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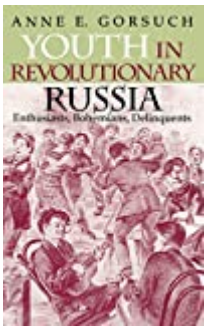

Anne E Gorsuch. *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians and Delinquents.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. x + 274 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33766-5.

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Let's Talk About Sex: Youth, Foucault, and the Soviet State

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Remember when DNA stood for someone's initials and the professor in your Russian History graduate seminar never mentioned "Postmodernism" or Foucault? Anne E. Gorsuch's book, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, and Delinquents*, left me pondering nostalgically about those days. This is not to say that Gorsuch's book is a meaningless rendition of theoretical jargon. On the contrary, it is an invaluable source on NEP's youth culture and an excellent summary of early Soviet material and recent Western literature on the subject. According to the author, the book "explores the relationships between representation and reality, between official ideology and popular culture, and the meaning of these relationships for the making of a 'Soviet' state and society" (p. 2). In other words, the author seems to address the question of what it meant to be "Soviet," "communist," or "revolutionary" to different social elements in the Soviet Union during the first decades after the Revolution. However, Gorsuch's vision of youth culture as an element of popular culture is based on theoretical formulas, such as the concept of the conflict between "self" and "other," and the power of the state over a culture that suits its purposes. In terms of the relationship between representation and reality, and between official ideology and popular culture, her exploration remains basically a rendition of the interpretations of Soviet social scientists in the 1920s or of Western historians' research on the subject. Thus, the vision her presentation affords us is rather theoretical, and far from realistic.

The first chapter, "The Politics of Generation," describes the concept of "youth" as a political and cultural "metaphor" which went beyond "a stage in human development" to imply a "youthful state of mind, a revolutionary way of perceiving the world" (p. 16). The discussion also focuses on the generation gap that existed between the younger and older generations, and the difference between "adult," as opposed to "youth" responses to Bolshevik cultural ideals. One of the elements of Gorsuch's argument is that there were serious contradictions as to the political significance of youth, as to how youth would be accommodated in the communist culture, and even as to what this "communist culture" was exactly.

According to Gorsuch, revolutionary values had become contradictory by the 1920s (p. 19). As the state endeavored to create a youth culture that could respond to its needs and attempted to enforce communist standards for youth culture, the contradictions engendered by this period of transformation only exaccerbated the gap between generations, and between the expectations and concepts that both generations had about what it meant to be "Soviet" or "communist". The results, as Gorsuch argues, were a stronger government control over youth culture on the one hand, and youth's recalcitrant resistance to imposed values, on the other.

Chapter 2 "The Urban Environment" describes the atmosphere engendered by the contradictions she points out in the first chapter. Gorsuch uses the term "anxiety" to describe the psychological effects of these contradictions, not only for the state but also for Soviet youth in general. As the author reminds us: "A central argument of this book is that culture had a vital impact on the socioeconomic and political relation of NEP, but clearly behavior and belief were also influenced by the social and material experiences of this difficult period" (p. 30). She gives a vivid depiction of the dire, social and economic conditions that affected the attitudes of youngsters in the early 1920s, including the crowded housing facilities, high unemployment, the competition between young workers and their more mature, better qualified counterparts. The result of these conditions was "disillusionment," which, in turn, led to the Bolsheviks' inability to "educate and inspire the new generation"(p. 39). Consequently, the state began to regard youth as a dangerous force in view of its "potential to resist as well as support" (p.40) Bolsheviks' attempts to transform culture.

