Americans Experience Russia

Encountering the Enigma, 1917 to the Present

Edited by Choi Chatterjee and Beth Holmgren

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5 The Russian Romance in American Popular Culture, 1890–1939

Choi Chatterjee

As a latecomer to American popular culture, I was recently acquainted with the dubious pleasures of the popular television serial *Sex and the City*. As an unrepentant second-wave feminist from the Third World, I had initially resisted viewing the show, but a colleague enticed me with the promise of a "fabulous Russian protagonist!" In the episodes I viewed, Carrie Bradshaw, a perceptive commentator on single living in Manhattan, dates a Russian intellectual, Alexander Petrofsky, played by an aging but still romantic Mikhail Baryshnikov. Petrofsky is a wealthy émigré artist and playboy, and, although he is based in New York, he has retained close ties to the European art scene. He is urbane, charming, and cultured, and his seduction of Carrie follows well-established old-world patterns. Carrie finds Petrofsky's romantic routine of elegant dinners, poetry reading by the fire (Joseph Brodsky), and piano playing too self-consciously intellectual and high brow. And, when Petrofsky presents her with an Oscar de la Renta gown and takes her to see *La Traviata* at the Metropolitan Opera, Carrie almost faints, overwhelmed and exhausted by a relentless excess of European high culture.[1]

Seventy years after the proletarian revolution of 1917, Stalinist-enforced modernization, and the militarized discourses of the Cold War, the producers of the series selected a decidedly prerevolutionary image of the Russian hero as a cultured, cosmopolitan, and extravagant nobleman. In a strange replay of the past, American popular culture was recycling images of Russia first circulated in the late nineteenth century, erasing the historic link between the Soviet Union and the anticapitalist Bolshevik revolution. While representations of gender relations in film and fiction often tend to reify a particular vision of the desired world order, they also contain transgressive desires that threaten to subvert the status quo.[2] In this essay, I use the evolution of the Russian-American romance as a tool to explore American fascination with the persona of the Russian revolutionary that persisted in the face of official proscriptions. In the process, I also illustrate the deep contradictions and ambivalences that existed in American perceptions of Russia and the Soviet Union. While a majority of American commentators criticized the repressive political systems of both the tsarist and the Soviet empires, this widespread disapproval of the ruling regimes coexisted with a

latent longing to create meaningful emotional relationships with individual Russians and to participate in select Russian cultural and ideological milieus. Americans' desire for the Russian other was often expressed through the trope of transnational romance, which featured frequently in novels and films about Russia. Key elements of the romance, including significant lovers' meetings in important geographical locations such as St. Petersburg and Moscow, ideological clashes, lengthy philosophical exchanges, and happy endings that revolved around the ideological redemption of the Russian hero or heroine, formed the core structure of these cultural products that were created for popular consumption both at home and abroad.

Since American media industries proved particularly adept at repackaging Russian-American romances from the nineteenth century to fit twentieth-century norms, this particular transnational model had a long shelf life. Its origins lie in the late nineteenth century, when fiction about romantic relationships with aristocratic Russian revolutionaries provided readers with a new and titillating alternative to the interracial romantic novel created by the colonial encounter in the early modern era. While the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 led to substantial modification of the plotlines in the 1920s and the 1930s, the fascination with the Russian revolutionary remained either an overt or a subterranean motif through most of these texts. The persistence of fictional fantasies about thrilling mésalliances with the cultured Russian revolutionary from the late nineteenth century on shows that many of the transnational myths that we usually associate with the onset of the Cold War had established historical antecedents.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ROMANCE

The Russian-American romance played out against the backdrop of strained diplomatic ties, interrupted commercial relations, and in an atmosphere of mutual vituperation based on competing imperial interests.[3] Spirited denunciations of tsarist autocracy became commonplace in the American media, which often featured stories about oppressed prisoners in overcrowded Russian jails, the Siberian exile system, and impoverished victims of rabid anti-Semitic pogroms.[4] According to David Engerman, American travelers to both imperial Russia and the Soviet Union found that the Russians lacked the spirit of enterprise and the capacity for hard work that distinguished citizens of modern and Western civilizations.[5] The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 shocked many conservative Americans, yet fired the imagination of many progressive American intellectuals, both left-wing and liberal.[6] Inspired partly by John Reed's highly successful revolutionary travelogue, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, and by the writings of other journalists such as Walter Duranty, Louis Fischer, Maurice Hindus, and William Chamberlin, American tourists, reformers, activists, journalists, workers and

policymakers traveled to the Soviet Union to try to understand this strange new civilization that eschewed profit for the sake of progress, a goal that many liberal reformers advocated in the United States.

