Author’s Response to Commentaries

6th Contribution to the Forum about The Firebird and the Fox: Russian Culture under Tsars and Bolsheviks by Jeffrey Brooks

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Abstract

The author of The Firebird and the Fox: Russian Culture under Tsars and Bolsheviks (Cambridge University Press, 2019) responds to comments of Michael David-Fox, Muireann Maguire, Kevin Platt, William Mills Todd, and Olga Velikanova. He expresses appreciation for the reflections provided and elaborates on several points raised by the commentators individually and collectively: the theoretical framing of the work and the importance of agency; continuity of culture over episodes of political disjunction; the applicability of the term “cultural ecosystem;” an alternative treatment of the topic that would have accorded greater emphasis to political power and the life cycle of revolutions; and the relationship of the work to analysis of institutional history and cultural theory. He finds the five commentaries to be valuable companion pieces for readers of The Firebird and the Fox and stimulants to further scholarship.

Keywords


I thank the editors of Russian History for devoting space to discussion of The Firebird and the Fox, and my colleagues for their careful, critical, and creative interpretations of the work. I am honored by their attention and impressed with the range of readings. The five commentators approach the book from different perspectives and bring their own interests and expertise. The aggregation

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of their reflections greatly enlarges the sphere of relevance of the book, and at the same time presents challenges to the respondent. I do my best below to draw out common elements of their contributions, and to reply where they challenge me to have gone further, gone differently, or perhaps not to have gone at all.

Olga Velikanova places the book within Russian studies generally, her own research work, and her life experience. She provides a wealth of complementary examples that buttress and further illustrate the argument. She notes a tradition within Russian studies that seeks to decipher cultural codes to gain insight into the legendary enigma of the Russian-European-Byzantium type of civilization. Notions of the Russian soul, dualism, and geo-schizophrenia have been offered as interpretive frames, and now the firebird and the fox enter the ranks of the codebreakers. A strain of work within Russian studies has emphasized crucial turns in history imposed from above, such as the adoption of Byzantine Christianity, Peter’s Westernizing reforms, and the importation of Marxism into Russia. Velikanova argues that as powerful as were these forces for change, they met their match and were transformed by the enduring strength and evolving forms of indigenous and traditional culture.

In this she reinforces the book’s presentation of the transformative interaction between and among cultural forms over time and across media. She carries her argumentation forward to encompass the cultural impact of modernization with its market energy, technology, mobility, new audiences, and the emerging public sphere. Velikanova also notes the work within Russian studies that sees 1917 as a decisive break with the past, including with past culture, and endorses the book’s rejection of this view. She accepts the framing of the interactions in a cultural ecosystem over the period covered but notes that in the Soviet period key actors from outside of its boundaries, in particular the Central Committee and Stalin personally, exerted outsized influence. Fair enough, since an ecosystem without boundaries is not a useful analytical device. Velikanova’s rich selection of examples and references makes her essay a valued companion piece to the book.

Muireann Maguire welcomes the presentation of continuity in Russian culture and the tracing of foundational themes that re-emerge in changing contexts. She concurs with the argument that Russian culture is self-referential and that it draws frequently from rich traditions and past accomplishments. She provides examples of this process at work in current cultural affairs, a perspective especially useful for those of us less engaged with very recent developments. Maguire also commends The Firebird and the Fox for its explication of the interaction between cultural actors and society, with each enriching and re-inventing the other. Her additional examples of socially and politically
engaged artists and writers both within the century covered and subsequently create an opening for her more detailed coverage of the agrarian economist Aleksandr Chaianov (1888–1937). Chaianov is not included in the book and until recently was little known for his literary activity. I admit to surprise and pleasure at meeting Chaianov in this context in Maguire’s essay. In my fifty years of marriage to an agricultural economist with competence in Russian, I had assumed until now that Chaianov belonged in her domain, rather than mine. I am happy to be corrected, and I look forward to reading more of Maguire’s work about him. I am pleased that she finds The Firebird and the Fox useful in developing the context for it.

Maguire’s introduction of Chaianov as a left-out figure worthy of inclusion echoes Kevin Platt’s observation that the entire layer of middle-brow culture and its creators are under-represented. To this error of omission I plead partially guilty, although I would argue that many of the periodicals covered that featured literature and visual arts1 had middle-brow audiences, as did the writings of Verbitskaia, Teffi, and Ilf and Petrov, also covered although not at length or in depth.

