

Book Reviews

Alexis Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend, The Remarkable Correspondence between American and Soviet Women*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2024, 290pp. Index. \$35.00. Hardcover

In the time of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, there were American and Russian women willing to bravely share with each other in letter correspondence, their life stories. For the first time ever, these women's letters are being examined by the historian Dr. Alexis Peri. The letters began with a pledge of peace by both American and Russian women as the goal of their correspondence was to learn about each other and not convince one another of individual political beliefs. Both sides were sharing about each other's working and family lives in detail as well as the social and economic issues they face within their countries. At first the letters from both American and Russian women showed a more idealized version of their home lives yet in time they were both willing to share a more honest picture of their day to day realities. The differences between these women would sometimes cause disagreements (for example Russians were more casual in how they address friends yet Americans were more formal in naming conventions). Other differences were about housekeeping standards which American women were more apt to describe in detail while for Russian women this was less of an overall priority since they did not have the consumerism of American life. Yet as time goes on these women find similarities in how they are managing to do it all and deal with similar inequities as women in their societies.

In the 1950's, communism became a target of Senator Joseph McCarthy and there were questions about American's relations with the Soviet Union. Yet this did not deter the American women from writing these letters well into the 1950's. Dr. Peri notes in her book that the letter writing program between American and Russian women was "unnoticed by scholars" during the time period. (p. 205). The letter writing program never grew to be more than it was which is why it was relatively unknown in the media at the time. Dr. Peri sheds light on the outcome of this letter writing program as it was seen as a way brokering an understanding of political and cultural differences among American and Russian women. Because women generally are more open to sharing life experiences it makes sense that there would be a thriving back and forth exchange of information. This information also showed that both American and Russian women faced similar challenges as wives, mothers, and workers.

Dr. Peri's examination of these collection of letters written by American and Russian women is unique in its storytelling and capturing of the intimate lives of women in the Cold War Era. What it demonstrates that while the two nations of the United States and the Soviet Union were at odds which each other, there were women in both nations willing to open themselves up to friendships and communication with each other. Women who were willing to get outside of

their silos and learn about each other's lives and experiences. The letters capture a perspective of a time that is not mired in war and hatred yet more about the heart and humanity. Dr. Peri's work adds something substantial to the history of women's lives during the Cold War era.

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Lisa A. Kirschenbaum. *Soviet Adventures in the Land of the Capitalists: Ilf and Petrov's American Road Trip*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Xiv, 329 pp. Index. \$39.99. Hardback.

In 1935, Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov set off on a journey around the United States that would result in their well-known book, *Low-Rise America* (or, *One-Storied America*) in 1937. In 2007, Cabinet Books and Princeton Architectural Press republished the travelogue with an introduction by Erika Wolf. Lisa Kirschenbaum's book is an excellent companion to the original text, thoroughly analyzing it, comparing it to other relevant primary sources, and offering a rich examination of this fascinating journey of two Soviet writers in Depression-era America. Kirschenbaum's source base is impressive: from Ilf and Petrov's original notes to the papers left by those with whom they interacted; from institutional, governmental, and corporate archives to the records of community history projects; from published newspapers and memoirs to contemporary anthropological sources. She retraced their journey literally, travelling the same route, and recreating photographs. She is not only interested in the places they visited, but in "the process of travel, the planned and chance encounters that transform an itinerary into a journey." (13). Given the timing of their trip, one might expect a book filled with anti-capitalist propaganda but, as Kirschenbaum is quick to point out, Ilf and Petrov's portrayal of the United States and American life is far more complex, containing a healthy dose of criticism with a fair amount of admiration as well.

Kirschenbaum begins her book with several chapters that establish the historical context of Ilf and Petrov's journey, reminding readers what was occurring politically and socially in the United States as well as in the Soviet Union. Ilf and Petrov came to the United States at a time when the Soviet Union was caught in a contradictory trap of its own making regarding its attitude toward the U.S., critiquing the racist, money-obsessed land of poverty while also promoting "Amerikanizm," an admiration of American technology, efficiency, and know-how which, of course, could be harnessed for the furtherance of socialism. Ilf and Petrov, then, had this extra baggage with them as they explored and attempted to understand America themselves. The United States was experiencing its own problems as well, financially and socially, and the Soviets were well aware of the racism and hypocrisy that existed in their democratic rival.

Kirschenbaum highlights some of the obstacles that Ilf and Petrov faced in their exploration of the American other. Neither of them spoke English well so they had to rely on others to communicate. These interpreters were often Jewish Russian immigrants which certainly colored their impressions of "real" America.

Moreover, their encounters with so many struggling Russian immigrants led the writers to portray them as “embodying the emptiness of American promises of plenty.” (24) Similarly, their view of America was skewed by the places they visited, spending a great deal of time in New York, then traveling west, experiencing various forms of “low culture,” some “high culture,” but not much of middle America. They also fell prey to stereotypes; though they condemned racism in America, their descriptions of black life in Harlem echoed conventional depictions of the time.