The rapid state-sponsored industrialization initiated under the Five-Year Plans in 1928 initially seemed to promise a cure for both the backward Soviet Union and the Depression-ridden West, and businessmen and economists in the United States became interested in the novel production methods of the Soviet planned economy. But the growing authoritarianism of the Stalinist regime in the late 1930s, climaxing in the bloody Show Trials of 1936–1939, alienated many erstwhile American supporters. The signing of the infamous Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939, coupled with the Soviet invasion of Finland, confirmed the worst suspicions of American career officers in the State Department. Many of them believed that there was little difference between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Despite the Roosevelt administration's diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union, in 1933, most opinion makers in the mainstream American press and in government were anti-Soviet, and erstwhile fellow travelers such as Granville Hicks, John Dos Passos, John Dewey, and Edmund Wilson slowly changed their pro-Soviet worldviews in the late 1930s.

Despite the abundant negative characterizations that we find in the writings of diplomats, journalists, and travelers, the revolutionary changes in Russia and the Soviet Union continued to evoke curiosity and interest among American audiences.[7] Producers of both popular films and fiction used the Russian-American romance as a means to construct and reify hallmarks of imperial Russia and the early Soviet civilization. Sentimental representations of recognizable Russian character types and their romantic interactions with American counterparts served as vehicles for the exploration of Russian culture and Soviet revolutionary innovations and, as such, preserve American commentary and attitudes from that period. But the fascination with Russian-themed exoticism and the recurrent marking of Russian otherness coexisted with the desire to transform, redeem, and Americanize the object of desire. The Russian subject responded to both a desire for otherness and Americans' relentless drive for assimilation, one that served to annihilate the strangeness that had provoked the fascination in the first place.

While there have been excellent analyses of the representations of Russians and the Soviet Union in American films, popular American fiction set in Russia has for the most part attracted little critical inquiry. The genre of romance in selected works of fiction such as Richard Savage's novel *My Official Wife* (1891), *The Chasm* (1911), and *Moscow Yankee* (1935) and in popular films such as *Ninotchka* (1939) and *Comrade X* (1940), shows that these fantasies of transnational romance persisted from the late nineteenth century into the Soviet era and beyond.[8] From the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, both popular film and fiction repeatedly affirmed

that, although Russia as a country and a civilization was unredeemable, individual Russian heroes and heroines (always cultured, well dressed, and sexually attractive), could be weaned from their unfortunate addiction to revolutionary principles and successfully integrated into mainstream American society. While this universal trope of redemption could be found in both film and fiction, there was little unanimity within the American cultural establishment about how to represent this particular romance or how to prescribe the processes through which Russian heroes and heroines could be transformed into good Americans. Due to ideological and political differences among American writers, the Russian-American heterosexual romance spawned a variety of imaginative cultural and political forms that resist easy categorization. I will outline some of the more popular romantic plots to be found in both fiction and film and trace their evolution across the revolutionary divide of 1917. I also include counterexamples of Russian protagonists who defy Americanization and assimilation. The very existence of these Russian antiheroes in both film and fiction led to the elaboration of counterplots and counternarratives to accommodate the exceptions to the rule.

PASSIONATE REVOLUTIONARIES

Spurred by the popularity of literary works that used Russia as a backdrop, such as Oscar Wilde's play *Vera the Nihilist* (1881) and Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911),[9] writers of political thrillers from the middle of the nineteenth century on found Russia to be a popular setting for their writings. These novels offered little historical information about the Russian empire, but they reified models of romantic relationships between aristocratic Russians and their equally "aristocratic" American counterparts. The revolution of 1917 did not curtail the production of nostalgia about the tsarist court; well into the 1930s, American authors continued to write novels about Peter I and Catherine the Great, and both the reading and the viewing publics in the United States exhibited voracious curiosity about the glamorous lifestyles of the Russian nobility.[10] The tragic fate of Princess Anastasia, the sexual peccadilloes of Rasputin and the noblewomen at the Russian court, and the adventures of the legendary Cossacks continued to titillate and interest American audiences throughout the twentieth century.[11] Hollywood aided in this glamorization of Russian imperial style by producing films such as the *Scarlet Empress* (1934), which featured Marlene Dietrich as the sexually adventurous and violently manipulative Catherine the Great, and *Anna Karenina* (1935), with Greta Garbo. Other films, such as *We Live Again* (1934), *Once in a Blue Moon* (1936), and *Tovarich* (1937), portrayed the Russian nobility in a sympathetic manner, usually as tragic victims of both the tsarist and the Bolshevik regimes.[12]

