

Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training Program

Final Report

Territory and Empire in Early Soviet Poetry

I received an American Councils Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training grant for the autumn of 2011, which allowed me to pursue preliminary research for my dissertation project “Producing the Contours of Political Space: Russian Civic Poetry and Borders in the Interwar Soviet Union.” Briefly stated, this project entails tracing the evolution of the new Soviet conceptual polity in the polemics and aesthetics of poetry in the early Soviet Union much more possible. This evolution has coalesced to be understood as traditional ideas of rebirth from apocalyptic circumstances and of unbounded diversity and difference across the wide territory of the country were directly related and transmuted into the Socialist Realist ideal of uniformity and lateral connectedness, with all difference deferred onto the boundary.

Though poetry was not the dominant genre, nor even literature the dominant cultural medium, of the early Soviet era, the analysis of this period’s civic poetry illuminates a number of general cultural responses to cultural tasks during this period. For my purposes, these include in particular the representation of Soviet territory as *terra nova* and, concomitantly, the emergence of a certain key of representation that reflected the reconstruction of imperial patterns of governance in its structural relationship to the Soviet polity, while nevertheless remaining in harmony with the anti-imperialist ideology of the Revolution.

The recognition of imperial, or neo-imperial, structures is possible mainly because of the theoretical conceptualizations on the history and idea of empire by historians in the last two decades, through which the temporal limits of Russian empire extend beyond the Europeanized Russian Empire of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In a broad sense, articulated, for example, by Geoffrey Hosking in *Empire and Nation in Russian History*, the Russian empire extends from the 1552 Muscovite conquest of Kazan' through the collapse of the Soviet Union, and perhaps beyond. (This

“perhaps beyond” depends on one’s position in the question of whether the federative identity proposed for Russia has persisted in the system of political representation and franchise in the Putin era and what might have replaced it in the event of its decline). Empire may be defined as a system of instruments for controlling an increasingly vast, culturally diverse territory, wherein access to state and privilege are unevenly distributed in a systematic and hierarchical fashion. Russia, as an overland empire, experiences the additional variables of contiguity between colonized and colonizer, and a range of ethnic difference between the center and imperial holdings.

In light of this, the question of how Russia can remain a temporally continuous polity that bridges periodic massive disruptions and failures of state or economic apparatuses to function. Culturally, at least, it seems clear that the apparatus of empire proved robust enough to subsume a complete break with the ideology of empire, that is, the anti-imperialist rhetoric following the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War. The conclusion of the Civil War in 1921 witnessed the near-complete reconstitution of the prerevolutionary Russian Empire, especially in Asia; representations of this territory were heavily inscribed with symbolism from the imperial era. A pragmatic explanation for such continuity might be the massive inertia of the structural features of the Russian empire, which provided the new government with a ready-made means of controlling its periphery, and was reinforced by the fact that the land that was retained in the new state was far less modernized and economically empowered regionally than the lost industrial strongholds of Finland and Poland.

In what would appear to be a countervailing force against the cultural continuity of empire, the early Soviet period’s culture was distinguished by the enthusiastic participation of a deliberately anti-imperialist avant-garde (essentially the Futurist camp, with Vladimir Maiakovskii at its forefront) and a massive influx of working-class literary cadres literate in the Marxist-Leninist theory of imperialism and the Soviet rhetoric of emancipation. Moreover, among themselves, these

individuals expressed aggressive suspicion of one another specifically in connection to retrograde aesthetics and contents. Yet, by the time the Soviet Union experienced another destabilizing shock with the German invasion in June 1941, many of these same people engaged in the cultural ideation of imperial expansionism. For example, in August 1939, before the Winter War began in November later that year, Anatolii D'Aktil' celebrated the Soviet Union's incorporation of Finland in the song "Receive Us, Suomi-Beauty"—rather prematurely, as it turned out. This moment may be understood as a capstone for this particular line of development; the cultural and ideological experience of World War II may signal another, distinct reification of empire, given the postwar amplification of the Great Family and the political phenomenon of the Iron Curtain. Between these two moments of absolute territorial implosion and instability, the Civil War and World War II, an additional turning point may have occurred following the 1927 transition from the formulation of "Internationalist Revolution" to the inwardly-oriented "Socialism in One Country." Culture production reflects this shift in a number of ways: a greater conceptual stability of the boundary between Soviet citizen and enemy evolved, with concomitant responsibilities for *bditel'nost'* (vigilance), and the emergent dominance of narratives about the borders' volatility, from their dangerous porousness to their jubilant inclination to expand.

