
First published:
http://www.oei-dokumente.de/JGO/Rez/Kuromiya_Griesse_Comm...

The opening of the formerly secret archives in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union vastly expanded the historical sources available to scholars, making it possible to study the minds of Soviet citizens under Stalin who were not free to speak. Interestingly, the study of the Soviet people as individuals led to diametrically opposed views of them, one camp (the “Subjectivist School”) emphasizing their integration into the regime (which left no or little separate space for the public and the self) and the other camp (the “Resistance School”) stressing the ubiquity of their open and hidden resistance to the regime. While Malte Griesse notes that the Stalinist regime was not monolithic, he asserts that the manifestations of critical thinking in Soviet society were certainly marginalized. Griesse takes issue with the Subjectivist School, criticizing it as preoccupied with the vertical link between a Soviet subject and the regime: the state sought to fashion the soul of the individual, who in turn tried to perfect a self in which the public and the private were merged without contradiction. The fact that Soviet idealism and reality diverged inevitably created room for critical thinking. According to the Subjectivist School, however, even such critical thinking was trapped in the mode of Stalinist discourse (concepts, vocabulary, and logic), which in turn demonstrated the degree to which Soviet individuals were integrated into the Stalinist system. By taking the Soviet subject’s discourse at face value, according to Griesse, the School’s approach becomes inevitably ahistorical.

Rather than a dominant vertical relationship between the individual and the state, Griesse sees micro spaces of horizontal, inter-subjective relations among individuals. It was in these spaces of inter-personal communication that inherently subjective views and opinions were confirmed and strengthened or repudiated. It was inter-subjectivity that clarified subjectivity. Griesse’s work therefore is devoted to elucidating the existence, structure, functions, and use of inter-personal links under Stalin. Griesse uses the term “lien” (“link”, “tie” or “connection”), instead of “réseau” (“network” with utilitarian connotations) in order to stress its ideational significance. Likewise, he avoids the terms “subject” (too “Foucauldian”) or “individual” (too close to the liberal concept of “autonomous individual”), using instead “personne” (“person”). In this attempt Griesse seeks to avoid the dichotomies of “repressive vs. constructive/productive”, “reactive vs. proactive”, “exclusive vs. inclusive”, “collectivism vs. individualism”, and “illiberal vs. liberal”. Focusing on Old Bolsheviks, Griesse deploys a wide array of “ego documents” such as diaries, personal correspondence, autobiographies, memoirs, and others. These include records of well-known people such as Stepan Podlubnyi (1914–1998, the subject of work by Jochen Hellbeck) and newly found sources such as private correspondence between the couple Anna G. Kravchenko (1890–1984, an official in the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment) and Aleksandr P. Spande (1892–1962, also a Soviet official).

Griesse’s overall argument is persuasive to a degree. It is particularly strong in rebutting the Subjectivist School’s preoccupation with the vertical line between state and person. Among the many examples Griesse discusses, he singles out Kravchenko and Spande as especially illuminating. The couple and their children (particularly their son Iakov, 1918–1921) left voluminous records of correspondence (some 1,200 letters). In this family space they discussed matters of common concern (social and political issues). Letters with sensitive subjects were delivered by trusted friends. Although exactly when they began to entertain doubts about the Stalinist regime is not entirely clear, by 1940–41 definitely they had developed very critical views of Soviet political life. Griesse emphasizes that it was only in this micro space of communication that they helped one another to think critically. In the process they did not abandon their Bolshevism. Rather they used the old vocabulary of revolutionary idealism (egalitarianism, comradeship, mutual respect, reciprocal engagement) to come to criticize the Stalinist regime. When Griesse discusses Podlubnyi and others who provided ex-