Popular novels about Russia brought together two major images, namely an aristocratic Russia and Russia the land of revolutionaries. Novelists were undoubtedly influenced by the major works of Russian literature. Beginning with the appearance of the first translations of Ivan Turgenev's works in English, in 1867, the transatlantic English-speaking world became obsessed with Russian literature.[13] Leo Tolstoy's influence spread far beyond the confines of a literary-minded public, and, while his philosophical and political writings were greatly admired by a range of American intellectuals, including Mark Twain, Jane Addams, and William Dean Howells, it was the publication of the novel *Anna Karenina* that put him on the American best-seller list for more than a century. Even Theodore Roosevelt, the poster boy for imperial American manhood, succumbed to the fictional charms of Anna Karenina's passionate nature.[14]

Drawing on the conventions of European travel literature about imperial Russia, American novelists tended to idealize the Russian noblewoman as the epitome of charm, good looks, and sartorial elegance.[15] Earlier in the century, Theophile Gautier, the well-known French writer, had commented at length about the cultivated and intensely fashionable ladies of the Russian empire.[16] And a travel guide to Russia warned that the season in St. Petersburg was comparable to that of Paris and that "ladies wishing to pass a 'season' at St. Petersburg should recollect that Russian ladies dress very richly and in great taste."[17] Many of the novels about Sofia Perovskaia, who helped orchestrate the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, contained detailed descriptions of her supposedly fatal beauty and stylish wardrobe but conveyed little information about the radical ideology that she espoused.[18] The acerbic Isabel Hapgood, one of the first Americans to translate Russian literature into English, tried to temper what she felt to be the unjustified adulation of the Russian women: "If one may judge of the Russian woman from the general trend of comment by admiring but awe-struck foreigners, that remarkable person is the Egyptian Sphinx, brought down to date, and garnished à *la Parisienne*."[19]

In 1891, Richard Henry Savage, one of the ablest practitioners of the Russian-American romance novel, published *My Official Wife* to critical and popular acclaim. It was translated into numerous European languages and turned into a play in 1893, and performed in most of the major American cities to enthusiastic audiences.[20] According to the author himself, the novel was "dramatized, burlesqued and plagiarized."[21] Before turning to fiction, Savage had served in the army, practiced law, and traveled widely in various regions of the world, including the Russian empire.[22] He successfully transferred the plot lines of the interracial romance spawned by the colonial encounter in the New World and applied it to the Russian context. Savage was politically conservative and admired the aristocratic social order in Europe. He had married a German aristocrat, his daughter married a scion of the Russian nobility, and his familiarity with the social mores of the upper classes lent verisimilitude to his Russia-based fiction.

In *My Official Wife* Savage creates the portrait of a gruff and cosmopolitan American soldier, the middle-aged Arthur Bainbridge Lenox, who is traveling to St. Petersburg to visit his daughter, recently married into an aristocratic Russian family. Lenox's susceptibility to beautiful Russian women leads him to befriend Helene Marie, a fascinating adventuress who is also a political nihilist. In St. Petersburg, Lenox traverses the social scene of Russian high society with aplomb and savoir-faire, yet, throughout the novel, he is terrified of falling afoul of the tsarist secret police. But when Helene Marie reveals her plans to plans to assassinate the tsar, Lenox the good republican saves both the tsar and the Russian empire by his quick-witted actions. Lenox manages to foil Helene Marie's nefarious plot, but he is unable to change her political inclinations and unwilling to abandon her. When Helene Marie escapes the police dragnet with the connivance of her paramour, Sasha, the dashing Russian nobleman, the noble Sasha loses everything. Lenox gives him $250 to go to America and reinvent himself as the manager of an opera troupe!

In Savage's subsequent novel *For Her Life* (1897), we find that his revolutionary heroine, Hermione, is a beauty in distress and politically more malleable than Helene Marie. Although she returns to Russia in the face of intense danger, carrying secret ciphers that are crucial to sustain the nihilist code, Hermione ultimately succumbs to the moral blandishments of the American hero, Walter Grahame, a temperate and placid lawyer from Philadelphia. Hermione says to Graham, "I know your bright land of freedom! I spent some happy months there once," and the lure of transatlantic romance neutralizes the siren call of revolution.[23] Savage's plot turns on the remaking of Hermione, and, as the novel progresses, she realizes that meaningful political change of the autocratic Russian state cannot be achieved by the use of violence. After numerous gothic twists and turns in the tale that include frightening nihilist conspiracies and the cruel machinations of the Russian secret police, interspersed with glamorous scenes of noble life in St. Petersburg, the novel ends with Hermione's incarceration on the prison island of Sakhalin. Meanwhile, Hermione has fallen in love with her American hero, and, at the end of the novel, the efficient and farsighted Graham arranges to have Hermione rescued from Sakhalin and transported to the United States.

