

Evgeny Dobrenko's 'Late Stalinism: The Aesthetics of Politics' Recasts 20th Century History

This ground-breaking book was translated by Jesse M. Savage.

By [Felix Light](#)

October 24, 2021



Author Evgeny Dobrenko

“The late Stalinism period,” writes Evgeny Dobrenko, touching off his new history of the final years of Josef Stalin’s reign over the Soviet Union, “was essentially the endpoint of the half-century long process called the Russian Revolution.” It’s a revealing line about a book that seems at first to be a lavishly detailed and compellingly written cultural history of the years 1945 to 1953, but is actually a fascinating unorthodox reinterpretation of Russia’s 20th century.

For Dobrenko, a professor at the U.K.’s Sheffield University, late Stalinism — the eight-year period between final victory in the Great Patriotic War and the dictator’s eventual death —

has been unfairly maligned as a period of dull stability, sandwiched between the Terror, the War and the Thaw. Instead, he argues, Stalin's twilight years — which see the rise of cultural puritanism, state-sanctioned anti-Semitism and the nascent Cold War — set the cultural frames of reference on which the Soviet Union, and eventually Russia, continue to operate.

In Dobrenko's telling, up until the victory in 1945, Leninist internationalism still provided a more-or-less consistent bedrock ideal for Soviet society, politics and culture. With the victory in the war — delivered, in part, by patriotic appeals to Russian national unity — the Soviet Union was transformed into something quite different. In place of revolutionary socialist utopianism came “national Bolshevism,” a militarist, nationalist and xenophobic order that would endure, with occasional interruptions, until the present day.

Dobrenko, whose knowledge of the period's literature, art and music is nothing short of encyclopedic, assembles a rich dossier of evidence to support his claims. Only in the late Stalinist period, he argues, did the West, most particularly the United States, come to assume the villainous cultural proportions it has never really lost for Russians since. Noting that the period sees earlier bugbear nations including Japan, Poland and Finland forgotten, Dobrenko makes a compelling case that Stalin's last eight years set the stage for what has happened ever since.

Throughout, Dobrenko's command of the period's cultural canon endows the book with an impressive scholarly weight. In chapter two, we are treated to a blow-by-blow account of the emergence of war literature in the traumatized Russia of the late forties, tracing a direct, if convoluted link, from Vera Inber's memoirs of the Siege of Leningrad to the present day “cult” of Second World War victory. Here, as throughout the book, Dobrenko's prose and quotes from literature, newspapers, and other sources, have been brilliantly translated by Jesse M. Savage.

Late Stalinism is, almost by default, a deeply political book. Dobrenko's not unconvincing argument that “Stalinism is the heart of Sovietness” has vast implications for how we ought to understand everything that came after Josef Dzhugashvili's death. Likewise, though Dobrenko does not dwell on contemporary parallels, his inferences make themselves: Russia's cultural present is one shaped by the consensus of late Stalinism. Russia in 2021 is still, in some way, stuck in 1953.

From Chapter 8

Socialist Surrealism Representing Life in the Forms of Life Itself

“HAMMER AWAY AND DRUM IT IN”

On May 13, 1947, Stalin summoned the country's three highest-placed literary functionaries to the Kremlin: Soviet Writers' Union general secretary Aleksandr Fadeev, his deputy, Konstantin Simonov, and the party secretary of the union's Executive Board, Boris Gorbатов. He had commissioned them to come up with a broad campaign for the propaganda of Soviet patriotism. As Simonov recalled, Stalin told them the following:

“This is the kind of topic that is very important and that writers need to get interested in. This is the topic of our Soviet patriotism. If you take our average intelligentsia, the scholarly

intelligentsia, professors, doctors,” Stalin said, constructing phrases with that special intonation characteristic of him, which I have memorized so exactly that I think I could literally reproduce it, “they don’t have a sufficiently ingrained feeling of Soviet patriotism. They have an unjustified worship of foreign culture. They all feel immature, not 100 percent, and have gotten used to considering themselves in the situation of perpetual students. This is an obsolete tradition; it goes back to Peter [the Great]. Peter had good ideas, but soon too many Germans crept in; it was a period of worshipping Germans. Look how hard it was, for example, for Lomonosov to breathe, how hard it was for him to work. First it was the Germans, then the French; it was the worship of foreigners,” Stalin said.

Stalin had brought up this topic earlier as well—in particular, during the discussion of Leningrad journals at the Central Committee Organizational Bureau on August 9, 1946, and during a meeting on February 26, 1947, with Eisenstein and the other creators of *Ivan the Terrible*. And now, having heard from Fadeev and the other two Writers’ Union leaders about the topics that prominent writers were working on, Stalin declared, “That is all good. Nonetheless, it is not the main thing. The main task for writers, the general task, is fighting against kowtowing to foreigners.” A good half hour of the conversation, which lasted an hour and ten minutes in total, was devoted to the development of this idea.

Patriotic mobilization and the cultivation of nationalist feelings were understandable in war conditions. After the victory, Stalin’s declared concern about the people’s patriotism and the greatness of Russia could seem politically incomprehensible, but psychologically it made complete sense; the brief encounter with the West had undermined the parallel reality constructed by Stalinism and created cognitive dissonance. The country had to conform to its new status of superpower, which it did not economically, culturally, or politically. Most of all it had to conform to the *greatness of its conqueror-leader*. As the “liberator of humanity from the Fascist plague” and the “father of the people,” Stalin could not be the leader of a country whose elites perceived themselves (as he saw it) as students of the West, which he, “the greatest military commander of all times and nations,” haughtily challenged. Stalin’s zealous attitude to the country’s greatness was merely a projection of his concern for his own greatness, image, and status. This explains Stalin’s growing attention, as Simonov noted, to the theme of Russian preeminence, kowtowing to foreigners, and—later—cosmopolitanism: “Stalin had an attitude that was severe, and also oversensitive, toward everything that he embedded in the concept of ‘kowtowing to foreigners.’ After the war’s being won, in the devastated and hungry victor-country this was his sore spot.”