One could with interest probe whether and what more complete coverage of the middle sphere would add or change about the argument, and perhaps someone will explore this topic in the future. My own interest is greater at the two poles of the literary spectrum – I read the thousand pages of The Bandit Churkin with genuine delight, rather than as a professional chore to be checked off, and, of course, every re-reading of War and Peace or The Master and Margarita yields new insights. I take less enjoyment from the works of the middle sphere. As I structured this volume with knowledge that it would transit into my retirement, I felt justified to indulge my preferences at least in part.

The same argument applies to concerns expressed by Platt and David-Fox about insufficient treatment of Socialist Realism. I took a full dose of Socialist Realism when working on my Thank You, Comrade Stalin and felt that a lighter application would suit here. I tried to present the origin of Socialist Realism and its linkage to other developments; that is, its place in the ecosystem, without examining specific works or the programmatic statements of artists and writers. I concur with Platt that Boris Groys and Evgeny Dobrenko hold

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1 I discuss many magazines that engaged a middling public. The most significant include the illustrated “thin magazines” Field (Niva, 1870–1917) and Motherland (Rodina, 1879–1917); the humor magazines Alarm Clock (Budil’nik, 1865–1918), Splinters (Oskolki, 1881–1916), Jester (Shut, 1879–1914); and Sparks (Iskry, 1901–1917); the late imperial weeklies with photos, Little Flame (Ogonek, 1899–2008) and Blue Magazine (Sinii zhurnal, 1910–1918); and finally some Soviet satirical publications including Hippo (Begemot, 1924–1928), Red Pepper (Krasnyi perets, 1923–1926), and Crocodile (Krokodil, 1922–2000) among others.
different views on the derivation of the Leninist-Stalinist cultural order and by extension on the roots of Socialist Realism. I have the highest regard for the work of both. On Socialist Realism my reading of the evidence accords with the argument of Dobrenko that as people of common origin moved into positions of responsibility within the Stalinist administration, they brought with them a very restrictive view of the forms and functions of culture, and that this restrictive view undergirded Stalin's imposition of Socialist Realism from above.² Of course, historical developments can have more than one causative factor.

David-Fox suggests that the work would have benefitted from attention to Groys' argument that a "basic line of continuity" runs between the avant-garde and Stalinist culture more fully. He would have liked to have seen recognition of the totalizing political-aesthetic project of the avant-garde, the intelligentsia's dream of a unified culture, and the contributions of each of these to the complexity of Socialist Realism. I accord relatively little weight to the programmatic statements of spokespeople for artistic movements, especially after 1917. The arts occupied a prominent place in the performative culture of the Soviet regime, and public proclamations of intent were part of the performance, whether heartfelt or not. In my view the artists, writers, and musicians of the avant-garde were interested chiefly in their art. Some made compromises as needed to serve their art. Sergei Diaghilev, for example, personally walked the tsar through his huge portrait exhibit that opened in February 1905, a month after "bloody Sunday," and then gladly took money from Nicholas II to fund his projects in Paris, including the Ballets Russes. Others signed on to political agendas, but particularly in the years after the 1917 revolution and into the 1920s, their actions and enthusiasms create the impression that they saw politics largely as another medium for innovation. The medium betrayed them as artists, and I do not see a direct line from the avant-garde to the tractor novelists. I offer these thoughts in explanation for why I give little attention to Socialist Realism in The Firebird and the Fox. I consider it to be a constructed edifice consistent stylistically with the tastes of the intelligentsia from the people and the propagandistic needs of the Stalinist regime but not

organically linked with the earlier foundations of Russian creativity in literature and the arts. Others will hold differing views, and questions of politics within the cultural ecosystem will continue to generate useful debate.

Platt applies terms of literary criticism and theory to *The Firebird and the Fox* with explicit recognition that this is a work of cultural history. He does so with useful insight and considerable kindness. In reflecting on Frederic Jameson’s argument that the key choice in framing a narrative is that between emphasis on continuity or rupture, he affirms that *The Firebird and the Fox* stresses continuity and linkage. Platt turns to Hayden White to note that the analyst confronting the chaotic raw material of history faces the essential task to organize it and emplot a narrative. He or she can avail of an array of tools. Among the various ones that could have been used, Platt sees the “book in terms of its formal patterning as a comedic narrative and its poetic basis in the trope of synecdoche, which undergird its analytical efforts to integrate material across seeming historical and social divides.”

To this sagacious insight I respond as did the naif who never knew he could speak in prose. Platt’s use of the term “comedy” in its technical meaning refers not to coverage of humor in the book, which is ample, but instead to the creative energy generated through the expansion of agency among different societal groups holding disparate aspirations, values, and tastes. In the political and military spheres these conflicts yielded bloodshed and tragedy, but in the cultural sphere they were, as Platt notes, enriching and “harmonizable,” if not fully resolved.

