

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* by Brigitte Studer and Dafydd Rees Roberts

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two robust though rarely intersecting scholarships—histories of Russia as a multi-confessional empire, and studies of Sufi networks in Russia—and brings Russia into broader narratives of Islamic history. It shows that religious identity in imperial Russia was often fluid; in the Middle Volga region, she notes, religious and ethnic identity often “mutated from one generation to another” (255). It also broadens discussions of “lived Islam” in Russia by bringing women into the story, and demonstrating the dynamism of traditional Islamic education before Tatar reformism (jadidism).

This book is timely, given the growth of Islam in Europe due to immigration and conversion (see Esra Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* [Princeton, 2014]), and renewed debates about the Kräshen apostasies in Tatarstan today (6). Kefeli’s book provides deep history to this current situation, and reminds us of the persistence of tsarist-era history into the present.

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***The Transnational World of the Cominternians.*** By Brigitte Studer. Trans. Dafydd Rees Roberts. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. x, 227 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$90.00, hard bound.

*The Transnational World of the Cominternians* brings together new versions of work that originally appeared in German and French between 2000 and 2012. Focusing on foreign (especially French and German-speaking) exiles and students in Stalin’s Soviet Union, Brigitte Studer emphasizes the importance of Soviet autobiographical practices in the lives of international communists. In seven thematic chapters that reach back to the 1920s and end in 1943 with the dissolution of the Comintern, Studer tracks a shift from practices of self-criticism to self-accusation. Drawing on the vast archive of personal and biographical reports collected by the Comintern, she emphasizes that the “permanent self-observation” required by Soviet authorities could be both “productive” and “repressive,” aiding foreign communists in the task of transforming themselves into Bolsheviks while also placing “them in a position of existential insecurity” as to whether they were measuring up to “real Bolshevik” (17) standards. Ultimately, she argues, many tried and failed “to meet the ever-growing expectations of the Stalinist party, which, in fact, required of its members a total surrender of the self” (20).

A chapter-length introduction provides a wide-ranging historiographic and theoretical discussion of the “transnational.” Studer highlights the “transnational biographies” (2) of those involved in the Comintern, who frequently crossed national, cultural, social, and gender boundaries. She also sketches the international reach of the Comintern “network” that included “sites of political interaction outside the Soviet Union” (5), notably Paris and Spain, and facilitated the global circulation of communist practices, symbols, and norms.

Although an investigation of the international nodes of the Comintern network lies beyond the book’s scope, Studer works to “apply the notion of a ‘transnational space’” (5) to Comintern operations in Moscow. In “The Bolshevik Model” she provides an institutional overview of the Comintern, emphasizing both its increasing subordination to the interests of the Soviet state and the “hybrid complexity” (22) of its numerous affiliated organizations operating at the international, national, and local levels. The chapter “In Stalin’s Moscow” locates the “world” of the Cominternians—the foreign, mainly Western, communists attached to the Comintern—in the “cosmopolitan

but closed and privileged” (66) enclaves of schools, offices, and housing that cut them off, institutionally and often linguistically, from the larger Soviet world.

A particular strength of the book is its consistent emphasis on gender as central to historical understandings of institutions and of individuals’ experiences. “To join the party,” Studer argues, “was to adopt not just a political orientation” (10) but a complete way of life—one that made shifting and quite gendered demands on men and women. “The New Woman” documents the “new but still limited opportunities” (42) for women within the Comintern, where many worked as secretaries, translators, or couriers, but few attained leadership positions. The chapter on “The Party and the Private” investigates the linkage of ostensibly personal issues—marriage, friendship, sex—to assessments of political reliability. This conflation subjected women to a double standard as “sexual promiscuity was more severely judged in woman than in men” (116).

Each of the book’s thematic chapters tells part of the central story of the Stalinization of the Comintern in the early 1930s and the destruction of its cadres, its culture of international solidarity, and many of its key institutions during the terror in the late 1930s. Thus, for example, in the chapter on the party, we learn in the private notes that during the terror “women Communists of the 1920s” (124), fervent believers in women’s autonomy, were shocked by the party’s practice of condemning women for their personal ties to “enemies of the people.” “Soviet Party Practices” traces the transfer and development of Soviet “practices of biographical surveillance” (75) to the Comintern, ending with their conversion into a tool of the terror. The chapter on the Comintern’s schools emphasizes the original pedagogical intent of Soviet autobiographical practices that, when “the political conditions of their deployment” (107) changed, became instruments of repression. The final chapter charts the decay, beginning in the early 1930s, of the Soviet commitment to proletarian internationalism and its replacement by the end of the 1930s with Stalin’s conviction that the Comintern was a nest of foreign spies.

This thematic organization produces some repetition, but has the advantage of emphasizing the human and institutional complexity of the world of the Comintern. Moreover, chapters could easily be assigned to advanced undergraduates as stand-alone essays. The book provides a brief, accessible, and engaging English-language survey of Studer’s theoretically sophisticated body of work on international communism and Soviet subjectivity.

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***International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion.***

By Lisa A. Kirschenbaum. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xiv, 278 pp. Notes. Index. Bibliography. Photographs. \$99.99, hard bound

What did it mean to be a Communist in the first half of the 20th Century, to dedicate one’s time, energy, sometimes even one’s life to an ideal incorporated in a party? In recent years, under the impulse given by cultural, gender and transnational perspectives, the question of subjectivity has gained momentum in the history of international communism. Lisa Kirschenbaum does not explicitly situate her research in subjectivity studies, referring rather to trajectories and personal experiences, but with the diaries and letters of a group of American communists who participated in the Spanish civil war and who had stayed in the Soviet Union earlier on, she makes use of the kind of sources that have characterized this strand of research. Party auto-