

Art for the Workers: Proletarian Art and Festive Decorations of Petrograd, 1917-1920. By Natalia Murray. Vol. 20, *Russian History and Culture*, eds. Jeffrey P. Brooks and Christina Lodder. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018. Notes on Transliteration and Conventions. Abbreviations and Glossary. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Plates. Photographs. Table. \$142.00, hard bound.

This fascinating book studies the complex history of the development of celebratory, “proletarian” revolutionary festivals in Petrograd - a city often called the “cradle” of revolutions - from February 1917 to November 1921. In support of the arguments put forward, it uses a wealth of novel, textual and visual archival materials from Moscow and St Petersburg, alongside other valuable primary and secondary sources. Given the volatile and shifting nature of the political, social and theoretical context of the period, Murray’s chronological approach seems an appropriate way to tackle the variety of post-revolutionary celebratory events that occurred in Petrograd in the period.

The book has 5 chapters with an “Introduction” and an “Epilogue”. The “Introduction” straightforwardly provides both European and Russian contextual and theoretical bases for the book. Murray particularly foregrounds the contemporary importance of the writings of Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931), a French social psychologist internationally famous for his theories on ways to manipulate the uneducated masses by visual and participatory means, rather than by reasoned arguments. Murray argues throughout the book that his ideas had significant impact on the concepts of manipulating the proletariat through theatrical, artistically designed, celebratory mass events, utilised not only by the Tsarist autocracy in the 1890s-c.1913, but also by the Provisional Government (February-October 1917), and most importantly by the Bolsheviks after October 1917.

The first two chapters provide valuable contextualising evidence from various conflicting, revolutionary and government sources, regarding the origins of a broad, Russian concern with the creation of artistically devised, mass events/celebrations and their desired, propagandistic

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impact on society, before October 1917. Chapter 1 “Roots of Proletarian Culture” mainly focuses on the attempts by exiled members of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDWP), especially Alexandr Bogdanov and Maxim Gorky (Capri 1909, and Bologna winter 1910-1911), and also Vladimir Lenin (Paris 1911) to establish “Workers’ Schools”. While the basic aim of these (failed) schools was to generate politically educated, working-class agitators, there was apparently an acknowledgement within the Party, both abroad and in Russia, that proletarian revolution also required the development of a proletarian art and culture with mass appeal. The central questions addressed by the Party were always about what the art should look like, and who should make it – essentially, these are the also the central questions pursued by the book.

Chapter 2, “Festivals and Proletarian Art under the Tsars and the Provisional Government,” briefly discusses mass Tsarist, secular and religious celebrations and the influence of their imagery on the festivals/demonstrations of the early Revolutionary period. The chapter, however, focuses mainly on festive celebrations organised by the Provisional Government, February- October 1917, using wonderfully unfamiliar archival imagery.

The last three chapters deal with the development, contextual political problems, and perceived successes of mass festival celebrations in the early Soviet period. Chapter 3, “Narkompros versus Proletkult: Festivals and Proletarian Art after the Revolution”, for example, is mainly concerned with the unsuccessful, factional struggle between Bogdanov’s briefly autonomous “Proletkult” organisation, and the opposition to it by Lenin and by IZO Narkompros, (the state Ministry for Enlightenment), regarding the desired definition of

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“proletarian culture”. Chapter 4, “The Victory of Figuration over Futurism: from Cultural Diversity to Military Parade”, follows on from this to argue that the apparent triumph of Narkompros over Proletkult regarding the control of definitions of “proletarian culture”, led to the marginalisation of the so-called “Futurist” artists and writers whom it had previously supported. The final chapter, “Street Art – Collective, Politicised: the New Public Spectacle,” looks more closely at what appears to have been the most successful celebratory “proletarian” art form of the period, the development of mass theatrical events 1920-21, that as Murray argues, provided a new and more convenient (to the Bolsheviks), and inspiring interpretation of past and present events as the apparently certain path to socialist utopia in Russia.

The “Epilogue” is a relevant summary of the main points of the arguments, albeit with an, unsubstantiated but predictable, post-Soviet Russian punch-line – that the success of the Bolshevik Revolution was a disaster for the people of the (ex-) Russian Empire from the very start. Despite this, as well as minor glitches in English syntax, and exactness of some bibliographic and index listings, the book is worth its weight in gold for the ground-breaking wealth of new imagery and information that it makes available. The 117 illustrations are very small. But they are, at least, mainly clear and can be seen to support the arguments in valuable ways. (738 words)

Dr Pat Simpson,

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