Like Savage, other American novelists proved to be sensitive to the political ardor of the Russian revolutionaries and used their novels to explain some of the radical ideologies espoused by their Russian characters. Even though the American protagonists sometimes recoil from some of the violent tactics advocated by their Russian counterparts, they are equally critical of the brutal measures enforced by of the evil tsarist regime. American heroes and heroines help Russian revolutionaries in various ways: by providing funds, plotting escape routes, and creating innovative exit strategies from the empire.[24] For the most part, Russian characters, both men and women, lose their revolutionary ardor when transported to the United States and

appear to be enthralled by their new bourgeois existence and monogamous relationships.[25] Once on American soil, erstwhile revolutionaries who had spiritedly defended their various left-wing ideologies to American suitors abjure their adherence to violent political solutions. Immigration to the United States magically mitigates the theme of revolution and transforms formerly revolutionary Russians into orderly and law-abiding citizens.[26]

While American novelists took pains to describe the stylish estates and lifestyles of Russian nobles in superlative terms, they seldom expressed political sympathy for the aristocratic social order and the politics of autocracy. Travel writers such as Ruth Kedzie Wood deplored the violent tactics used by Russian revolutionaries, but in her romances she also registered the real sufferings of the Russian revolutionaries under the oppressive tsarist system.[27] Moreover, many of the fictional American heroes and heroines, like their real-life American counterparts, dreamed of bringing about progressive political change in Russia by means of their romantic alliances with members of the Russian nobility. In his socialist novel *The Chasm* (1911), George Cram Cook explores the complicated feelings of a young Marion Moulton, daughter of a wealthy American industrialist. Marion is caught in a romantic triangle involving a cultivated and elegant Russian count, Feodor de Hohenfels, and her attractive and manly gardener, the socialist Walter Bradfield.[28] While Hohenfels dreams dilatorily of creating a Nietzschean super-race that is biologically superior to the masses, Walter, a cultured autodidact, born of "ox-like parents," skillfully opens Marion's eyes to the fact that her wealth and breeding are based on the rank exploitation of the American working class. Marion, in a misguided move that she will later regret, marries the count and moves to Russia in the hope that she will help him usher in a democratic order by contesting elections to the Duma, the Russian parliament.

Once Marion is in Russia, the count fails to live up to her political expectation that he will be the harbinger of constitutional democracy in Russia. Disappointed by his ennui and political conservatism, Marion falls in with a group of socialist revolutionaries. Although Marion renounces the privileges that her husband's position offers her, she uses her capitalist father's money to help the revolutionaries in their antitsarist struggles, especially while they suffer torture in prison. Bradfield, who has prospered economically in the meanwhile, but without forsaking any of his revolutionary principles, returns to Russia just in time to help Marion escape her disastrous marriage and the even more disastrous Russian political system.

In an interesting parallel to the fictional Marion, we find that American women such as Emma Ponafidine and Julia Dent Cantacuzene, who married into the Russian nobility in the late nineteenth century, also hoped that they would bring American notions of democracy, constitutionality, and social philanthropy to ameliorate class conflict in their adopted country. Both women, who escaped from the Soviet Union after 1917, described their husbands as improving landlords and noblemen deeply committed to ushering

in constitutional democracy in imperial Russia.[29] In her memoirs and in a series of anti-Bolshevik articles commissioned by the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1923, Cantacuzene used many of the tropes ubiquitous in Western popular fiction about Russia to describe her life among the former nobility. Ultimately, both Cantacuzene and Ponafidine present their husbands and themselves as tragic heroes and heroines: homeless, dispossessed of their former estates, and unable to bring progress and modernity to their erstwhile homeland.

THE REVOLUTION OF 1917 AND RETHINKING THE RUSSIAN-AMERICAN ROMANCE

The novel *Miss Amerikanka*, published in 1918, encapsulated the dilemma that American writers faced in trying to represent the Bolshevik revolution. Even witnesses to the Russian Revolution and the civil war were unsure about the validity of their own observations and about Russia's future within the world order. Olive Gilbreath, of Missouri, a graduate of Wellesley and the University of Michigan, traveled across Russia as an interpreter for the Red Cross in 1918. She contributed pieces to *Harper's Magazine*, *Yale Review*, and *Asia Magazine*, and wrote two novels based on her Russian experiences. Although Gilbreath's breathless writing style and romantic observations about the supposedly Asiatic nature of the "Russian soul" jar the sensibility of the twenty-first-century reader, her books received good reviews in the contemporary press. *Miss Amerikanka* was serialized in *Harper's* in 1918. Gilbreath's portraits of the Russian nobility in this and other subsequent novels were widely inaccurate, but they adhered so perfectly to popular American stereotypes that a reviewer wrote admiringly, "Her pictures of the Russian aristocracy confused or imperturbable at the trend of events, brilliant, dissolute and sophisticated, are most convincingly authentic and sharp."[30]

