; features an exclusive blog in which the author may venture opinions not just on Russian history but also on El Niño, the Teletubbies, and Iraq; and has a canonical author's photograph for download. This kind of marketing builds up the author as a brand product, while the book's advertising, distribution, translation into foreign languages, and eventual release

[11] For an interview with Andrew Wylie conducted by Lloyd Grove, which notes that Wylie actively recruits historians as clients, see www.portfolio.com/views/columns/the-world-according-to/2007/12/14/An-Interview-With-Andrew-Wylie, last accessed 25 June 2008.

[12] See www.wylieagency.com/CLIENT%20LIST.htm, last accessed 30 May 2008. Antony Beevor is represented by Andrew Nurnberg Associates (London) (www.antonybeevor.com/Biography/biography.htm, last accessed 19 June 2008); Orlando Figes, like his mother, the fiction writer Eva Figes, by Rogers, Coleridge, and White (London) (www.orlandofiges.com/orlando.php, last accessed 19 June 2008). Other scholars represented by literary agents in the field that have come to our attention are David Engerman and Constantine Pleshakov, by the Susan Rabiner Literary Agency (New York) (www.rabiner.net/authors.html, last accessed 19 June 2008); Geoffrey Hosking, by David Higham Associates (London) (www.davidhigham.co.uk/html/Authors/NonFiction, last accessed 19 June 2008); Catherine Merridale, by Robinson Literary Agency (London) (see her *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945* [New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006], 443); and Robert Service, by David Godwin Associates (London) (see his *Comrades! A History of World Communism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007], x).

in paperback are governed by the same business dictates as any other profit-driven commercial publishing venture. Meanwhile, scholars in the field have faced the so-called crisis of academic publishing for many years now: works and notes have become shorter and stay in print for fewer years, while academic topics and approaches that sell fewer copies are difficult to publish.[13]

Commercial books do not have a long shelf life, and the value of the author-as-brand starts to fall if the author does not throw a book on the market every few years. If the traditional divide between commercial and academic publishing is erased, and academic departments continue to view this kind of commercial publishing as a prestigious alternative to less widely distributed scholarship, fewer of history's leading practitioners may write their *magnum opus*—the kind of study that requires long-term research driven by topic, not by audience. No *Scenarios of Power* or *Destruction of the European Jews* would ever have seen the light of day under today's ruthless pressure to churn out new publications.[14]

The effects of breaking down the barriers between academic and commercial publishing have proceeded further in other fields. If you talk to specialists on the Third Reich, some of them long for a pre-Goldhagen age when commercial success—the "dollar signs blinking in the eyes" (Michael Wildt)—was not as much on scholars' minds and debates were more insulated from the public.[15] In the case of German history, there are already cases of scholar-popularizers who have left the field and now live entirely off their book sales—for example, Michael Burleigh and Daniel Goldhagen (who now has his own website at which talks can be booked, www.goldhagen.com).

[13] A recent Andrew Mellon Foundation joint grant to the University of Wisconsin Press, Northwestern University Press, and the University of Pittsburgh Press attempts to address the problem by using "Mellon funds to support the publication and promotion of first monographs in Russian, East European, and Central Asian studies. Although all three presses have strong publication lists in this field, this initiative will enable them to accept more first books by junior scholars, to work closely with those scholars to develop their authorial skills, and in some cases to underwrite the publication of works in paperback or the incorporation of expensive elements (such as color images). The grant will also allow the publishers to promote the books more widely in the U.S. and abroad, to help launch the careers of these junior scholars by organizing lecture tours to other universities, and to offer publishing panels at Slavic Studies meetings." See the 18 January 2008 Association of American University Presses press release at www.mellonslavicstudies.org/pressrelease.htm, last accessed 16 June 2008.

[14] Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995–2000); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961). One might argue that universities produce similar pressures: witness in the United States the first book requirement for tenure, the second book for promotion to full professor; in Great Britain the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE); in Russia the *kandidatskaia* and *doktorskaia* thesis requirements; and in Germany the doctoral and *Habilitation* thesis requirements.

[15] Interview with Michael Wildt, 27 June 2008.

Such a drastic step often comes after years of having the best of both worlds. University administrators today tend uncritically to welcome celebrity faculty, since popularizing promises to give a competitive edge in the battle for attention, not least from potential "clients"—students and their parents—and from the public at large. But blurring the line between academic and commercial holds its own dangers for university departments. Popularizers bank on their academic reputation to succeed in the world of commercial publishing but may—to be sure, not always and not all—become a liability for departments, students, and the profession as a whole. For example, they may shirk department responsibilities, become unavailable to their students, or no longer have the time to perform the menial but important tasks of the profession, such as reviewing their colleagues' work in academic journals.

It is certainly both possible and important to write well for general and scholarly audiences at the same time, as we know from the wildly popular *The Return of Martin Guerre* or *The Cheese and the Worms*, by Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginzburg, respectively—microhistories written by the very best academic practitioners that make for engrossing narratives but are also methodologically cutting-edge.[16] At the same time, non-academics have helped fix major historical issues in the wider public consciousness: for example, many readers first discovered 20th-century Europe through *The Guns of August* and *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by the journalists Barbara Tuchman and William Shirer; and the Russian field is similarly indebted to writers like the journalists Robert Massie and Harrison Salisbury or the *littérateur* Henri Troyat, not to mention Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*.[17]

In reflecting on popular history today, we should differentiate among justly respected academic scholars with a record of archival research in the primary languages, such as Figes; conscientious and well-qualified non-academics in the tradition of William Shirer; and the worrisome trend toward overt commercialization associated with people like Montefiore, "the English banking scion with a playboy reputation who gave up finance for war reporting," whose U.K. *Young Stalin* book launching took place at a Bond Street jewelry store with guests ranging from Kate Middleton, Prince William's girlfriend, to David Cameron, the leader of the Tories.[18] Likewise

[16] Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

[17] Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960); Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1974–75).

[18] Vicki Ward, "History in the Making," *Vanity Fair* (22 January 2008, at www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/01/montefiore200801, last accessed on 30 May 2008). Figes's

in need of critical evaluation is the relatively new phenomenon of leading academics who turn away from traditional scholarship to lucrative popularization, who remain in the world of academia but begin to lead a life apart from the profession. Natalie Zemon Davis, after all, never left the field after *Martin Guerre*. Leading historians today face an increasingly stark choice between the demands of scholarship and the pursuit of wealth and fame.

If the lively debates among the editors provoked by the writing of this column are any indication, readers may have strong opinions and comments as well. Please join the debate at e-*Kritika* (web.mac.com/kritika/iWeb/ekritika/Home.htm) by sending your own thoughts, either by clicking the link on the page or sending an e-mail directly to *ekritika@mac.com*.

published Cambridge University dissertation was the widely lauded *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution, 1917–1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).