I find application of the literary critic’s use of “comedic” very apt for *The Firebird and the Fox*. I am agnostic, as noted in more detail below, that viewing the work through the lens of synecdoche is equally insightful. That said, Platt argues the merits of cross-disciplinary work bridging literary theory, literary criticism, cultural criticism, and history, and his commentary provides an excellent example of the accruable benefits. Platt also notes several relevant recent publications not referenced in the work, such as those of Molly Brunson, Irina Shevelenko, and Michael Kunichika. I appreciate his observation and the deserved recognition of these works.

Michael David-Fox has been a supporter of *The Firebird and the Fox* for years, offering comments on earlier drafts and providing opportunity for discussion with his students and colleagues at Georgetown University. For this past support and for his comments in this volume I am grateful. Here he raises important and provocative questions: What is genius and is it appropriately defined? Can culture and power be treated separately? Should the evolution of Russia’s culture over this period be tied more closely to the life cycle of revolutions? To what extent can the unfolding of Soviet cultural life be linked to earlier
developments, and in what ways is it discontinuous? The book offers responses to each of these questions, and David-Fox's posing of them invites readers to agree or disagree with the choices of the author. In his essay he offers reflections on each, thereby providing rich material for discussion.

David-Fox notes that the national focus of the book goes against the grain of much current work, which addresses transnational and globally shared developments. I agree with this observation, although I had not thought about it earlier. Transnational comparisons must be grounded in solid national work, and I hope the book contributes to that body. I also think it appropriate for a senior member of the profession to undertake work that might be considered unfashionable or even stodgy, since younger scholars cannot afford to do so. To his question, “What is genius?” David-Fox replies that although the term is often defined according to political expediency (as was the case during the Cold War), he does not contest its application to Russia during the era under examination.

David-Fox offers an alternative framing of the cultural creativity of the era in terms of an extended life cycle of the Russian Revolution. Such a framing would heighten emphasis on the interplay of culture and power. He argues that the cultural “play-sphere” presented in the book (as an arena of imagination in which people acquiring enhanced agency could explore how to use it) complemented a didactic tradition in which the intelligentsia, the Church, and the government sought to shape the choices of common people. Influence over the cultural preferences of newly literate and increasingly empowered people of modest origins in this view became an instrument in the competition for political power. He argues that the treatment could have accorded more attention to the antipathy toward the market exhibited by many in the intelligentsia who felt a moral obligation to contribute to the enlightenment of the common people. David-Fox places particular emphasis on the intersections of culture and power in early Soviet culture and successive phases of Stalinist culture. He argues that differing elements of the cultural system persisted even under the most draconian Stalinist conditions, suggesting that power was less than tightly controlled. As noted above, David-Fox, like Platt, would have welcomed a fuller treatment of Socialist Realism in the book, perhaps in expectation that it would have surfaced examples of meaningful contestation within the strictures of the form.

I welcome David-Fox’s view that the material presented could alternatively have focused on the relationship between culture and power, and I hope that readers approaching it thusly will find the book of interest. I also expect that such readers might find fault with the framing, since questions of culture, power, and the chronology of revolutions were not foremost among my motivations.
for writing. I wanted instead to use the knowledge I had acquired over a professional lifetime to respond to a query sometimes posed very simply by my students as, “Where did this rich but strange art, music, and literature come from?” To my mind, a focus on culture, power, and a century of revolutions would have been unduly narrow, although clearly relevant to the larger picture. The gears of revolution turned continuously in the background, but in the foreground people lived lives animated by change and aspirations separate from the tensions that exploded in periodic revolutions. Most of the active cultural life took place in the foreground. Teffi, for example, in her tale of flight in 1918 as Russia dissolved behind her, included exhortations of an acquaintance in Odessa that she really must buy a dress-length of an excellent crepe de chine before it sold out. Framing the entire cultural enterprise of this century in terms of the life cycle of revolutions would have been for some purposes appropriate, but for mine unduly reductionist.

William Mills Todd reads The Firebird and the Fox with knowledge of our shared interest in the sociology of Russian literature, a field he has done much to develop. Todd encouraged me at an early stage of my career and has since been a valued colleague and mentor. He notes that this work is one of cultural history and represents a shift from my earlier emphasis on the sociology of literature. He attributes the pivot to the prominence I accord to the growth in agency of creators and consumers of culture alike. Elevated agency of individuals and groups separate from that of the Church and state derived from the changing historical context, an important feature of which was the rise and expansion of the cultural market. I agree with his insight that this is foremost a work of history, although the interlinkage between and among levels of culture and media at a given point in time retains the sociological perspective.