Set in the early years of the First World War,[31] *Miss Amerikanka* is both a travelogue through war-torn Russia and a romance between the narrator, a granddaughter of a slave-owning Southern aristocrat, and a Russian nobleman, Novinsky. While the hypersensitive and intensely aristocratic Novinsky struggles to free his country from German intrigue and treachery, Miss Amerikanka, the eponymous heroine, struggles to define Russia as a young civilization endowed with an ancient and mystical soul. The novel contains many platitudes about the ancient Russian soul and its connection to a mystical Asia. Gilbreath's characters philosophize at length about the unrequited passion of the East and the pain of peoples who belong to the steppes. As the novel progresses across Russia—from Vladivostok to Petrograd to Moscow to Tver—Miss Amerikanka finds that travel undoes all certainty of knowing and description. "America is a melting pot, but

Russia holds her elements unamalgamated. Her paradoxes are unresolved; to state a truth about her is to be false to her."[32] At the end of the novel, there is little resolution, and Novinsky prophesies rather presciently that for the next hundred years there will be more suffering for Russians. Since Gilbreath romanticizes the Russian aristocracy as sensitive, cultured people, adored by their social inferiors, it proves impossible for her to explain the class-war aspect of the Russian Revolution and the violent class conflict that resulted in the aftermath of 1917. Because Gilbreath fails to redeem Novinsky from his political conservatism and leaves him in the premodern world of aristocratic estates and fixed social orders, he cannot escape to a democratic America. His political backwardness ineluctably dooms him to an uncertain future and possible death in the maelstrom of the Russia Revolution.

Given the widespread belief in upward mobility in the United States, it proved difficult for most Americans to understand the class dimensions of the Russian events of 1917. Even though the United States had experienced intense bouts of labor conflicts, starting with the great Pullman strike of 1894 in Illinois, the textile strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912, the Ludlow mine massacre of 1914 in Colorado, and the wide-scale resumption of worker opposition and strikes after the end of World War I, American politics remained firmly wedded to reformism. Although radical novelists such as Jack London and Upton Sinclair criticized rampant capitalism and the social effects of wage slavery, they advocated reform and electoral politics, rather than class war and bloody revolution.[33] The Russian revolution offered a more violent resolution to class conflict, but that was an option that few American novelists adopted in their own fiction. The growing labor movement in the United States was efficiently suppressed by the Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer, during the Red Scare of 1918–1919. Advocates of the Bolshevik revolution such as John Reed and Louise Bryant were publicly grilled in Congress, and, in December 1919, 294 radicals, including Emma Goldman, the infamous Russian anarchist who proved unwilling and unable to assimilate to the American mainstream, were formally deported to the Soviet Union.

These political events cast a pall on the production of politically themed literature as well as the organization of radical politics in the 1920s. Both slowly reemerged in tandem with the onset of Depression in 1929. Even so, American novelists analyzed the transformation of the consciousness of the individual hero and heroine, rather than the actions of the proletarian class, and most of the novels ended with a general strike rather than with a victorious socialist revolution. Despite Mike Gold's exhortation to American writers to "go left" in his famous 1929 column in the *New Masses*, very few American novelists produced novels that were set in the Soviet Union. When Charles Ashleigh has his proletarian hero migrate to the Soviet Union to flee police persecution in the United States in his novel, *The Rambling Kid*

(1930),[34] this literary ending proved to be the exception to the rule. The few popular novels from this period were either set in prerevolutionary Russia or, in one case, featured the gripping adventures of a gang of Russian *bezprizorniki* (orphans and street urchins) rooting out sabotage within the Soviet secret police.[35] Events in the Soviet Union were so fantastic that they needed little fictional embellishment, and left-leaning American journalists such as Louis Fischer, Anna Louise Strong, and Ella Winter, rather than novelists, took the lead in reporting on the revolutionary changes taking place in the Soviet Union.

