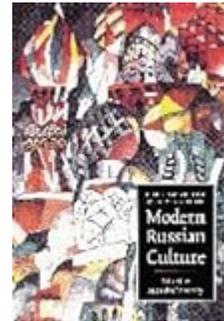




**Nicholas Rzhevsky, ed.** *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xxviii + 372 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-47218-0.



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## Confirming the Canon

Cambridge University Press has begun to produce “Cambridge Companions,” it would appear, as a introductory reference tool for undergraduates looking for overviews of various media in the arts of various societies, in this case Russia. Neither a dictionary nor an encyclopedia, the work provides article-length pieces on broad cultural topics. Unlike typical anthologies, this one is carefully organized to cover the important “art” forms, if in orthodox terms. As a result, readers won’t find new interpretations in Nicholas Rzhevsky’s edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*. They will find valuable tools to orient students with basic information and further study.

The contents are divided into two sections: “Cultural Identity” and “Literature and the Arts.” The former addresses themes that have influenced all art forms: “Language,” “Religion: Russian Orthodoxy,” “Asia,” “Ideological Structures,” and “Popular Culture.” The titles are sweeping and suggest the breadth of material included. Two issues become clear across these essays (and the second part as well). The first is the ambivalent, but influential relationship to the West. Even Mark Bassin, in his fas-

inating discussion of “Asia” persuasively argues that for Russians “Asia” had little meaning until the eighteenth century and then acquired meaning as a result of Russia’s increasing orientation to the West. The second issue is the tendency to focus on past traditions. According to Dmitry Likhachev, “The vigorous adherence of Eastern Christianity to church traditions...helped it to survive the Ottoman Turks’ occupation of the Byzantine Empire, Bulgaria, and Serbia, and in Russia to withstand the reign of Peter I, and to live through seventy years of the Soviet government’s unrelenting atheism”(p. 39). He also seems to be saying that this focus saved not only Russian Christianity, but Russian culture as a whole.

“Literature and the Arts” presents overviews of the major artistic media: “Literature,” “Art” (which is mostly painting, although John Bowlt does discuss the cross-fertilization with other genres and media), “Theatre,” “Music,” and “Film.” These titles suggest the range of information potentially found in the essays. Other media, such as dance and architecture, receive some peripheral attention in related chapters. The chronological focus is “modern,” which as Rzhevsky points out in his introduc-

tion, usually encompasses from the mid-nineteenth century on. The primary emphasis, however, is the “Silver Age” at the turn of the century. The essays as a group demonstrate the extraordinary vitality of artistic activity at that time.

On the other hand, the discussions of the era since 1940 are weak. Bowlt and Nikita Lary (“Film”) are exceptions. There are several reasons for the imbalance beyond the most obvious that the earlier era is the scholarly focus of most of the contributors. Part of the relative inattention could be a result of the fact that the Silver Age was so rich and the post-Stalin era pales by comparison. But the prejudice is also embedded in the introduction’s claim of “Russian cultural deintellectualization” as a result of Communist Party policy (p. 8). While there is some truth to that understanding for the years leading up to roughly 1957, it ignores the changes, a “reintellectualization” if you will, that made possible the events of the Gorbachev era. Bowlt’s success is in his characterization of the era as “the slow but sure rediscovery of the avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s...[and] the sporadic encounter with contemporary Western culture” (p. 228).

The main objection to the collection is its effort to be “definitive.” What is most lacking is an effort to introduce students to the critical element of interpretation. Most of the essays offer only summary. Perhaps that is why Bassin’s “Asia” in the most interesting essay. He not only makes an argument that the notion of “Asia” as

an alternative to “the West” is a recent invention. He also acknowledges conflicting interpretations and unresolved questions. (On the other hand, as a result of his choice, the companion omits any discussion of the actual influence of the Mongols on Russian culture.) While contributors may have wanted to extend the shelf life of the work by not “dating” their essays, the bibliography inevitably dates the work. The recent debates surrounding Dmitri Shostakovich’s work offers one obvious missed opportunity.

The volume provides a host of supplementary materials in an easily accessible format. For instance, an extensive chronology links major cultural production to the historical context. The bibliography, including many primary sources, is divided according to the chapters. The filmography is most substantial, although, given the target audience of English-speaking students, an indication of which films are available with subtitles would have been helpful.

The *Companion* is a useful tool as far as it goes. It provides neat introductions to the familiar faces and movements in Russian artistic history, as has been conventionally defined.

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