Kirschenbaum calls *Low-Rise America* “genre-defying ... not only a travelogue, satire, and picaresque but also ... a valedictory intervention in the debate on the possibility of socialist realism with a modernist sensibility.” (72) She has done an amazing job at deconstructing Ilf and Petrov’s journey, and persuasively demonstrates that Ilf and Petrov’s book reveals much more than many have appreciated in the past. Though not physically large in size, her book is thick with detail that adds much to the story of this famous episode in the history of Russian-American relations.

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Joseph Horowitz, *The Propaganda of Freedom: JFK, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, and the Cultural Cold War*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023, ix. 248pp. Appendices. Notes. Index. \$34.95, Cloth.

In *The Propaganda of Freedom: JFK, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, and the Cultural Cold War*, Joseph Horowitz examines the relationship between American conceptions of freedom and artistic creativity. Based upon the study of the ideas of President John F. Kennedy and music critic Nicolas Nabokov as well as the works of the composers Dmitri Shostakovich and Igor Stravinsky, the author maintains that the American contention that creative individuals can only thrive in a free political system is not necessarily correct since Soviet composers created significant works. Horowitz’s analysis leads to the conclusion that preconceived ideological frameworks may influence greatly perceptions of artistic endeavors and that it is important to transcend these suppositions in order to assess accurately an individual’s work.

Within the context of the Cold War, Horowitz notes that President Kennedy’s repeated contention that freedom served as a prerequisite for artistic success became the clearest expression of the efforts of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), which was established in 1950 and which sought to showcase free societies as fostering innovative artistic expression. The president’s ideas and the work of the CCF aligned with the views of Nicolas Nabokov, who held a prominent role in the CCF. Horowitz’s discussion of Nabokov reveals that his aristocratic origins and subsequent exile from the Soviet Union prompted him to adopt an extremely negative stance toward Soviet music. Nabokov and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., an advisor to Kennedy, shared similar political viewpoints, and through their work in the CCF, they became associates. According to Horowitz, Schlesinger shared Nabokov’s opinions concerning the necessity of freedom as a basis for

artistic achievement. As a result, this perception influenced Kennedy and became a dominant theme in his speeches. In Nabokov's role as a leading expert on Soviet culture, he strove to contrast the originality of musical compositions produced in free societies to the formulaic musical works created in authoritarian systems.

Horowitz explores the idea of freedom and artistic accomplishment through an examination of Nabokov's praise for Stravinsky's compositions. In Nabokov's 1951 book, *Old Friends and New Music*, he hailed Stravinsky for his pioneering approach evidenced in his ability to uncover "a new concept of harmony, fuller, broader, and nobler than the sterile harmonic concepts of the late nineteenth century" (36). Specific compositions such as *The Rake's Progress* (1951) were described as exuding "Mozartian dimensions and lucid beauty" (60). Horowitz explains that Nabokov used his leadership role in the CCF to feature Stravinsky's compositions as evidence of the creativity that is the hallmark of Western freedom. Specifically, in Nabokov's planning drafts and later published commentary regarding the CCF's Paris Festival of 1952, the implication is clear that Stravinsky's music is the predominant example of Western musicians' original compositions that are divorced from politics. Such compositions stood in marked contrast to the prescribed political works of composers in the authoritarian Soviet Union. Horowitz contends that Nabokov's preference for Stravinsky's works may stem from Nabokov's affinity with Stravinsky's life as an exile and the struggle that both men endured as they attempted to find meaning and fulfilling work outside their homeland.

Conversely, Horowitz's analysis of Nabokov's writings and actions both prior to and during his leadership in the CCF demonstrates that Nabokov consistently critiqued Shostakovich's compositions and the detrimental effect of state control over the arts. In the 1943 article, "The Case of Dmitri Shostakovich [*sic*]," which appeared in *Harper's*, Nabokov outlined his views on the composer's music. Specifically, Nabokov refers to Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 1* as "conservative and unexperimental" (26) as well as his works overall as "redundant" and "provincial" (26). Later in 1953, in his undisclosed role as a CCF official, Nabokov continued to provide harsh reviews concerning Soviet music. Generally, he contended that Soviet composers could not create music appropriate for somber occasions since the state demanded only celebratory harmonies. In another 1953 article, Nabokov seemed to critique Shostakovich's lack of innovation as resulting at least partly from the rise of the lower middle class and working class to positions of power in the Soviet Union, who in the prerevolutionary era, had developed a preference for music replete with clichés and "worn-out formulas of western low-brow musical production" (40). Horowitz implies that dismissals of Shostakovich's work due to ideological preconceptions dating from the Cold War have precluded a recognition of the merits of many of Shostakovich's compositions, including his film scores for *The New Babylon* (1929) and *King Lear* (1970).

Horowitz concludes his work by noting that personal contact and cultural exchange initiatives during the Cold War enabled individuals to transcend ideological frameworks and to develop an appreciation for another culture's achievements. Among the examples cited are Van Cliburn's exceptional performance at the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition and Leonard Bernstein's 1959 popular tour with the New York Philharmonic. According to Horowitz, Van Cliburn's and Bernstein's successes in the Soviet Union evidenced that America

could boast of highly significant musicians, which in turn proved more effective in demonstrating Western achievements than CCF festivals. Overall, Joseph Horowitz's *The Propaganda of Freedom* is an important addition to the field of cultural studies and reminds readers that an appreciation for the arts ideally should overcome political differences.