Todd notes that the treatment of cultural institutions throughout the book is largely implicit, and that the topic warrants greater emphasis and explicit attention. I agree, and hope that the book might stimulate future examination of the role of institutions in molding the interactions discussed.

Similarly, Todd finds that cultural theory would be relevant to the analysis but remains largely behind the scenes. In bringing out a theoretical perspective, Todd runs what might be considered a test of the external validity of the book’s framing by applying it to three works not included among those discussed in the text. This is a creative approach that gives insight into the works examined and also into The Firebird and the Fox. The test provides gratifying examples that the framing can be usefully applied more generally, but without, of course, formulaic or constraining imposition. In the case of Dostoevsky’s Demons he

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finds that the three themes I emphasize (freedom and order, boundaries, and the character of art) do indeed present with relevance throughout the work. He also finds that Andrei Bely shaped his *Petersburg* within the frame of the mega theme of rebellion in Russian culture. With regard to Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* and Prokofiev’s score to the film, I welcome Todd’s insight into the elements of resistance integral to both. I stand gratefully corrected in my reading of the film and its sound track as unadulterated celebratory Stalinist culture.

Todd shares my appreciation for the insights that works often considered “junk” or unworthy of serious attention can provide. The mechanism at work is the self-referential nature of Russian culture as noted by Maguire in her essay in this issue. To dismiss the unworthy works is thus to blinker our vision of the cultural whole. Several examples show the insights to be gleaned from a close acquaintance with the “junk.” For example, Gregory Freidin in his review of Andrew Kahn’s *Mandelstam’s Worlds* argues that the poet in his “Stalin epigram” of 1933 “defined Stalin for all time as a shiny-booted, cockroach-moustached, worm-fingered tyrant ...”4 Mandelstam had a major assist in the act that unfortunately cost him his life in the form of Kornei Chukovsky’s earlier and well-known *The Monster Cockroach* (*Tarakanishche*, 1923) that introduced a bewhiskered six-legged tyrant to the Russian reading public. Similarly, when Shostakovich and his co-director Mikhail Tsekhmanovskii were commissioned to make the 1940 animated film of Samuil Marshak’s *A Story about a Silly Little Mouse* (*O glupom myshonke*, 1925), they used the opportunity to reply in sly form to the earlier criticism of Shostakovich’s opera *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, criticism thought to have been penned by Stalin, himself.5 I expect that the unexamined “junk” of Russian culture contains many more such examples of self-referential connection.

Though each of the commentators provides a valued and unique perspective on the book, they overlap in treatment of several issues. Among these are the role of agency, the emphasis on continuity versus disjuncture, synecdoche, and the concept of a cultural ecosystem. To each of these I turn briefly below.

Several commentators suggest that I exaggerate the extent to which cultural actors, both creators of culture and their audiences, were empowered and understate the constraints imposed and influences exerted upon them. Todd, in contrast, applauds the emphasis on agency and its importance to cultural developments of the era and to the framing of the book. Velikanova observes that I might have viewed agency and constraints on it in terms of Russia’s dualist or dichotomous separation of the sacred and the secular, or

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the tension between religious teaching and the demands of lives unfolding in a modernizing society. Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev* (1966) falls outside my defined century but shows vividly the lasting significance of dualism in Russian cultural history. I could have drawn on Russia's early modern and medieval rulers, invasions, and empire to reach back into the more distant past. After all, Ivan the Terrible, Ermak, and Peter the Great all figure prominently in the popular fiction produced for new common readers in the era of the Great Reforms. Had I emphasized dualism I would have stressed the state's promotion of Orthodoxy and the prevalence of cheap popular icons and their relationship to the lubok. Dualism could also have been presented as a factor explaining a turn away from Western art in the early twentieth century in favor of Russian primitivism. The insularity of Stalin's socialism in one country and the crusading ideas of some Stalinists could also be seen to echo earlier traditions of dualism. Even some elements of market-driven popular culture might also fit this turn of investigation, particularly tales that feature ritual abnegation and repentance.

All of these dualistic elements should be noted. To elevate them, however, would force demotion of the celebration of freedom in folktales, the bravado of secular fools, and the glorification of rebellion in the bandit tales. I argue instead that the popular commercial culture of the late Imperial era privileged stories and images of modernity and celebrated new freedoms even as the older ideals retained some allure.

