

Zitierhinweis

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 **Reviews**
in History

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Serhy Yekelchuk's *Stalin's Citizens* is a fine work of scholarship, based on painstaking archival research. Yekelchuk, a native of Ukraine who teaches Russian and Ukrainian history at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, is the author of the excellent *Stalin's Empire of Memory* as well as *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (1), in addition to numerous articles. Yekelchuk has spent years in Ukrainian archives in his attempt to interpret the Soviet mystery, and together with people such as Serhii Plokhyy, Hiroaki Kuromiya, John-Paul Himka, Amir Weiner, and Karel Berkhoff has been instrumental in allowing us to understand Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine in an even-handed and profound manner. One of the strengths of their works (which make them fascinating reads for all interested in Soviet history) is the authors' almost unrestricted access to any of the archival materials of the Soviet era that are preserved in Ukraine nowadays (including those of the secret police). For those researching in Russia, such access is unthinkable, for secret-police, military and politically sensitive materials (and many are deemed to be such) remain off-limits.

In *Stalin's Citizens*, Yekelchuk sets out to establish the degree to which Ukrainians in post-war Kyiv felt an emotional attachment to the Soviet Union. Public and ritualistic expression of such a love of country was plentiful, but did people genuinely 'speak Bolshevik', from a heartfelt inner conviction? He investigates the meaning of 'expressing Soviet identity in public spaces', as a gauge to measure this emotional bond. In the end, it seems, he sides with those who suggest that 'genuine belief was less present than ... dissimulation' (p. 3 and p. 221). The massive documentation he has perused, evident from the copious references to archival sources, lends strength to his argument. *1984* this was not. And the Soviet leaders were at least half-aware of this, displaying great anxiety about this lack of enthusiasm about their ideology among the population at large. They spent much effort on inculcating the creed and demanding a steady stream of reports from rank-and-file Party members and communist sympathizers (in this period, many of the thousands of agitators instilling political orthodoxy were not members of the Communist Party) about the popular mindset.

In November 1943, Kyiv was retaken by the Red Army, more than two years after the German-led forces occupied it. The city was in ruinous state (in part because its centre had been blown up by Soviet partisans in the days after the Germans arrived in September 1941), and its population subsequently only slowly returned to its pre-war levels. The rebuilding of certain parts of the city lasted at least until 1960, despite several campaigns to enlist volunteers in post-war reconstruction projects. Some assistance in this was given by German POWs, who seem to have been more effective than an exhausted and emaciated post-war Kiyvite workforce. Indeed, as Yekelchuk points out, in the lack of enthusiasm for such projects one can discern the lack of success of the regime in forging a truly self-sacrificing population, willing to forsake everything for the glory of the communist cause. For much of the decade that Yekelchuk investigates, Kyivites displayed a similar lukewarm enthusiasm, whether measured by the token attendance at (and absence

from) political-education meetings or pro-regime demonstrations, or by meeting the targets of production plans. In the case of the latter, plans tended often to be fulfilled by a genuine race to meet the goals ('storming' or *shturmovshchina*) in the last part of the months (just before the tally was made up), after which a distinct lull set in at the beginning of the next month. People's ostensible affection for the regime was whipped up by agitators during election campaigns for the many elections that punctured the post-war era (no fewer than seven from 1946 to 1953, respectively for the Soviet Union, for the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic, and for local soviets). As Yekelchuk suggests, these pre-election meetings (in themselves farcical as only one candidate stood for office in each district), did present an opportunity for the voters to register some disaffection with their lives (although this had to be done in rather guarded fashion), while the Soviet authorities used them to rally the population behind the flag. As Yekelchuk says, 'inasmuch as elections were a formality, electoral campaigns emerged as the principal venue of citizen interaction with the state in the political domain. An army of volunteer agitators served as a medium in this process, representing the state before its citizens and citizens before the state. ... [This] symbolic interaction with the state therefore included elements of formal political education and subtle negotiation with the state about life's necessities' (p. 142).