The next three chapters–"Making Youth Communist," "Excessess of Enthusiasm," and "Gender and Generation"–deal with different aspects of youth culture in view of the experience of youngsters in the Komsomol. They all treat the subject of contradiction and the resulting "anxiety" discussed in the first two chapters. "Making Youth Communist" points out the contradictions between the Bolshevik leadership's model of "communist youth" and that of the Komsomol youth. But part of her argument seems to contradict the original statements concerning "disillusionment," since Gorsuch argues that "the league's activities and ideology offered a new identity, as well as new opportunities" (p. 43). She does offer interesting insight on the obstacles the Bolshevik authorities encountered when attempting to establish a communist value system for youth through political education. Soviet youngsters' knowledge of history during NEP, for example, was apparently as surreal as that of Western students today: "For some youth who grew up after the revolution, facts about the revolution and the Civil War were already considered history, something to be memorized, rather than a vital part of living memory. Many insisted, for example, that the February revolution occurred after the October revolution, because they learned about the October events in the first trimester of school, but the February revolution in the second" (p. 77).

Chapter 4, "Excesses of Enthusiasm," discusses one of the book's three main "characters": the "enthusiasts". Militancy grew in a portion of the youth population as a reaction against the cultural conditions under NEP. The government's *smychka* politics eliminated the "clearly defined 'other' " and introduced a number of abstract "enemies" such as religion and illiteracy. As a result, the "diminished sense of difference between 'us' and 'them,' between communist and non-communist, made identity less certain than it had been, and led to both disillusionment and anger among some young people" (p.82). Consequently, NEP itself became the new enemy. Many youngsters embraced a revolutionary counter-culture of militancy, which manifested itself in desdain for the established social standards in clothing and behavior, for example (p. 87-95).

Chapter 5, "Gender and Generation," discusses the situation with female youth and the obstacles they encountered in a male-dominated Komsomol environment, which actually represented a microcosm of Soviet society in general. Trapped by a society that could not economically cater to their needs and a culture that was still male-dominated, women remained bound by their traditional responsibilities and gender roles as housewives and mothers. Unlike their male counterparts, who were allowed to stay "young" longer, women were forced to "grow up" and become "adults" (p. 97). According to the author, "all that it took to marginalize young women was their sex...," which was "associated with the non-revolutionary sphere of the private and of the adult partially because of their ability to have children, for example" (p. 115).

Revolutionary participation, for example in Komsomol activities, was very difficult for young women. Consequently, they remained in the "periphery" of revolutionary society and culture, and suffered marginalization not only politically, but also culturally and socially (p.97). Only those who broke away from the traditional female roles and became "masculine," were able to remain active participants in the Komsomol, only to find themselves

marginalized further by young men disgusted with their "*Komsomol'ka* masculinity."

The last three chapters pertain to the other "characters" Gorsuch mentions in her title: the bohemians and delinquents. Chapter 6, "Flappers and Foxtrotters," deals with the counter-culture NEP economic and social revival encouraged. "Dance and dress had political meaning in the unsettled and contentious environment of NEP" (p. 137). Youngsters used "the language of clothing to express their resistance to communist norms and to define themselves as anti-Bolshevik" (p. 135). On the other hand, the authorities understood this defiance as a dangerous political message, and reacted with stricter, disciplinary measures (p. 138).

Chapter 7, "Life and Leisure on the Street," concerns the issue of *bezprizornye* (homeless children) and the inability of the Soviet authorities to effectively reintegrate these homeless children into society. The discussion includes interesting data on the internal conditions and problems inside children and youth communes for *bezprizornye*, the "*detdom*," (orphanage) as well as a convincing argument as to the contradictory nature of Bolshevik policy, which acknowledged the state's responsibility as caretaker, while at the same time considering *bezprizornye* a social nuissance rather than innocent victims.

The final chapter, "Discourse of Delinquency," treats the subject of hooliganism and how the Soviet authorities handled the problem in view of their "anxiety" to control youth subcultures that did not fit the Bolsheviks' cultural and social standards. According to Gorsuch, the state developed a vision with intensely negative connotations. Hooligans were "primitive" and "sick," closer to an animal or "beast" that to a human being in terms of their behavior (pp. 170-174). Much like Foucault's social elements, Soviet hooligans were subjected to the state's control of "undesirables," by means of the "creation of the alien 'other' attitude towards this group" (p. 174). In addition, rhetoric emphasizing hooliganism as an "illness" also led to a vision of the danger of "infection" and "contamination," which legitimized the authorities need to protect "healthy youth" by imposing a rigid system of isolation and control (p. 176). The author concludes her presentation with a discussion on the most extreme reaction to the state's demands and control over youth: suicide as the ultimate wheapon of resistance in an "age of anxiety" (pp. 176-181).

