Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin , and: *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (review)

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Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin.* 448 pp. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. ISBN-13 978-0674032316. $19.95.

Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams*. 304 pp. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009. ISBN-13 978-0801448393, $55.00 (cloth); 978-0801475900, $22.95 (paper).

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Jochen Hellbeck's *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* and Irina Paperno's *Stories of the Soviet Experience* lay to rest two closely related commonplaces about the historiography of the Stalin era in Russia (some of the first blows, at least for readers in the West, having been dealt by the translated anthology of Stalin-era diaries, *Intimacy and Terror*).[1] The first is that the Stalinist regime—whose own rhetorical campaigns so aggressively dominated contemporary media, public space, and archives—ensured that very few documents of private life were preserved for subsequent generations. The second is that there were few such documents to begin with, because the invasive and repressive manner in which the regime thrust itself on its citizenry meant that personal thoughts and experiences were discussed only in the most private realms and not, as a rule, committed to paper—which, like the rubles Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi hides in the ventilation flue of his bathroom in Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, had an uncanny way of ending up as hard currency in the hands of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD).

As both these studies amply demonstrate, the Stalin era in fact witnessed something of a boom in diary writing in spite of the state's insistence on collective, public life and party ideology—and even, in some ways, because of it. Both Hellbeck and Paperno survey of a range of diaries (and, in some cases, autobiographical memoirs) in an effort to identify recurring patterns in them:

[1] Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, eds., *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, trans. Carol A. Flath (New York: The New Press, 1995). See also Malte Griesse, "Soviet Subjectivities: Discourse, Self-Criticism, Imposture," *Kritika* 9, 3 (2008): 609–24.

of self-identity and development; of self-defined relation to the Party, state, or workplace; and patterns across diaries and memoirs of reaction to cardinal events such as the purges of the late 1930s or World War II. Hellbeck covers a somewhat wider range of materials than does Paperno, examining the diaries of well-known writers such as Dmitrii Furmanov, Iurii Olesha, and Aleksandr Afinogenov as well as those kept by members of the former intelligentsia, who resisted and then struggled to adapt to the new order, and, most symptomatic of all, those of several *vydvizhentsy*, men who ascended from obscure provincial or rural origins to acquire an education (typically technological) and some sort of public role (e.g., as brigade leader at work, as agitator, etc.).

Hellbeck's primary interest lies in using the diaries to probe the nature of Stalin-era subjectivity. He warns against the facile application of a "public–private binary" to these records of personal experience because it assumes that Soviet citizens strove "like liberal subjects" (86) for individual autonomy, whereas most of them, he suggests, were committed Marxists who actively participated in the initiatives of the state. This suspension of Western prejudice is certainly necessary to a scholarly consideration of the material, but in some ways it intensifies rather than allays concerns about how we, at our historical and geographical remove, understand the diaries. One such concern is hermeneutic and applies to the reader: how can we tell what the diarist's ultimate intentions and self-understanding were? It might be reasonable to assume that, if a diarist like Nina Lugovskaia, one of Hellbeck's examples, states that she keeps her diary to expose the "lies" of communist propaganda (60), then she is telling the truth, because it is improbable that any one would fictionalize such a posture. But what of the many *vydvizhentsy* who in their notebooks express nothing but enthusiasm for the Soviet remaking of their world? In the absence of other evidence, are we safe in assuming they are sincere? Or is it also possible, as other forms of evidence from the Stalinist era might suggest, that some of these Soviet subjects were in fact clever collaborationists who for reasons of fear or ambition carried their simulated loyalty as far as their diaries—perhaps keeping the diaries for the very purpose of simulating loyalty—while in fact, in their innermost selves, believing none of it? Hellbeck dismisses the maintenance of a calculated pose for years on end as unlikely (355), but should we so readily dismiss such a possibility? A related issue is moral and epistemological and has to do with the diarist's capacity for self-knowledge. If in these Stalin-era diaries we really do encounter forms of selfhood that sincerely strive for something other than liberal autonomy, what are we to make of this, especially if we detect subtle fissures—of naïveté, of doubt about the self's relation to the Stalinist project? A different but related

issue is how hard it is when one reads Hellbeck's descriptions of the diaries to avoid a sense of pity for their authors. This is an unscholarly response, to be sure. It is tainted with the condescension of historical hindsight and needs to be suspended for the sake of analysis. Yet when one reads these diarists' strenuous efforts to break old habits and beliefs, to condemn their own past, to subject themselves to demanding regimes of self-transformation, to force themselves to reconceive the world in terms we now know to be severely flawed, it is hard not to feel at least some measure of grief over how misguided so much of the effort was.