Questions raised by the voters pertained to their spartan living conditions, but criticism hardly ever had outright political content. Yekelchuk notes how, during the 18-month limbo that stretched from Kyiv's liberation to the surrender of Nazi Germany, people spoke somewhat more freely or independently, apparently unsure whether or not the whole unforgiving pre-war Stalinist edifice would be resurrected and therefore more inclined to probing the margins (pp. 70-8, 117). Although writing about an ostensibly dry topic, Yekelchuk displays a great sense of irony and humour in his book, which makes it into a rather enjoyable read. He finds some hilariously absurd (and nonetheless telling) examples of how the Soviet system did not work. Thus he tells how '[i]n 1949 city district leaders assigned 1,125 party and Komsomol members to take time off work to volunteer for the construction of the subway [, but] 65 percent of them stopped during the first three months, while others could not cope with the physically demanding job of volunteer miners' (p. 129). Equally amusing is his discussion of the attempt to teach the uninitiated about such arcane texts as the fourth chapter of the *Short Course of the History of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*, the standard textbook for Soviet political history from 1938 onwards, or Stalin's forays into the fields of linguistics and political economy, issued toward the end of his life (pp. 83-4, 96-8). Thus Yekelchuk says about the *Short Course's* chapter four, 'Even learners with college degrees found it challenging, and yet there was no way of excluding this section, which was (correctly) rumored to have been written by Stalin himself' (p. 84).

The book is enlivened by some excellent (and topical) photographs, which very well convey the stilted formality behind the officially proclaimed

fervour. In general, the text has very few errors, although I am not fond of sentences that begin with 'But,' of which there are several. The index is decent (even more detail would have been useful in my, somewhat fastidious, opinion), but there is no bibliography, which is to be lamented. Indeed, its lack may reflect the one shortcoming of the book: its less-than-comprehensive dialogue with the existing literature on the postwar era in Stalin's Soviet Union. One glaring example may suffice: The reviewer may betray a sense of personal pique here, but I think my misgivings go to something more substantial than that: In 1999 I published a book on Tver province's postwar history as *Life and Death under Stalin: Kalinin Province, 1945-1953*.⁽²⁾ While through an error at the Canadian National Library in Ottawa the book received a mistaken Library-of-Congress (in use in Canada as well) catalogue number that makes it appear as if it deals with the former German Königsberg (rather than Tver' in central Russia), it was reviewed in a variety of scholarly journals, including the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of Modern History*. In other words, Yekelchyk should have come across my work in his perusal of secondary sources. While his book is much more cogently argued, and his argument more lucid (I focused on a broader theme, endeavoring to write a sort of 'total history' of the region I had investigated), there is considerable space dedicated in *Life and Death under Stalin* on the lack of success of political education and the failure to create the 'new Soviet man' (or woman) in the post-war period (on the basis of archival research and evidence of an oral-history project). The statement in Yekelchyk's publisher's blurb that this is '[t]he first study of the everyday political life under Stalin', then, is simply not true. Indeed, I encountered quite a few moments in *Stalin's Citizens* in which the author's observations rather closely echoed my own findings: This is not to say that Yekelchyk errs in his conclusions, of course, but I contend that his argument could have been even stronger if he had referred to my book (and several other texts), and thereby have increased the relevance of his findings for Kyiv, which, he implies, go beyond the history of Kyiv and Ukraine (see p. 8, for example; in his notes, Yekelchyk regularly refers to books that deal with Soviet territories outside of Ukraine). Thus, reference to work by Joonseo Song on Magnitogorsk, Juliane Furst on Soviet youth and on late Stalinist Russia, J. Eric Duskin on the Soviet intelligentsia, Larry Holmes on Kirov's Pedagogical Institute, Tim Johnston on late-Stalinist Soviet identities, or Mark Edele on Soviet veterans might have been useful to help Yekelchyk broaden his conclusions. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to blame Yekelchyk for the somewhat over-ebullient words of his publisher. *Stalin's Citizens* accomplishes what few scholarly books do, providing a sound argument embedded in a solid investigation of the evidence. It is written in an accessible and humorous style, making the text a pleasure to read, and allows us once again to reflect on the conundrum of why a system so flawed survived for so long.

Notes

1. Serhy Yekelchyk, *Stalin's Empire of Memory* (Toronto, 2004); *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford, 2007).

2. Kees Boterbloem, *Life and Death under Stalin: Kalinin Province, 1945-1953* (Montreal, 1999).

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.