The October Revolution in 1917 and the production of a large new generation of writers with shared experiences of the Civil War opened up experimentation in every space of culture, as creative workers sought a means to express, on the one hand, the import of the tumultuous upheaval and sacrifice of the Civil War and, on the other, the absolute novelty of the new Soviet age. As a result of this opening-up in culture, poetry lost what had been its privileged place in prerevolutionary culture, explaining, perhaps, the relative paucity of scholarship on early Soviet poetry. This leaves more or less open an inviting field of inquiry, as, while multiple media engaged the problem of redefining Soviet territory (in particular, film and other visual media), the literary

genres encompassed by poetry prove useful in discussing the relationship between territorial representation and a neo-imperial aesthetic in Russia. In part, poetry's utility in the twentieth-century interwar period arises from the relative flexibility of composition; while a logical narrative usually emerges, order is not necessarily driven by chronological, psychological, or expository motivations. A poetics of space allows for geographical elements to be arranged in a broader spectrum of ways than, perhaps, a prose travelogue would. Poetry in Russia also carried with it a genre history that reserved a particular civic role for poetry in state- and epos-building. The state-building function stems from the role of the occasional ode as dominant genre during the birth of secular Russian literature in the eighteenth century. Its epos-building function may be located both in the perpetually reinforced myth of Pushkin as national poet (realized most clearly in the 1936 Pushkin jubilees) and in what could be called the Nekrasov tradition of *narod*-influenced poetry. Furthermore, poetic genres provided a particular set of commonplaces to the Soviet avant-garde, due to the confluence of poetry's peak prerevolutionary dominance with the increased circulation of mystical and eschatological ideas about Russia's role in the world at the same time. These factors, taken together, explain poetry's continuing use as a metric in the Soviet era; though the aesthetic preoccupations of the new guard arguably took them in completely new directions, they retained a certain authority, as well as a sustained set of commonplaces, on the basis of the recent and distant past.

Of course, to say scholarship on early Soviet poetry is completely absent is to deny the presence of literary surveys that do a responsible job of summarizing the literary movements and polemics of the period and dozens of monographs and articles about individual authors—particularly about Maiakovskii—as well as of books about the relationship between politics and the arts and of the difficulties and dangers of trying to maintain authorial autonomy and individuality during this period.

However, my initial stated research goals oriented, not toward apolitical or satirical works, or works resistant to state directives in general, but towards works and authors that grappled with problems of representation, of writing to and for the masses and poetry's participation in the task of realizing socialism. In examining these authors, I intended to realize concretely the frequently-made allusions to neoclassicism in the eighteenth century in criticism about early Soviet culture. Iurii Tynianov mentioned in passing that the poetic movements of the twenties reflected a general reversion to the declamatory, "archaic" mode in the dynamic of "archaists and innovators" that he had described in *The Archaists and Pushkin* (1926). Andrei Siniavskii, reporting from the other end of this period in "What is Socialist Realism?" (1959), noted the aesthetic similarities between the public art of Soviet socialist realism and Russian neoclassicism. The significance of this observation remains that, in the century following Peter I's reforms to the Russian state apparatus, Russian literary language evolved greatly in response to the need to signal to Russians and Westerners alike that Russia was a modern empire and belonged among the civilized powers, in other words, to the need to create a new textual Russia.

My preliminary research in libraries and at the Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts (RGALI) permitted me to make a necessary reorientation away from direct comparisons to be re-approached in a more lateral fashion that takes into account the lyric subjectivity that remains differentiated in its relationship to power. Such a distinct subjectivity developed with the decline of the occasional ode in the late eighteenth century, and poets, no matter how committed to the proletariat and the state, preferred to re-conceptualize a poet's subjectivity, rather than reject it completely or re-subsume it to the represented state. The relationship of the poet to his work, the masses, and the state remained an operative question during the formative years of the Union of Writers; clearly the civic role for poetry, though still invested in the creation of a textual Russia to

export to citizen and world alike, requires re-evaluation so as to account for an aesthetics that successfully (or unsuccessfully) negotiates the grandeur of the state and the dignity of the poet.

