

Kristin Roth-Ely, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), ix + 315 pp.

Though the demise of the Soviet Union caught many (if not most) observers and scholars unawares, it has since served as a convenient organizational principle for numerous books seeking to explicate aspects of the Soviet experiment and experience. Kristin Roth-Ely's monograph subjects to almost forensic analysis three pillars of the Soviet media establishment, cinema, radio and television from the death of Stalin until 1991. She examines the challenges the new technologies placed on the Soviet leadership and the responses and compromises which the twin constraints of external ideological competition and internal ideological convictions exerted on the system. The author's subtitle indicates the framework in which she reviews her material, namely the effectiveness of the system to make its message heard and absorbed and the reasons for its eventual failure. The author defines her brief as looking 'beyond the fabled intelligentsia gatherings around the kitchen table to consider cultural terrains of a different type: bureaucracies, technologies, social networks, and everyday life practices' (12).

Kristin Roth-Ely starts her analysis by outlining the fundamental nature of Soviet culture as being 'unapologetically elitist and pedagogical' (4) with an audience which was 'a perpetual work in progress, subordinate and needy' (4). This symbiotic relationship, based on a creative tension between the worthwhile and the popular, forms the basis of the following chapters which chart the various iterations of this underlying dynamic. The author considers that the rise of the new media invested the creative intelligentsia with 'exceptional clout in ideological terms' (4) and that the global aspirations of Soviet culture invested it with 'an innate disposition to cosmopolitanism... a sophisticated, confident cultural diversity' (4), but such a rosy picture is not borne out by the narrative which follows. Instead we see the repeated triumph of the party bureaucracy and political expediency.

Chapters One and Two are devoted to the film industry and frame the debate in terms of cinematic success and Soviet movie culture. The inability of the Soviet film industry to finance itself without recourse to the importation of foreign pictures and its ineptitude in exporting Soviet products meant that the much-vaunted goals of education and mobilization were constantly under threat. The setting up

of the Experimental Creative Studio in the 1960s as part of the Kosygin reforms which incorporated a version of the profit motif, although initially successful, was shelved in 1976. Subsequently, the accommodation of the industry under the leadership of Filipp Ermash (1972–1986) and the resultant release of domestic blockbusters only exacerbated the situation. The third chapter explicates the way in which technical and foreign competition moulded the development of Soviet radio. Once again it is the ideological ‘other’ which looms large in the development of the medium. Various production decisions associated with the drive to ‘radiofy’ the country meant that Soviet citizens were able to pick up short-wave foreign broadcasts and in the privacy of their homes make cultural selections which the earlier more communal way of life had largely excluded. In its turn Soviet radio embarked on an ambitious programme of overseas broadcasting but in this case too the experiment with mirroring the opposition brought its own problems. Chapters Four and Five trace the evolution of television from its humble beginnings in the 1950s to virtual total coverage of the country in the 1980s. It proved to be the most successful of the media, yet it too struggled with the creative tension between ‘political correctness’ and consumer demands. The epilogue very effectively sums up the basic argument through a close reading of the film *Moscow doesn't believe in tears*.

In reading this book I was strongly reminded by a Breughel painting in the variety of the material presented and the attention by the author to detail. This book contains a most impressive array of secondary sources: monographs, articles, archival documents, web-sites. The author cites ten archives she consulted in a list of their abbreviations on p. ix, including the GARF, RGALI and RGANI in Moscow. This attentiveness is evident not just in the main themes of the book but also in areas touched on tangentially. A reference to the attitude to car ownership in her discussion of the influence of foreign radio is supported by a reference to Lewis Seigelbaum's book *Cars for Comrades* (2008). The Selected Bibliography runs to twelve pages (287–299). The content is well-argued and jargon-light. The author embellishes her narrative with quirky, apposite and occasionally humorous illustrative instances, for instance, the debacle around the programme VVV (Evening of Merry Questions).

Earlier VVV competitions had attracted at most a few dozen contestants, this challenge brought six to seven hundred to the theatre in the MGU complex where they were broadcasting. It was a hot day and according to eye-witnesses, cars and buses packed with overdressed, sweaty people hauling samovars caused giant traffic jams along local roads. (249)

There is much to recommend in this book but there are several aspects which detract from the final product. The style (as signalled by the subtitle) does not adhere to standard academic discourse but verges on the chatty. Some readers might find this refreshing but I would have preferred a more restrained literary approach. The couching of such a meticulously researched specialist academic treatise in colloquialisms seemed to me to undercut the seriousness of the material. It could be justified as an attempt to bring an esoteric topic to the attention of the generalist reader, however such turns of phrase as ‘These are all, let it be said, piddling figures for Soviet television’ (232) and ‘But what about shortwave production?’ (140) jar in the context of a work which cites numerous academic documents and sources. I also found the repeated use of the substantive ‘Soviets’ as a catch-all phrase designating variously ‘Soviet authorities’ (22, 66, 67, 68, 154, 232), ‘Soviet citizens’ (3, 5, 7, 26, 152), and, possibly in some contexts, ‘Soviet organizations’ and ‘Soviet viewers’. Although the range of Soviet sources consulted is breath-taking the transliteration is not always accurate, usually when the letter ‘ia’ is involved, as in Maia Plisetskaiia which should have been Maiia Plisetskaia. The Moscow Film Festival was a biennial event not a biannual one (109).

All in all this is an impressive work of research, if less so of presentation. There is much of novel value for even a seasoned consumer of Soviet culture. It is hard not to agree with the author’s evaluation that the Soviet media empire was a ‘very successful failure’. My only over-riding reservation is that, should it fall into the hands of local undergraduate students, their already casual approach to the expression of academic niceties might be further reinforced.

Lyndall Morgan
The University of Queensland