SEDUCTIONS EAST AND WEST

While Ernst Lubitsch's comedy *Ninotchka* (1939) remains one of the best-known and most beloved of all Soviet-themed films made by Hollywood, the overwhelming popularity of the movie, both commercial and critical, eclipses the fact that, while Ninotchka was transformed into a good American heroine, her lover, Count Leon D'Algout, was terribly attracted to her revolutionary certitude. While the icy demeanor of the Russian heroine, Yakushova, slowly thaws onscreen under the double onslaught of the count's skilled lovemaking and the temptations of Western consumer culture, within the pages of popular fiction American men were continuing to fall in love with revolutionary Russian women. Their real-life counterparts, famous American journalists and scholars of the Soviet Union such as William Chamberlin, Louis Fischer, and John Scott, married Soviet women that they met in the course of their travels. In the previous decades, Anna and Rose Strunsky, radical émigrés from Russia, had played an important role in shaping the politics of an entire cohort of influential American writers and socialists, including that of Jack London and William English Walling.[36]

Myra Page's novel *Moscow Yankee* (1935)[37] tells the story of Frank Anderson, a working-class hero, who, through his love affair with the revolutionary beauty Natasha, discovers the true meaning of socialism and romance. Although reviewers were critical of Page's uncritical admiration of all things Soviet, especially women, the novel was considered important enough to merit a review in the *New York Times*.[38] Frank Anderson, better known as Andy, like many real-life American workers in the Depression-era United States, moves to the Soviet Union in search of a temporary job at the Red Star Truck Plant in Moscow.[39] He lacks both ambition and class consciousness and is initially despised by the Russian heroine, Natasha, a committed worker who is studying to be an engineer. Like the heroine of *Ninotchka*, Natasha is a firm believer in the socialist order, and both her feminist confidence and her sexual allure are inextricably tied to her ideological certainty about the correct workings of historical materialism and

her mastery of technology. The Russian heroines in *Ninotchka* and *Moscow Yankee* are initially repelled by the spiritual and ideological emptiness of the American male protagonists. They marvel at the American men's ability to live without conscious thought about the future or conscious design for the present. As Nina Yakushova ominously tells Count D'Algout, "your type will be extinct soon!"

Myra Page, a well-published academic who received her doctorate from the University of Minnesota, was a member of the American Communist Party and a seasoned reporter on American labor politics. She spent two years in the Soviet Union producing articles for socialist journals in the United States and writing for the Communist Party publication, *Moscow News*.[40] She was well aware of the conventions of socialist realism that mandated representing the glorious future of the Soviet Union and overlooking its imperfect present.[41] But, unlike the bulk of the socialist realist novels produced in the Soviet Union, in which the heterosexual romance is subordinated to the development of the hero's consciousness under the tutelage of a wise party mentor, Page uses the bourgeois conventions of the bildungsroman to power her plot.[42] Page based her heroine, Natasha, on her Russian friend Valya Cohen and tried to draw an accurate picture of the "New Soviet Woman" for American audiences in both her journalistic articles and her novel.[43]

In the 1930s, the Soviet Union provided endless examples of successful, independent, and strong women who could climb mountains, fly planes, run industries, and fire automated weaponry with aplomb.[44] Fellow travelers and journalists such as Ella Winter, Maurice Hindus, and Jessica Smith wrote admiringly about Soviet affirmative-action policies that were designed to introduce women to productive labor, higher education, and management positions in agriculture and industry. They approvingly described the many Soviet services that were designed to relieve women of household duties.[45] They claimed that Russians, unlike Americans, were remarkably frank, scientific, and pragmatic about sexual matters and that there was little false prudery as education about sexuality was widely available. Men no longer treated women as chattel, and women had sexual freedom unrestricted by either law or bourgeois codes of morality. Examples of Soviet heroines, both fictional and real, added to the general unease among conservative Americans already outraged about the radical implications of the Soviet revolution, including the granting of women's right to sexual freedom, legalization of abortions, and the state's assumption of responsibility for the education and development of children.[46]

Observing Natasha's socialist convictions, her dedication to workers' welfare, and her mastery of industrial technology, Andy begins to compare her favorably to Elsie, his frivolous and materialistic girlfriend back home in Detroit. Andy's growing socialist consciousness comes from his reflections on the perceived differences between Natasha and Elsie. Elsie is

shallow and money-minded, but Natasha slaps Andy when he tries to buy her love with a pair of silk stockings.[47] She exhibits a revolutionary disdain for the pettiness of everyday life and the middle-class conventions of love and marriage. While Elsie is petit bourgeois and limited and represents the decaying capitalist order, Natasha harbors vast global ambitions on behalf of the working class. Elsie lives in fear of the Depression-ridden present, while Natasha passionately believes in the socialist future. Natasha, instead of being domesticated into a bourgeois American wife, turns the American laggard male into an exemplary worker and empowers him to find meaning in both everyday life and the socialist community of workers. The absent and much-maligned Elsie is ably duplicated in Russia by Mary Boardman, the bored and vacuous housewife whose only ambition in life is to set an elegant table and host a bridge party. Philip Boardman, an energetic engineer who is, like Andy, employed at the Red Star Truck Plant, is tired of his wife's inanity and her complaints about the poor shopping choices in Russia. Boardman, like Andy, is also attracted to Natasha's energy, revolutionary ardor, and self-confidence. He is equally impressed by the Soviet approach to industrialization, one that valorizes science, technology, and the romance of production without any gross thoughts of commercial profits and costs.