It is in the nature of diaries and autobiographical writing from distant cultures (and the Stalin era is now distant from us in a variety of ways) that these kinds of questions cannot be answered with any certitude. Fortunately, in the main part of his study, Hellbeck shifts these issues to the background to concentrate on an analysis of the remarkably consistent pattern according to which so many of the diaries were written. For the diaries he examines do not set as their task the simple recording of private emotional life, social encounters, or the progress of a career; they do not even seek to chronicle major events in the life of the nation as experienced by one of its citizens. Rather, the Stalin-era diary was understood by nearly all those who wrote one as the site on which to work on the private self—assiduously, daily—to perfect it so that it could be more successfully uplifted into the realm where history, guided by the Party, was taking place.

This pattern is most evident in the diaries of the *vydvizhentsy*, who, as Hellbeck points out, often regarded themselves as having to create a (Soviet) self where none had existed before and who, in a sense, come closest to exemplifying the pure Soviet subjectivity about which Hellbeck hypothesizes. Stepan Podlubnyi, for example, was the son of a peasant accused of being a *kulak*. Hiding his origins, he made his way to Moscow and a job as a typesetter at *Pravda*. As a part of his effort to erase his supposedly tainted origins and assimilate into the Soviet order, he became a relentless self-improver. He used his diary as a laboratory for his developing self, recording, for example, his study of fundamental political texts (as Hellbeck remarks, self-definition in the Stalin era was intrinsically linked to the ability to master ideology [112]); however, he also treated the diary as a "rubbish heap" where he could deposit emotions that did not accord with model party-mindedness. The ultimate aim, as Hellbeck comments, was a "strictly rationalist life in the image of a machine," devoted to realizing the ideal of the "new" Soviet man (199)—though this did not prevent Podlubnyi from expressing scathing cynicism about the motives of some fellow workers and party officials. Leonid

Potemkin, who rose from provincial origins to become one of the most prominent mineralogists in the Soviet Union, also treated his diary as the site of his personal transformation. In fact, Potemkin recorded not only the process of his own reforging into a better Soviet citizen but also copied out letters he sent to several correspondents (especially young women) whose personal transformation he monitored. Hellbeck notes the romantic strain deeply embedded in all these transcriptions of feelings, whatever their ultimate vector, all this searching of music, literature, and love as languages of the soul, all this application of will to the uplifting of the self—one of the many unexamined relics of the 19th century in the Stalinist project.

Even the diaries of former members of the intelligentsia—many of whom had kept diaries of a very different sort before 1917—succumb, sooner or later, to the pattern of self-analysis and efforts at self-improvement in order to be fit for participation in party-led history. A special category is formed by prominent writers, whose diary keeping existed in a complex relation to their belletristic writings, themselves increasingly devoted to the transformative task of bringing the Soviet citizenry out of spontaneity and into party-minded consciousness. Dmitrii Furmanov, author of the Civil War classic *Chapaev*, sought in his diary to trace the workings of history (i.e., the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution and the development of the Soviet state) in his personal life while charting the emergence in himself of a "new structure of the soul" appropriate to the new era in which he believed he lived (16). In a far more complex record, the playwright Aleksandr Afinogenov agonized over the criticism to which his plays were subjected and sought to "kill" the old self inside him and undergo a radical rebirth; the whole enterprise was laden with religious metaphors, which anyway were never far from Stalinist ideology. The transformative narrative also, however, shaped former members of the intelligentsia who were not writers. Lugovskaia, for example, began keeping her diary to expose the lies of communist propaganda but with time began to chart the difficult process of her own effort to join the collective and participate in the building of a new socialist world.