I had also intended to address the sets of systems of symbols and images that were typically used to represent Soviet space over the period covered. This ended up taking preliminary research in two directions, the synthesis of which led to the refinement and improvement of the research project's theses. On the one hand, the crystallization of symbolic structures certainly took place, particularly in newspapers, where, for example, aviation feats were referred to without fail as "steel birds"—this sort of stable set of referents is interesting as much for the concern it provoked in poet-members of the Union of Writers as for the stable picture of Soviet expanse and accomplishments it paints.

On a less one-to-one basis, readings in the library's journal collections and in the minutes of literary groups of the 1920s and 1930s indicate that much of the poetic development in the early Soviet period proceeded, not from a null point, but from a system of pre-existing intertexts and frameworks. Though the initial apprehensions of novelty arguably were represented through these ready-made frameworks, they were clearly also the object of self-conscious critique and resistance (in fact, prerevolutionary intertexts are most often recognized by those seeking to polemicize with their quoting opponents).

Between the ideology of the Revolution as the moment of transition into a new stage of history and the tumultuous lived experiences of the Civil War, Russian culture as a whole was informed by the imagery of the apocalypse, the destruction of the old world so that it could be replaced by the new. Although no hard and fast categories should be drawn, there were at least two ways of appropriating the threshold moment of the Revolution, which broke down roughly along generational lines. Those who had already been well-established were more likely to represent the destruction of the old world and to tie the revolutionary movement to a developed teleological

system, often religious. Those who became active poets during or after the Civil War—among them the members of the group “October,” the younger members of “Pereval,” and some branches of the Constructivist movement—often took these events as a zero-moment, a testing-ground from which Soviet values emerged almost *sui generis*. Short stories and novels (such as Fedor Gladkov’s 1925 *Cement*) had to deal with the biographical necessity of a prerevolutionary childhood and past for their subjects, heroes of the Civil War. By contrast, poetry could present the Russian city, countryside and landscape as *tabula rasa*—the village and proletariat are history-less until the arrival of the Revolution. Though enthusiasm drove both sorts of lyric representation, the difference proved to be one of the tensions that characterized the continuous *boi* of literary politics in the twenties, and thus provoked the beginning of the aesthetic revolution. Many of the techniques associated with these understandings ended up being pressed to the service of representing a more unified, harmonized whole of Soviet geography in later geographies.

The focus on cyclic destruction and re-creation, and the concomitant necessity of “rediscovering” the new land on the other side of the transformative moment, finds some expression in the tropes of paradise and Eden, as well as apocalyptic imagery, which, in turn, bring with them their historical uses in Russian letters. Maiakovskii in particular frequently represents the future as paradise (this this certainly mutated in his late plays and the long poem *At the Top of One’s Voice* [1930]), more for its unattainable immanence than for its material pleasures, into which the proletariat may transcend. Moreover this imagery is not only religious, it is frequently imbued with its historical image. While the flood metaphor used in *Mystery-Bouffe* (1918; revised 1921) and *About This* (1923) originates as a clear spoof on the biblical deluge, an additional force to the metaphor, as examined by Lev Pumpianskii, emerged with the trope’s historical, imperial use (101-102), one which was *not* overtly recognized, and thus parodically “defanged,” by the author.

An inquiry in my dissertation that was absolutely only opened as a combined result of in-country guidance from experts in my field and the ability to follow up immediately in the archives were the ways in which the imperial trope of overflowing abundance and rich diversity translated into post-revolutionary terms, and particularly Soviet Eurasianism, a set of instruments and devices closely associated with the Literary Center of Constructivism that could be seen as an effort to cope with persistent difference between center and periphery. The early years of the Soviet Union were characterized by an understanding of the periphery as a source of variety and difference, and therefore of creative potential for the country as a whole. In many ways, these creative understandings were informed by the philosophical trends of the Silver Age—specifically, the prerevolutionary Scythians, who had a major influence on Eurasianism inside and outside of the Soviet Union.

