

Igal Halfin, ed. *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identities*. Cummings Center Series. London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002. x, 403 pp. Index. \$54.50, cloth. \$26.50, paper.

Edited collections are often criticized for being uneven or for lacking focus, but it seems to me that judging collections such as *Language and Revolution* by the standards of the traditional monograph is a mistake. The point of collecting a number of essays from different scholars is not to produce a unified argument but to approach a common theme from a number of different angles and source bases. Successful editors solicit papers from smart people and then create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, either by having the authors engage with one another in fruitful ways or by arranging and introducing the pieces in a similarly productive fashion.

Igal Halfin succeeded in the first and most important editorial task; he gathered a group of smart and interesting scholars together for a conference in Tel Aviv in 1999. The aim of the conference was to gather proponents of the "linguistic turn" to take a "united stance against the old historiography, which tended to focus on social and political history," while simultaneously enabling the "beginning of a dialogue" between different disciplines and branches of modern history on the subject of language and identity (p. 2). Historians of twentieth-century Russia will be familiar with most of the authors and the topics they have been working on, since some of this work has recently emerged as part of larger projects. Thus we have Boris Kolonitskii focusing on rumours and Russian political culture during World War I, Peter Holquist on the "construction" of the Cossacks in 1918, Mark Steinberg on proletarian writers, Jochen Hellbeck on Stalin-era narratives, Katerina Clark on Stalinist film (specifically *Volga-Volga*), Boris Gasparov on Shostakovich, David Hoffmann on physical culture and Soviet bodies, Eric Naiman on bodies and terror, and Halfin himself on "intimacy in an ideological key." In addition, Halfin invited a number of other Europeanists to attend the conference and contribute to the volume. David Andress, Peter Fritzsche, David Horn, Boaz Neumann, Avner Ben-Amos, Elisabeth Domansky, and Dan Diner offer essays ranging on topics from citizenship in the French Revolution to the Holocaust in historical memory.

Halfin was considerably less successful in the second task of a collection editor, though. Far from being greater than the sum of the parts, the "whole" of this collection was mysteriously less than that of the individual submissions, either because the tone of the conference from which these papers emerged or the direction set by the editor was too extreme in its approach to language. All talk of enabling a brisk dialogue on the importance of language aside, Halfin does seem to believe that the focus of (all?) historical study should be on language and language alone, even upbraiding two of his contributors (Mark Steinberg and Elisabeth Domansky) for "trivializing language" by "eventually seek[ing] reality outside of it" (p. 26). The criticism is telling. In the first place, it shows that the stance of the authors represented here is not quite so "united" as Halfin originally claimed. Secondly, given that few historians would see any trivialization in Steinberg's careful unpacking of the language of Soviet worker-writers or Domansky's investigation of postwar collective memory in Germany, it shows that Halfin and several of the other contributors have moved from linguistic avant-gardism to radical linguistic absolutism.

Even the more sober scholars in the collection appear to have been affected by the tone of the volume. Take, for example, Katerina Clark's sharp essay on the film *Volga-Volga*. This is a fine exploration of the film, its context, and the way it reinforced a great many Stalinist models of identity in a way that truly appealed to a mass audience. For some reason, though, Clark deems it necessary to argue that the fact that the heroes and heroines

enter Moscow through the Volga-Moscow canal (recently built with convict labour) means that "The work of the NKVD, as it were, channels individuals into proper citizens. The walls on either side of the canal, as it were, guide the steamer along the correct route—or confine it" (p. 231). The two "as it were" asides in consecutive sentences indicate that Clark is reaching here, probably too far. Why can't this scene be read less provocatively as yet another display of pride in the accomplishments of Soviet engineering? In less careful hands, this same extremism is considerably more aggravating. Boaz Neumann, in an essay entitled "Death in Auschwitz as an 'Ugly Death,'" argues that the statements of death camp survivors that those camps were populated by people who were "living dead" should be taken literally, that death was the ontological state at Auschwitz II. This insight has a certain value if it is not pushed too far, but Neumann does not show much restraint. He claims at one point that Eichmann was mystified by the postwar accusation of child murder because he thought it was impossible to kill someone who was already dead, and concludes just as curiously that "[i]n a world in which death became a mode of Being people committed suicide just by remaining alive" (p. 337). Some may read this as clever rhetoric; I for one saw it as proof that one can take the linguistic turn all the way around the bend.

There is more that can be said about the essays in this volume, much of it positive. Two major clusters of articles study the broader templates of political identity that individuals and states faced in modern Europe and the ways that "modern" men and women narrated their lives. These are fruitful and already quite influential lines of inquiry. In addition, the broad geographical focus of the book does provide for useful comparisons. This is particularly so with the essays by Jochen Hellbeck and Peter Fritzsche on Stalinist and Nazi narration and the work by David Horn, Eric Naiman, and David Hoffmann on texts and bodies in Italy and the Soviet Union. Still, the lasting impression this reviewer had at the end of the book was that many historians who focus on language have "turned" too far; they have turned inwards upon themselves, stretching towards the absurd and the tautological in a series of aesthetic language games that have less and less to do with the living history that sustains us. Halfin deploys Jacques Lacan, the doyen of French psychoanalysts, to argue that "everything is linguistic," save perhaps notions like trauma. (pg. 24). He might also remember that for Lacan and his followers, the "rock of the Real" is decisive for human beings in more fundamental ways. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the "famous Lacanian motto not to give way on one's desire... is aimed at the fact that we must not obliterate the distance separating the Real from its symbolization: it is this surplus of the Real over every symbolization that functions as the object-cause of desire." Exactly so; it is precisely the surplus of historical reality over the sum of historical representations that constitutes the historian's desire. For this reason, if for no other, one suspects that the high-calibre historians who contributed pieces to this volume will turn away from the more radical manifestations of the linguistic turn and go in different directions soon.

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