Gorsuch's book is an excellent source on the subject of youth during NEP. The subject is interesting, and the information useful. The amount of important secondary material summarized in one source makes it almost encyclopedic in its academic value. I would recommend it as required reading for a graduate reading seminar on Soviet culture, for example. I also acknowledge the author's understanding of the sub-topics she develops as complementary issues to the main subject of youth. Her methodological approach, i.e. fitting the data into the numerous theoretical arguments concerning identity, popular culture, and its relationship to state power, will also contribute to students' understanding of the application of these theories to historical evidence.

However, I find a number of problems with the data and the way it is presented. First of all, the information Gorsuch uses, as I mentioned before, is mostly secondary. Out of one hundred ninety-four notes for Chapter 3, only thirty-three are original archival annotations. Chapter 4 includes twelve archival notes out of a total of seventy-nine, less than ten percent. At the beginning of Chapter 5, Gorsuch states: "My material suggests the difficulties of restructuring gender relations even in the most conscious of revolutionary situations" (p. 97), but only twenty-seven out of ninety-three annotations include archival material to substantiate such a powerful statement. In view of this, the reader cannot be sure whether Gorsuch is presenting original arguments or whether they are a combination of other authors' own conclusions. Hence, I find it useless to add alternative views and opinions of other scholars who have dealt with the subject in my review, since Gorsuch has already mentioned most of them as part of her own arguments.

In addition, the author sometimes comments on attitudes and feelings without presenting further evidence, as for example when she explains the Bolsheviks' ideal model of youth, adding that young people "too sometimes objected" (p.22), without further developing this point. In fact, the silence of Gorsuch's characters is definitely the most troubling aspect of the book. Gorsuch includes mysterious characters such as enthusiasts, bohemians, and delinquents, that immediately capture a reader's attention. The titles for the chapters, "Flappers and Foxtrotters" and "Life and Leisure on the Street," also lead the reader to think that her presentation is about people, and about what they thought or how they felt. But Gorsuch rarely allows these enthusiasts, delinquents, flappers, and bohemians to speak out for themselves. Much like the Soviet state in Gorsuch's argument, the author herself seems "anxiously" trying to control the thoughts, attitudes, and lifestyles of her subjects, disregarding their views; and instead acknowledg-

ing the opinions of "experts," which she quotes incessantly. There are instances in which she quotes archival data, such as secret letters, which allows us a glimpse at the attitudes of these youngsters first hand. Unfortunately, Gorsuch uses this data only rarely throughout her presentation, and in fact, chooses to relegate most of it to the endnotes, as comments, instead of including it in the text (p.61, note 109; p. 80, note 190; p. 81, note 4).

Although Gorsuch's argument is well developed throughout the book, she seems somewhat obsessed with the idea of fitting Foucault's theoretical blueprint into her view of the situation of Soviet youth. In her Introduction, she indicates that her book will point out the ways "in which popular culture is about politics, power, and relationships" (p. 6). But the main elements of this formula, such as the political complexities of NEP, the contradictions in Bolshevik policy, and the intra-party struggle for leadership between Trotsky, Stalin, and Bukharin (which really defined the different alternatives of the "Bolshevik ideal" for youth) are only mentioned in passing. In addition, she completely ignores the period of Cultural Revolution, an important turning point in the definition of the "communist" and "Soviet" revolutionary model. Personally, I have no objection to a scholarly debate on Foucault. But to try to fit theory into a subject as dynamic, lively, and *human* as youth popular culture in Soviet Russia is another matter. If you want to talk about Foucault, why don't we just … talk about sex….

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