The elucidation of this stubbornly recurring diaristic agenda is one of the major accomplishments of Hellbeck's study. He does not shy away from pointing out the coercive nature of the self-reformation the diarists undertook. What the diaries reveal, he suggests, is how in the Stalin era the "regime's violent practices entered the lives of Soviet citizens, often with catastrophic effects" (347). Nor can it be regarded as a neutral fact that after a series of early and optimistic proposals for recording biographical data of the newly enfranchised working class, it was the NKVD that ultimately became "the

chief interpreting agency of Soviet diaries" (48). This would seem simply to recycle the interpretive dilemmas already mentioned, but what emerges from Hellbeck's analyses is the latent but powerful appeal Stalinist ideology had for anyone seeking to remake his or her life. It is not simply that the Soviet diary writers Hellbeck has studied decided for whatever sincere or calculating reason to record how they assimilated themselves into the ideology ruling their society: this ideology *itself* "worked as a creator of individual experience" and harbored an implicit agenda for self-transformation (13). When the Great Purges of the late 1930s came along, to many diarists they appeared not as an egregious violation of the principles of party life but as a campaign of purification that, however cruel, fit naturally into a transformative agenda. One of the vexed questions the diaries might thus actually succeed in answering, if only in part, is why so many Soviet citizens appear to have accepted the purges without protest. (The threat of retaliation by the organs of state obviously played its role, too).

Like Hellbeck's, Paperno's study of Soviet diaries and memoirs shows that their writing was anything but a casual exercise. Indeed, in the post-Soviet era the effort to collect memoirs of the recent past could sometimes acquire eschatological overtones. Thus the "People's Archive" in Moscow, located in the back room of a "seedy shop" and mentioned also by Hellbeck as the site of revelation where he first discovered Stalin-era diaries (ix), was inspired by nothing less than the philosopher Nikolai Fedorov's project, detailed in his *Filosofiia obshchego dela* (The Philosophy of the Common Cause, 1906/1913), for preserving traces of past lives in the hope that science would one day be able physically to resurrect the dead (44). (One notes a certain parallel with the genealogical data collected by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). More central to Paperno's account, however, is the tradition Soviet diary writers inherited from the 19th century, when a historical consciousness, which had first appeared between the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, came to fruition in the 1840s–60s. Its most influential embodiment was Alexander Herzen's *Byloe i dumy* (My Life and Thoughts), which became the model for several successive generations of Russian diarists and autobiographers. As Paperno puts it, Herzen's *magnum opus* represented a "historical self-consciousness that gave meaning and value to their difficult and complex lives" (11). Since Herzen's historicism was heavily influenced by Hegelian thought, it readily lent itself to a Marxist and even Stalinist updating in the 20th century. For some writers, it even sharpened into the notion of world history as a tribunal, which as Paperno notes was but a secularization of the idea of the Last Judgment (43). But in an apt allegory of Soviet life in general,

while Herzen provided the lofty model for relating one's life to the course of history, lesser episodes of daily life seem to have assimilated themselves to Zoshchenko. As Paperno demonstrates, memoirs written by authors from the same social circles often deal with the same incidents and, when published successively, engage in dialogue as well as disagreement in a way that comes to resemble a *kommunalka*, a "textual communal apartment" (41).

The body of Paperno's study falls essentially into two parts. The first compares a diary that was manifestly a product of intelligentsia culture—Lidiia Chukovskaia's *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi* (Notes about Anna Akhmatova), a record of the poet's life under Stalinism—with the autobiography of a simple peasant woman from Ukraine named Evgeniia Kiseleva. Chukovskaia's diary is of a very specific sort and occupies the rarefied heights of intellectual response to Stalinism. It differs from every other diary examined by Paperno and Hellbeck in *not* being autobiographical but the record by an acolyte of a master's life and thoughts. In this regard, it is unfortunate that Paperno does not compare it with any preeminent examples of the genre, such as James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* or, closer to home, Vladimir Chertkov's account of the last days of Tolstoi's life. What does emerge from her analysis is Chukovskaia's staunch defiance of the assimilationist models so prevalent in other Stalin-era diaries (thus complicating any easy assumptions about sui generis Stalinist subjectivity). If the basic framework of showing how the life enters into the domain of history remains the same, Chukovskaia treats the Stalin version of history, especially the Purges, as a tragic aberration rather than the realization of any kind of authentic Hegelian *Geist*. In recording the many indignities, dislocations, and sufferings inflicted on Akhmatova, she produces a convincing portrait of the extent to which the regime intruded into the private sphere—even if along the way she also notes Akhmatova's own imperious manipulations of those around her.