Natasha seduces Andy with her love of high culture and her deep understanding of socialist ideology. Unlike Elsie, who wants Andy to "improve" himself so that he will move up to a white-collar position, Natasha believes that education and culture are valuable tools to broaden and deepen self-realization. She introduces Andy to socialist literature, opera, and symphonic music. At the end of the novel, Andy has to decide whether to leave the Soviet Union, like some of his more disillusioned American colleagues, who are irritated by the many inconveniences of life in the Soviet Union, or to live in the land of socialism with Natasha. Although Myra Page herself chose to come back to the United States, Andy decides to make his life in the Soviet Union. Andy fortuitously discovers that his former fiancée, Elsie, has been cheating on him, and this allows him to break off his engagement without guilt or embarrassment. Natasha is an unredeemable Russian, who cannot travel, migrate, or assimilate to the American mainstream. By choosing Natasha, Andy perforce has to choose the Soviet Union. The geographical location of the romance contains the communist revolution within the Soviet Union. The dynamic and energetic Natasha is securely limited to the Soviet Union and poses little threat to the capitalistic order of the United States.

Ninotchka, unlike the many anti-Soviet films produced by Hollywood in the 1920s and the 1930s, was a lighthearted comedy that became an unexpected box-office success. Subsequently, it was used as a major anti-communist propaganda tool by American authorities during the Cold War and was distributed widely in Western Europe.[48] In the film, Nina Ivanovna

Yakushova (played brilliantly by Greta Garbo) is sent on a mission to Paris to ensure the sale of jewels confiscated during the Revolution from a Russian aristocrat, the Grand Duchess Swana. The jewels will pay for much-needed agricultural machinery that will help the Soviet state grow more grain for its hungry people. Unsmiling, incorruptible, and completely dedicated to both the party and the Soviet people, the movie charts Yakushova's slow seduction by the consumer goods of the West and the lighthearted attitude about life espoused by the hero, Count Leon D'Algout (Melvyn Douglas as a decadent and amusing man about town).[49] By the end of the movie, the impressive Yakushova becomes Ninotchka, and the Russian diminutive of her name signals the veritable contraction of her once-towering personality. As the camera charts Yakushova's gradual sexual and emotional awakening, we also watch the slow erosion of her socialist convictions. She is distracted by the pleasures that Paris has to offer, and her single-minded dedication to the welfare of her people, which has dominated her consciousness prior to her arrival in Paris, is slowly diluted.

The film contrasts the gaiety and romance of Paris with the drabness of Soviet communal living, where cooking an omelet for a party strains the combined resources of several families. Leisure in the Soviet Union consists of regimented parades, while Paris boasts of endless amusements, opulent restaurants, and sumptuous balls. The movie suppresses inconvenient truths about the Great Depression, the breadlines, and the massive unemployment that gripped Western Europe and the United States in the 1930s.[50] It also ignores the fact that, by this time, living standards were improving considerably in the Soviet Union. Soviet women were being encouraged to dress attractively and shop at newly opened stores, and the state was orchestrating a variety of mass festivals and public holidays for popular consumption, partly to deflect attention from the Great Terror.

The film is ostensibly about Ninotchka's defection to the West and her falling in love with both Western fashion and Hollywood-style romance. The West is represented as the apotheosis of individualism embedded in the monogamous heterosexual relationship, a place where the quest for sexual desire is more important than individual responsibility for the commonweal. However, the film is also about the Leon's unquenchable passion for a doctrinaire and humorless revolutionary, Yakushova, who sharply criticizes his frivolity and lack of purpose in life. D'Algout rejects the Grand Duchess Swana, a stylish representative of the Russian nobility who is well integrated into Western society, and instead ardently pursues the complex ideological challenge that Yakushova represents. While Swana, like Elsie, is selfish and grasping, Yakushova sacrifices her love for the count and returns to the Soviet Union to serve the party and the state. In the end, Leon, aided by three Soviet officials who have defected to the West, manages to arrange for Yakushova's "escape" from her dreary life in a shared communist apartment.

TOWARD A CONCLUSION

From the vantage of the twenty-first century, one can discern patterns of American desire for the Russian other: a longing that seemingly transcends the limitations imposed by time, space, and ideological differences. Despite the many official interdictions on Russian-American relations, novelists and film producers featured Russian heroes and heroines as their star attractions and explored their charisma and powers of seduction. While in the tsarist era these Russian protagonists tended to be aristocratic nihilists or reform-minded aristocrats, Soviet heroines dazzled and enthralled American men with their socialist credentials, their capacity for self-reflection, and their unswerving dedication to the cause of humanity. But, while the Russian-American romance was nurtured by the erotic linking of revolution and culture, at the same time there was an overwhelming need to Americanize the Russian protagonists and render them more familiar and ordinary. Ninotchka's conversion to the American way of life was simply the latest installment in a series of Russian heroes and heroines who had undergone similar transformations in earlier works of fiction.

