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# The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921, by Bertrand M. Patenaude

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## Peer Reviewed

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Since 1992, Russian and American historians have used many new sources to explore Russian history. Another innovation in the study of Russia has been the increased presence of Russian scholars in the United States. Aleksandr Etkind's book is the fruit of this experience and, if translated, would be of great interest to specialists in American as well as Russian history.

Etkind is noted for his *Eros of the Impossible: A History of Psychoanalysis in Russia* (1993; English translation 1997) and *The Russian Flagellant: Sects, Literature and Revolution* (1998), as yet untranslated. The premise of the new book is ingeniously simple: namely, that leading Russian and American thinkers referenced each other in forming their sense of self and identity. Etkind is concerned not only with Russia and America but also with the idea of democracy. He follows an eclectic rather than a prescribed outline of intellectual or political history. Thus he shows us Alexander Pushkin reading Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville conversing with the Russian philosopher Petr Chaadaev, and James Fenimore Cooper listening to Russian aristocrats in Paris express their envy for the freedoms Americans enjoy. From this vantage point, he describes a host of interesting figures including familiar Russian Americans such as Vladimir Nabokov and Ayn Rand (Alice Rosenbaum), as well as other intellectual celebrities from John Dewey and John Maynard Keynes to Mikhail Bulgakov and Boris Pasternak.

Etkind guides readers through a fabric of Russian-American mutual imagining that extends from the eighteenth century to the 1950s. One distinctive pattern is the intense interchanges of people involved in utopian and sectarian communities. Another involves purely intellectual contacts, such as Pushkin's reaction to Tocqueville's discussion of religion in America. A third concerns descriptions and invocations of the other. In Soviet Russia, the political leaders' obsession with America as place in which technology could solve problems paralleled an equally intense interest among Russian cultural figures in the mammoth of capitalism. Etkind describes Ilia Ilf and Evgeny Petrov's humorous travelogue, *One-Story America* (1937), as "the culmination of the American text in Soviet literature" (p. 162). Their account includes an admiring visit to the would-be fascist Henry Ford, whom they warmly compare to self-taught Soviet inventors. The parallel phenomenon in America involved writers such as Theodore Dreiser, who visited Russia and tried to promote Joseph Stalin's cause, and also New Dealers who brought their confused notions of what was happening in the Soviet Union to the table in trying to rescue the United States from the Great Depression.

What conclusions emerge from this multiplicity of comparisons over two centuries involving several dozen writers and philosophers? The most important is that to the intellectual elites of each nation, the other often represented the extreme boundary of the real, the essence of what one was not but might

become. For some observers, this meant something to aspire to, and for others it was something to avoid. Of course, there were interludes when neither nation was a prime reference for the other. Revolutionary France through the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte occupied this position for both Russians and Americans. Later Nazi Germany filled the same role and many Americans got used to thinking of Stalin as "Uncle Joe." During World War II, Soviet propagandists also portrayed themselves as more like Americans than Germans and Austrians. Still later, Communist China briefly dwarfed the Soviet Union in American thinking, although America retained its preeminence in the Soviet imagination. At present, Russia has ceased to preoccupy Americans, though not vice versa, so perhaps this is a good time for Etkind's book to appear.

On a final note, this book can be read almost as an encyclopedia of Russian-American interactions and myriad imaginings, but it can also be read as a synthetic history of these interactions. As Etkind observes in his conclusion, for him, as for practitioners of the New Historicism, history is chiefly about "people and texts and their relation to each other" (p. 416). Fortunately, he goes a bit further than this in discussing the intentions of his subjects and their agency in the world around them.

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BERTRAND M. PATENAUDE. *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2002. Pp. viii, 817. Cloth \$70.00, paper \$29.95.

Bertrand M. Patenaude's book is aptly titled. American Relief Administration (ARA) workers in the Soviet Union during the Great Famine of 1921–1923 called Bolsheviks "bolos," and the enormous influx of American money and personnel made it "a big show." But Patenaude's study is not only massively researched and hugely engrossing, it is also crucial for our understanding of a largely forgotten and often misunderstood episode in twentieth-century U.S.-Soviet relations. Not since Benjamin M. Weissman's *Herbert Hoover and Famine Relief to Soviet Russia, 1921–1923* (1974) has a scholar tackled this topic. Considering the richness of the sources and the complexity of the politics, on both the Russian and American sides, this book was long overdue. For far too long, the ARA story has been seen either as a brief and forgotten example of "Herbert Hoover's Brush with Bolshevism" (the title of an earlier paper by Patenaude) or as an interesting but aberrant example of the perils of negotiating with Soviet Russia in the 1920s (see Benjamin Weissman, "Herbert Hoover's 'Treaty' with Soviet Russia," *Slavic Review* [1970]).