The Kiseleva memoir occupies the opposite end of the social and cultural scale from Chukovskaia's *Notes*, with their high drama of Akhmatova's martyrdom at the hands of the Stalinist regime. If the purge was the defining historical event for Chukovskaia and Akhmatova, for Kiseleva the war was the trauma that defined her life, with the purge (as an affair more for the urban and educated) not even meriting mention. Kiseleva's memoir is manifestly naïve, even to the point of resorting, as Paperno shows, to narrative patterns deriving from oral narration and folklore. On its publication in Russia in 1996, it was even promoted as an example of "naïve writing" ostensibly beyond the influence of rhetorical Sovietness (151). Nonetheless, in its general contours it is, like the diaries by *vydvizhentsy* that Hellbeck examines,

an account of its subject's ascent, through sufferings, to a better life shaped by the historical agency of the Soviet state. But here again, as in the case of Hellbeck's corpus, the question of authorial intentions and the subjectivity behind them is more complex than it might seem. What Paperno downplays, perhaps because one could only speculate about what it might mean, is the fact that Kiseleva wrote her memoirs not as a private record but to submit them to a film studio, so that her life could be made into a film. The seemingly unmediated and sincere expressions of "Sovietness" that fill her memoir (her teary lament over Brezhnev's death, her fervent wishes that Gorbachev succeed, her reference to Jimmy Carter as a "second Hitler"—all sentiments essentially lifted from the front page of *Pravda* or *Izvestiia*) may thus, in fact, have been the stratagem (however naïve) by which a "clever" peasant tried to package her life so that it could reach the big screen. At the end of the day, we simply cannot know how naïve or calculating she really was, but neither is it to be assumed that such a memoir represents spontaneous and sincere self-expression by a loyal subject of the regime.

The second, rather different part of Paperno's study examines some 50 "dream stories" (165) recorded in a range of diaries kept during the Terror. Suspending narrowly Freudian or other psychoanalytical approaches, Paperno treats the dreams principally as "stories about historical experience" (165), which validates them even if they have been embellished or invented and ensures their meaningfulness even if we know little about the psychological life of the person who recorded them. The dreams are not particularly sweet. Most involve menacing imagery of one kind or another, some of it graphically horrifying: scenes of being chased through the night by a killer, of anxieties over the corpse of a loved one, of subjection to a Kafkaesque hearing at a mysterious institution, and even, in one case, of being raped by Stalin. Paperno points out that the dream predicament common in anxiety dreams across cultures—being immobilized in the face of some threat—acquires poignant frequency in these particularly intimate records of the terror. Yet the dream material is not relentlessly horrifying, and Paperno notes several dreams that import such exuberant fairy-tale motifs as flying in a magic sleigh (often, in a particularly contemporary note, identified as a remarkable new product of Soviet industry). Fascinating as the dream stories are in themselves, however, what is revealing about the culture in which they were written (and presumably dreamed) is the extent to which it continued, for all its scientism, to take dreams seriously. Paperno notes that a belief in the prophetic nature of dreams was almost universal among the diarists who recorded them, while the NKVD considered the dreams recorded in confiscated diaries to be significant

enough that it treated them as criminal evidence, with incriminating passages in some of the diaries having been underlined in red by investigators.

What Hellbeck and Paperno have clearly demonstrated is not just the profound extent but also the particular ways in which the Stalin regime invaded the private lives of its citizens: by dominating the public sphere, which it declared to be the site of History's workings; then inducing or coercing Soviet citizens to regard their lives as meaningful only to the extent that they undertook a conscious program of assimilation to the regime's initiatives and control. None of the diaries Hellbeck and Paperno examine escapes this pressure. What remains less clear, even after the marvelous glimpse into private lives afforded by recent, post-Soviet access to these documents, is the true nature of the subjectivity behind the writing. Nonetheless, these two works shed welcome light on the forces with which that subjectivity had to contend.

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