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### Review of The Art and Science of Making the New Soviet Man in Early 20th-Century Russia By Yvonne Howell, Nikolai Kremmentsov

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Howell, Yvonne, and Nikolai Kremmentsov, eds. *The Art and Science of Making the New Soviet Man in Early 20th-Century Russia*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021. 296 pp. \$103.50. ISBN 978-1-350-23283-9.

The “New Man” constitutes a broad, expansive theme of early Soviet culture, far-reaching and familiar to many. Although scholars have acknowledged the cultural phenomenon of the New Man, with some probing it as a predominant motif in this or that facet of Russian and Soviet art, the New Man’s protean attributes and ambitious, utopian essence have long demanded a more comprehensive treatment. This thorough and thought-provoking volume of essays, the fruit of a 2019 international conference, goes a long way toward providing it.

Just how unique was the New Man to Soviet Russia and that era? In times of rapid change, Nikolai Kremmentsov and Yvonne Howell contend, the possibility of humans improving by leaps and bounds cannot help but reverberate in the social consciousness, and so it came to be in early twentieth-century Russia. Scientific and technological progress made the promise of a transformed human being attractive to artists and ideologues, as theological discourse on a new man gave way to Marxist and then Stalinist visions of the New Man. And a *New Man* (*novyi chelovek*) it was, as the editors provide at the outset a compelling explanation of why the “New Man” label/translation proves the right one (rather than the bland, misleading “New Person”). In his helpful introduction, Kremmentsov moves quickly through nineteenth-century Russian culture--Turgenev, Chernyshevsky--to get to the early decades of the twentieth century and to elaborate on four themes linking the volume’s essays: what the term “New Man” signified in Russia (and elsewhere); the ideology underpinning public discussions of the New Man; the different stages of public discussion of the New Man in Russia and the Soviet Union; and the ramifications of all the New Man visions at play. Kremmentsov perhaps over-relies on Google NGrams to track the

prevalence of New Man in the literature of the time, but such is the volume's forward-looking nature that use of the modern database to shape the discussion seems fitting.

The volume's essays are divided into three convenient sections, the first on the nurturing of the New Man through education, the second on creative visions of the New Man, and the third on ways the New Man was displayed before the Soviet populace. In the volume's first essay, Michael Coates discusses Alexander Bogdanov's advocacy of a socialist encyclopedia and the potential for this encyclopedia to shape a socialist New Man. Working on Capri (with Maxim Gorky, naturally) and then in the postrevolutionary Proletkul't, Bogdanov saw a workers' encyclopedia as key to a "new proletarian system of cognition," a utopian vision that informed Bogdanov's 1913 novel *Engineer Menni* and his unrealized dream of a Proletarian University (p. 42). With early Soviet education in mind, Lyubov Bugaeva probes in her essay how the American education reformer John Dewey took great interest in Soviet Russia and, in particular, the 1931 early Soviet sound film *The Road to Life*, directed by Nikolai Ekk, which Dewey introduced at its premier in the United States. Highlighting attempts to transform criminal youth into model Soviet citizens, *The Road to Life* elevated physical hygiene and commune life as means to reform wayward youth in Soviet Russia. And in "The New Man in the Nursery," Olga Ilyukha explores how Soviet dolls in the 1920s, transformed by pedology (the science of the child), reflected the ideals of the new nation and New Men. Red Army men dolls, worker dolls, and peasant dolls, along with dolls of various ethnicities, stocked the shelves in this idealistic period.

A "major meme" of Bolshevik culture, the Soviet New Man quickly gained in stature (p. 85). In "New Sciences, New Worlds, and 'New Men,'" Kremontsov explores the flurry of scientific and artistic activity at the ten-year anniversary of the October Revolution. Arguing

that notions of a New Man were not unique to Soviet Russia, Kremmentsov highlights the Darwinism, experimental science, and world literature (by such writers as Aldous Huxley and H. G. Wells, for example) that shaped the New Man in Soviet literary culture, be it Fedor Il'in's 1928 novel *Valley of New Life* or Bogdanov's *Engineer Menni*. Recalling Wells's 1934 visit to the Soviet Union, Matthias Schwartz delves into differences between the West's New Man and the Soviet New Man. From the "scientific fantasy" of Alexander Beliaev's novels and the "scientific-fictional" literature of M. Ili'in's propagandistic *How Man Became a Giant* (1940) to "The House of Entertaining Science" in Leningrad and Iakov Perel'man's "entertaining science," mainstream Soviet culture grappled extensively with the New Man and his lofty potential. And then there is Irina Golovacheva's engaging juxtaposition of the James Whale film version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with Mikhail Bulgakov's novella "The Heart of a Dog" (1925), which underscores an emerging uneasiness with the eugenic implications of the New Man.

From eugenics and monsters, the volume moves on to displays of the New Man, in particular the "new peasant" featured as a "living exhibit" at the 1923 All-Russian Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow and the focus of Olga Elina's essay; two 1926 sculptures by Vasilii Vatagin devoted to human evolution and orangutans at the State Darwin Museum and analyzed closely here by Pat Simpson; and the New Turkmen and multicultural Stakhanovites displayed at the State Museum of Ethnography in Leningrad and the focus of Stanislav Petriashin's essay. Soon enough, however, the new peasant would be declared a kulak and eliminated, while the "docile bodies" of Vatagin's sculptures would reflect fierce Soviet determination to build "a new sort of society, populated by a new species of humankind," and the aestheticization of the ethnographic Stakhanovites would be increasingly dictated by Stalinist socialist realism (p. 174).

The volume's provocative conclusion, written by Howell, draws a tenuous line between the New Man and twenty-first century posthumanism/transhumanism, but in exploring the New Man chronotope, Howell offers important conjecture on what it is that gives rise to the belief that a new type of human will emerge. Science, technology, and social crises together elevate hope for a betterment of humankind, and although presumably out of reach, such utopian ideals will continue to inspire artists, scientists, and even readers.

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