David-Fox's suggested shift in focus to view cultural developments in terms of the life cycle of revolutions would also imply a different treatment of agency. Institutions, political chiefs, enlighteners, revolutionaries, and apparatchiks would rise in importance relative to creators and consumers of culture. I do not deny the power of these constrainers of agency, both before and after the revolution of 1917. Velikanova in other work has powerfully described the brutality and savagery of the coercive forces in the Soviet era. Yet for all of the constraints, the agency of common people increased with modernization and reform.

Heightened agency confronted shifting constraints through unremitting dialogue. The resulting tension yielded cultural dynamism in an example of what Platt identifies as comedic interaction; that is, conflict that is harmonizable if not fully resolved. Teenage prodigy Petr Pavlovich Ershov's (1815–1869) *The Little Humpbacked Horse* wonderfully exemplifies the primacy of agency. The hero, a peasant lad and a fool, outsmarts two older brothers, deposes a tsar, and wins a kingdom, albeit with the assistance of a magic helper. The tale's

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celebration of agency may explain its longevity over decades of change – it was reissued in many editions including in the Soviet era and performed in three ballets in 1864, 1960, and 2009 (2017 at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.). Yet, as Todd notes, the story has not been elevated onto the reading lists of graduate students of Russian literature.

In the treatment of continuity versus disjuncture the commentators in general agree, but from somewhat different perspectives. Platt notes this as a key choice in structuring the narrative and has no quarrel with the decision taken. He observes that continuity is often seen in a temporal context, but that the device of the cultural ecosystem lends itself to examination of contemporaneous continuity across media and forms. Maguire applauds the presentation of cultural continuity over the century as “a radical act of common sense,” and a relief from the alternative of excessive temporal fragmentation of analyses. Velikanova accepts continuity including over the divide of 1917, with the caveat that the institutional shock to the system forced change in the manifestation of underlying themes and characters. David-Fox endorses the concept of continuity but sees its derivation within the framework of the century-spanning life cycle of revolutions: “What can be asserted is that any cultural history across the 1917 divide must recognize the ways the Russian Revolution was broader than the Bolshevik Revolution. Any consideration of innovation and flux within a Russian cultural system will be enriched by relating it to the multiple dimensions of revolution across successive stages.”

Both Platt and David-Fox use the term “synecdoche” in their essays. David-Fox applies the term in passing, and Platt develops it at greater length. I understand the term in this context to mean that the firebird, the fox, the fool, and to a lesser extent the three foundational themes would be understood to stand for the whole of Russian culture. I expect that most readers who are not literary critics will not be familiar with the term, and hence not misled by it. I do, however, worry a bit that those accustomed to think in terms of synecdoches might accept the appellation too literally. I would not be comfortable with a suggestion that Russia’s culture over this period be referred to as “firebird and fox” culture. Instead, I very much like Platt’s evocation in this essay of Yuri Lotman’s description of shared symbolic resources as linchpins of cultural memory: “The stable sets of symbols which recur diachronically throughout culture serve very largely as unifying mechanisms: by activating a culture’s memory of itself they prevent the culture from disintegrating into isolated chronological layers.”

Platt does not take Lotman’s stable sets of symbols the further step that would convert them to synecdoche, and I expect that the conversion would not in all cases be required or appropriate. David-Fox concludes his essay with the comment, “Decisive as Brooks’s work suggests political, social, and economic factors were in influencing the evolution of Russian and Soviet culture, its implications are very clear that the sphere of culture cannot be reduced to a synecdoche.” I am not sure whether in this comment David-Fox is disagreeing with Platt as commentator or with me as author, but the exchange makes me wary of the term “synecdoche” applied to the book.

The reviewers accept the concept of an ecosystem to describe Russia’s complex cultural world, and in general find it useful. I elected to use the metaphor because it so aptly describes the panoply of actors, their shared environment, and their multiple interdependencies. I was careful not to overuse it to avoid deviating too far into the realm of the biological, and the commentators appear satisfied with the result. David-Fox points out that he has used the term in his own work, as has Katerina Clark, but for purposes quite different from mine; largely to explore the relationship between revolution and culture. Velikanova finds the term useful for discussion of continuity across the temporal frame and within a concept of eco-space, much as Platt notes its facility in drawing out linkages across time and between and among levels, media, and creators of culture. Maguire welcomes the treatment of cultural history as a system of layers rather than an array of random developments. She also endorses recognition of the importance of self-referential dialogue between and among works. The stratification or layering and self-referencing can be accommodated within the metaphor of an ecosystem. I am pleased and relieved to see that the term appears to have done its job to facilitate rather than impede communication.

I again thank the editors of Russian History and the reviewers, both individually and collectively, for their contributions. I hope that readers of The Firebird and the Fox will find these commentaries as illuminating and stimulating as I do.