The success of *Ninotchka* inspired many similar films, such as *Comrade X* (1940), *He Stayed for Breakfast* (1941), featuring Melvyn Douglas as a socialist hero, and *Silk Stockings* (1957), a musical version of *Ninotchka*, but none of them proved either as popular or as memorable as the original. While a comprehensive survey of Russian-American films in the post–Second World War era lies outside the purview of this essay, we find that many of them reverted to the prerevolutionary trope of redemption. Most of the plots revolved around the successful attempts of the American hero to de-ideologize the Russian heroine, to stamp out her vestigial attachment to socialist community, and to remake her as a suitable American wife and consumer. Without exception, in one film after the other, the Russian heroine is "humanized" for American consumption. We watch the Russian heroine lose her feminist self-sufficiency, her moral rectitude, and her global revolutionary consciousness. And we in the audience cringe as she develops an unquenchable passion for individualism, consumerism, and heterosexual romance.[51] She becomes a Samson shorn of his locks, a gross simplification of her former complex self, a shopaholic, "a warm and tender woman," and a monogamous bourgeois mate![52]

In the last few episodes of *Sex and the City*, we find that Carrie has followed Petrovsky to Paris. Once in Europe, Petrovsky, like Count Hohenhals in *The Chasm*, reverts to type. He proves to be selfish and completely self-absorbed, thinking only about his upcoming art exhibition. He neglects the glamorous but intensely insecure Carrie, who wilts like a hothouse flower, deprived of Manhattan air and the cozy but provincial conviviality of her little sorority. Carrie finds that Petrovsky cannot be reconstructed; He defies Carrie's attempts to Americanize him, to bend him to her will, and to change his style of romance. He selfishly uses both Carrie and America to

relaunch his fading artistic career, but he cannot become an American. At the end of the series, Carrie returns to New York, single and available, because Petrofsky cannot be reformed into a dependable American husband. His exoticism, like his accent, remains unaffected, and he remains unequivocally a Russian *intelligent* to the very end of the season. The cultured, glamorous, and ideologically complex Russian hero/heroine lives on in our popular imagination, tantalizingly out of reach and evading our best efforts to ideologically remake him or her into a mirror image of ourselves. As such, these compelling images of Russians continue to provide intellectual fodder for cultural propaganda, popular entertainment, and scholars of international relations.

NOTES

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6 Russia on Their Mind
How Hollywood Pictured the Soviet Front

Beth Holmgren

When the United States and the Soviet Union joined forces in World War II, Hollywood undertook an international mission of daunting complexity. Invaded by the Germans in June 1941, the Soviet Union ceased being the Third Reich's willing partner under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and became the Allies' most important, neediest ally, suffering the brunt of the Germans' attack along the war's lone European front.[1] Because this enemy-turned-ally remained suspect to the American public, the Roosevelt administration, through its new Office of War Information, appealed to the film industry to improve Russia's image, "to humanize [its people] and whitewash Stalinism."[2] After decades of caricaturing or demonizing the Soviet Union, Hollywood somehow had to sell American moviegoers a sympathetic and compelling Soviet experience.

Almost every major Hollywood studio willingly complied, producing a positive picture about the Soviet front as part of its war effort. Most of these films circulated briefly and then were shelved as potentially toxic artifacts. Several, such as Samuel Goldwyn Studios' *The North Star* (1943) and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Song of Russia* (1944), would become infamous as the targets of the postwar House Un-American Activities Committee.[3] As these movies were being made, however, their producers worried little about political missteps and much more about their capacity to present the Soviet war realistically and persuasively. Screenwriters, directors, production designers, cinematographers, and actors scrambled to heed the call to duty and to meet the bottom line, to bear witness and to entertain. They realized that they were taking a leap into the dark even as they promised enlightenment. The studios had to reproduce the sights of a little-known Soviet Union as well as approximate the unprecedented horrors that the Germans were inflicting on soldiers and civilians whom they deemed to be subhuman. A closer look at how five pro-Soviet wartime fiction films were made—*The North Star*, *Song of Russia*, Columbia Pictures' *The Boy from Stalingrad* (1943), R&F Productions' *Three Russian Girls* (1943), and RKO's *Days of Glory* (1944)—reveals the strange combinations and substitutions that each studio risked in effectively imagining the Soviet front.