The thirties witnessed a flattening of the differences within the territory, but still reflect an aesthetic that is clearly relying on many of the same materials and tensions of the immediately post-revolutionary era. Changes in the conceptual border of the Soviet Union in poetic texts certainly occurred, and could reflect a number of things. On the one hand, they can be attributed to the central policy shift in 1927 from “Internatsional'naia revoliutsiia” to “Sotsializm v odnoi strane.” On the other hand, these changes are also part of a more continuous evolution of cultural models. The rejection of the romance of the periphery—the pleasure in and accentuation of difference—in favor of a more unified vision of the country that was born from the immense sacrifice of the Civil War resulted in the border being a singular space for realizing the productive potential of difference. The absolute nature of the border as a boundary between “Soviet” and “non-Soviet,” as a new site of irreconcilable difference, seems also to have been realized as a site for creativity and burgeoning reproduction and growth from the inside, realized both in a sort of transcendence in works like Mikhail Svetlov’s “Grenada” (written in 1926, but the object of renewed popularity in the late

thirties due to the Spanish Civil War) and in the cultural fascination with aviation and arctic voyages, not only as a projection of Soviet power, but as a projection of Soviet life—a phenomenon particularly clear in the accidental “settlement” of the frozen Chukotskoe Sea when the icebreaker *Cheliuskin* capsized in 1934.

No part of the dissertation project that I had in mind when I embarked to Russia has remained untouched as a result of the richness of human and archival resources I found in Moscow. The ready availability of the Russian State Library’s full collection of journals and newspapers, both central and peripheral, from the twenties and thirties made it an excellent resource to draw upon in parallel to the archival research I was able to do at RGALI on such groups as the Center of Literary Constructivists and the Associations of Proletarian Writers, as well as the formation of the Union of Writers. As I refined my research goals, my in-country affiliation with the International University in Moscow allowed me to obtain new letters of introduction in a fraction of the time it would take to obtain them from my home institution of the University of Pittsburgh. Preliminary research would have been much harder to complete in the absence of such affiliation. Additionally, many of these positive changes to my research goals were realized as a result of informal discourse with my instructors, who gave me the space and opportunity to develop the language to verbalize, and thereby develop, my research and goals, and with leading scholars in Soviet and post-Soviet literature and postcolonial theory, including Il’ia Kukul’in, whose current research on subjectivity in Soviet literature of the twenties and thirties made him an ideal interlocutor.

While the particular aesthetic dynamics of the early Soviet Union are peculiar to that period, my research underscores the interconnectedness of aesthetics and the identity of polity, and readies the individual to speak of Stalinism and empire—both of which are still active and, for the Western eye, occasionally unintuitively influential subjects in contemporary Russian mass discourses—with a more nuanced understanding of the creative class’s semi-autonomy from the cult of personality and

politics, and also to view developments in representation in post-Soviet Russia with a better idea of its political consequence. For example, arguably, among the reasons for what I understand as the current failure of the Russian federative experiment in the 21st century is the failure to inculcate a civic identity as a federation. In its place, the visual aesthetics of glamour and advertising—with their dynamics of a single vicarious shared experience and the consumption of exotic goods—appear to have gripped representation of both territory and Mr. Putin, whose propensity to be photographed shirtless is directly connected with the exoticization of the Russian locales where these shoots are held. My research addresses the importance of arts oriented toward the mass reader as barometers of new identities and the clear connectedness these identities have to earlier iterations of territorial and political identity. The potential implicit in this is to raise self-consciousness about, if not directly intercede regarding, the consequences of symbolic speech and expressions for Russian identity.

Although my ability to contribute meaningfully to scholarship on the early Soviet Union and on polity-building was improved immensely by the attention I could give my language skills and the access I had to Moscow archival and intellectual resources, I understand that I probably did not make an immediate impact on discussions of these issues in Russia. That is, through lectures, talks, or briefs with embassies, NGOs, or Government officials. That, I recognize, was a loss. Given more of an understanding of how and why to make contact with these entities for the sake of sharing my growing understanding of how these cultural dynamics work, I could have offered policy workers in Moscow the talk I am giving on this subject to the University of Pittsburgh's Center of Russian and Eastern European Studies (in other words, to future policy workers and their teachers).

I found the support offered for language and research by American Councils and their colleagues at the Russian as a Foreign Language department of the International University in

Moscow was very good. I can't imagine having better working conditions for research at this stage in my career.