This is why Stalin saw putting an end to deference to foreigners as a fundamental task: “Why are we worse? What is the matter? We must hammer away at this point for many years, must drum this subject into people’s heads for maybe ten years.” Then Stalin gave Fadeev a four-page document to read aloud about the “KR” affair—a scandal surrounding the handover to the West of Nina Kliueva and Grigorii Roskin’s manuscript containing a description of the anti-cancer medicine they had created. What Fadeev read aloud was the text, written by Zhdanov and edited by Stalin himself, of an indictment for a “court of honor” that was to begin the following day. The writers found themselves unwilling participants in the dress rehearsal Stalin had arranged for the trial. During the reading, Stalin paced up and down around his desk, listening attentively and scrutinizing their reactions. All said and done, this was an attack on the intelligentsia, and Stalin wanted to see the victims’ reactions: “He was doing a test, trying it out on us,” Simonov quite astutely observed, understanding that Stalin

“was testing what kind of impression this letter that he had dictated was making on us, intelligentsia folk—Communists, but intelligentsia nonetheless—about Kliueva and Roskin, also two intelligentsia people. Perhaps he had dictated it, or quite possibly he had written it himself. In any case, this letter was dictated by his will and no one else’s.”

Since the experience of war and freedom, of independence in decision making, of the temporary departure from the Soviet ideological parallel reality, brief but profound in its intensity and influence, and the Soviet occupational forces’ experience of encountering different realia and standards of living during their brief stay in the West all presented a substantial threat to the regime, the regime was subject to transformation and change. This was a complex and multistage process. At each stage there was a modification of experience through squeezing it out and replacing it without verification, and it had to be *compensated through a preservation of verisimilitude*. Just as Socialist Realism asserted “*the representation of life in the forms of life itself*” as a fundamental stylistic mode, the postwar politico-ideological construct that ultimately yielded something directly contradictory to lived experience was based on “*realistic verisimilitude*.” Accomplishing this required realism, about which Barthes observed that “no mode of writing was more artificial” since “the writing of Realism is far from being neutral, it is on the contrary loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication.”

To understand how collective and individual experience were refashioned, how the view of the world in postwar Soviet society was structured during the very period when the final tuning of the Soviet nation’s coming together after the war—with its complexes and traumas, anxieties and phobias, illusions and notions about its own greatness and messianic role—was occurring, we must see these signs, follow the modes of this transformation, and discern the figures and tropes that were used in this process of massive *politico-aesthetic immunization*.

At first the experience of contact with the West is transformed into an *inferiority complex* (“kowtowing”). This is imposed as a patently false diagnosis since the Soviet intelligentsia, who had experienced a widespread patriotic uplift as a result of the victory, suffered least of all from it. Obviously, the only person for whom the greatness already available was too little was Stalin himself, as he no longer wished to be “Lenin’s faithful student” or to remain in the shadow of the “classics of Marxism.” Widespread infection had the goal of developing ideological antibodies—more specifically the shaping of Soviet national narcissism through the construction of a *superiority complex* (expressed in the “feeling of Soviet pride,” the struggles for “the preeminence of Russian science,” and so forth). The complex process began with the organism’s assimilation of the weakened “microorganisms” to develop immunity against the virulent strains that extreme forms of political disloyalty were, such as (the next false diagnosis) “rootless cosmopolitanism,” which was nothing more than a projection and figure of repulsion (the “cosmopolitan equals anti-patriot” formula was asserted with transparent anti-Semitic connotations) and completed the process of narcissism’s rebirth as paranoia, the last stage of transforming the experience of the encounter with the West—its alienation.

Thus we may identify the following modes of transformation: inferiority complex → superiority complex (delusions of grandeur) → paranoia. They are realized through the corresponding political tropes: “kowtowing” → “national pride” → “cosmopolitanism.” Finally, their realization takes place through the following genres: patriotic play →

biographical film → anti-Semitic pamphlet. The only thing that unites them is a principle of fabrication; dangerous social symptoms are falsified since “kowtowing” and “cosmopolitanism” were symptoms not of a social trauma but of Stalin’s own trauma. Extrapolation of this false symptomatology onto the whole of society required a profound deformation of both current political events and history, with the goal of simulating illness. Plausibility, precisely, was a criterion for simulation and the result of falsification. And the Socialist Realist “representation of life in the forms of life itself” turned out to be exactly the appropriate stylistic formulation for this strategy, which was executed in different ways in the various genres. And if the result of these representational efforts looked improbable, then by no means was it because it employed some sort of fantasy means or forms of conventionality; it was because Stalinism, as one of the most conspiratological regimes, was based on conspiracy theories in which any reflection of reality came out completely distorted without the admixture of any fantasy. It was completely fantastic, just as the world of paranoia is fantastic.

But thus far we are merely at the beginning of this journey. “And pleased with the effect he had produced, strolling along the endless table, Stalin repeated what he had started with: ‘We have to destroy the spirit of self-effacement.’ Then he added, ‘There has to be something written on this subject. A novel.’ I said it was more a subject for a play.”

Without even suspecting it, Simonov had invented a new genre in Stalin’s office—the “patriotic play.”

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“Late Stalinism: The Aesthetics of Politics” has been shortlisted for the 2021 Pushkin House Book Prize.

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