Most other historians of either the United States or Russia have relied on Weissman, or the early official history by Harold H. Fisher, *The Famine in Soviet Russia, 1919–1923: The Operations of the American*

*Relief Administration* (1927), or the contemporaneous memoir of Frank Golder and Lincoln Hutchinson, *On the Trail of the Russian Famine* (1927). Most have neglected to delve into the voluminous archives of the ARA at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, Hoover's own papers at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa, or the innumerable collections of private and government papers in the United States, Britain, and Russia.

Patenaude did consult and use most of these collections, with the conspicuous exception of many newly available regional Russian archival collections in Samara and Buzuluk, the heart of the famine district. His rich use of archives remains the strength of this work: its detailed, enticing, and yet disturbing story of the thousands of young American relief workers who battled famine on the Volga in the eastern Russian steppes, feeding as many as eleven million Soviet citizens per day by 1922. These workers and this episode left an enduring mark on Russian memory and consciousness, and contributed in a major way to the beginning of a breakdown of the isolation of Bolshevik Russia from the West, a process that, despite Stalinist attempts to reverse it, contributed to the long undermining of Soviet control which finally resulted in the collapse of communism late in the last century.

Patenaude organizes his magnum opus in three overlapping sections: personal stories and encounters, political confrontations, and cultural impact. The stories are indeed engrossing, as are the tales of political clashes, including the intricate negotiations on both sides concerning the "Riga" agreement by which the ARA received permission from V. I. Lenin's government to send aid and workers to the famine area. As Patenaude definitively shows, both Hoover and Lenin accepted the agreement because they believed it would serve their political interests: Hoover to undermine Bolshevism and Lenin to stabilize his regime (in major crisis at the end of the Civil War). In fact, both Lenin and Hoover were right. The ARA famine relief effort did help to save Lenin's regime, but it also undermined it, albeit in the long term.

Patenaude argues throughout that the relief workers and their experience are crucial to our understanding of the dystopia that we call the USSR (and for that matter all the communist states of the twentieth century), because they "were the first group of outsiders to break through Russia's isolation . . . [and] to have sustained exposure to the strange new phenomenon of Russian Bolshevism" (preface). But the author does not claim too much for this statement by the end of his examination, letting the intriguing but complex story speak for itself. The relationship between the ARA workers and the Russian people and Soviet government was by no means simple. After all, Feliks Dzerzhinski, the founder of the Cheka (Lenin's secret police), was an essential partner to William Haskell, the chief of ARA operations in Russia, in efforts to get the trains running to carry relief supplies to the famine area. Often the arguments between Samara and Mos-

cow or Samara and Buzuluk and Washington seemed as fraught as they were between Moscow and Washington.

This book is essential reading for any historian of the twentieth century. It will enrich but probably not substantially revise our understanding of the ARA relief expedition in exposing, undermining, and strengthening Lenin's Russia. For like most episodes of international political and social history, the more we uncover, on all sides, the more we expand our knowledge of the complex nature of human encounters.

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JAMES T. ANDREWS. *Science for the Masses: The Bolshevik State, Public Science, and the Popular Imagination in Soviet Russia, 1917-1934*. (Eastern European Studies, number 22.) College Station: Texas A&M University Press. 2003. Pp. xii, 234. \$45.00.

LAURENCE SCHNEIDER. *Biology and Revolution in Twentieth-Century China*. (Asia/Pacific/Perspectives.) Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield. 2003. Pp. xi, 307. \$75.00.

That the communist regimes in the USSR and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were committed to emancipating the common people from religion and "superstition" and to propagating a scientific, rational, and technologically developed culture is well known. Less well understood are the mechanisms through which they sought to achieve that ambitious goal. In his well-researched book, James T. Andrews examines the efforts of the Bolsheviks to promote progress and enlightenment through the popularization of science. One of the book's strengths is that it links these efforts to earlier initiatives that go back via the adult education movement of the late nineteenth century to the foundation of such societies as the Society of Investigators of Nature at Moscow University in 1804. Pre-revolutionary popularizers of science included professional scientists, journalists, and educators of all types. Their work in disseminating scientific knowledge struck a chord with the urban public, and by the late nineteenth century, commercial publishers were producing scientific and technical literature aimed at the newly literate masses. The public proved to be interested in a wide range of subjects, including astronomy, world geography, and air flight, but nothing whetted their appetite more than the theory of evolution, with its challenge to the biblical account of creation. Andrews shows how quick the Bolsheviks were to entrench the theory of evolution into the school curriculum. Otherwise, however, he suggests that during their first decade in power, they relied mainly on prerevolutionary societies, museums, and journals to popularize science, although these bodies could now rely on funding from the science department of the Commissariat of Enlightenment. During the 1920s,