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John Van Oudenaren, *The Geopolitics of Culture: James Billington, the Library of Congress, and the Failed Quest for a New Russia*, Ithaca and London: Northern Illinois University Press, 2024, viii. 366pp. Index. \$56.95, Hardcover.

When James H. Billington was appointed as the Librarian of Congress in 1987, he was already serving as an advisor on Soviet affairs to President Ronald Reagan. As this well-researched and detailed book shows, Billington remained an important figure in US-Soviet (then US-Russian) relations for the next quarter century. The work also describes how the Library of Congress evolved from an institution that was much shaped by the adversarial nature of the Cold War into one that sought to assist the Russians in the post-Soviet era. At the same time, the author always situates the actions of the Library within the larger framework of US foreign policy, so readers get a clear sense of the ways in which Billington and his staff both adhered to, and deviated from, its line. Hence, this volume is a solid contribution to the literature on what went wrong with Russia's post-Soviet transition, and shows why Russian-American relations have deteriorated so badly in the Putin era.

The opening chapter outlines Billington's career prior to becoming Librarian of Congress, noting his closeness to Sir Isaiah Berlin, with whom he studied at Oxford, and through Berlin with Dmitrii Likhachev. In the years he spent as an academic, Billington developed the ideas that shaped his ongoing outlook towards Russia, notably that change was possible since the communist system was not permanent; that the Russian intelligentsia would be at the forefront of that change; and that Russia would look to its own past to build any post-Soviet future, but that the west needed to be mindful in case extreme nationalism replaced ideology. Billington also became a very strong advocate for exchange programs, believing that these would allow soft-power influence on Russian developments. After laying out these fundamentals of Billington's views, the chapter ends by describing how Cold War demands for information meant the Library of Congress came to house vast collections about the communist world and employed a significant number of experts with excellent foreign language skills.

Chapter 2 of *The Geopolitics of Culture* looks at the assistance Billington provided to the Reagan administration as the President sought to re-engage with the Soviets in the mid-1980s. While, to quote Van Oudenaren, "Billington never warmed to Gorbachev or overcame his prejudice against the Soviet leader as a mere communist apparatchik," that did not stop him from embracing the reforms that the Soviet leader was proposing. (p. 48) As Librarian of Congress, Billington pushed to help the library of the Russian Academy of Sciences recover from a

devastating fire. He also ensured that the Library participated in three summits with Gorbachev, hosted his wife and Likhachev when they were in Washington, put on two important exhibits highlighting Russian culture, and created an assistance program for librarians in former communist countries. In other words, Billington positioned the Library to serve as an agent for positive change in these turbulent years.

The next two chapters focus on the Yeltsin era. The 1990s were a difficult time for Russian libraries which faced significant staff turnover and financial difficulties. Yet the decade also saw the opening of some Soviet archives and expanded access to information. The Library worked to acquire as much material as possible, particularly items that documented the collapse of the USSR and to form new acquisition partnerships. In the first Clinton administration, Billington also helped to shape the tone and content of some of the President's speeches on Russia. However, as the decade progressed, Russia became less of a priority in American foreign policy so Billington's role as presidential advisor diminished. Meanwhile, the library that he headed looked for new collaborations with Russian institutions; indeed, by 1997 the Library of Congress had 155 exchange partners in Russia. (p. 139) The Library also acquired the papers of noted Russian historian Dmitrii Volkogonov, provided research support for Billington's *The Face of Russia* documentary, joined the international Comintern Archive project, and hosted "The Future of Freedom in Russia" conference.

Two of the most significant Library of Congress initiatives – Meeting of Frontiers and Open World – are the subject of Chapter 5. The first grew out of Billington's longstanding interest in Siberia, a region he felt had great spiritual and moral significance for Russia. The website that was created showcased parallels between frontier experiences and told the shared history of Alaska. Eventually, thirty-three Russian institutions contributed material to this early digital project. The Open World exchange programs were similarly successful and by 2021 had brought more than 20,000 Russian leaders to the United States. (p. 196)

Van Oudenaren's final chapters chart the deterioration of US-Russian relations in the Putin era and how the Library's work was affected. In the early 2000s, Billington was a well-respected public figure in Russia, and he was not averse to working with the Putin administration. However, things became more difficult as freedom of the press grew more limited in Russia while the country's foreign policy became increasingly nationalistic and aggressive. Billington's initial optimism about Russia's transition was fading, and Van Oudenaren notes that his 2004 book *Russia In Search of Itself* is much more pessimistic than Billington's earlier writings. Via discussions of initiatives such as the World Digital Library and the Library of Congress's attempt to work with the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library, readers are able to see just how difficult it became to sustain any partnerships that involved Russian institutions. Moreover, the victim narrative now developed by the Putin-led state made it impossible to acknowledge any help that had been received from abroad or continue existing partnerships. The Russian invasion of Crimea effectively ended the kinds of collaboration that Billington had championed for so long, and he retired the following year.

As this book demonstrates, Billington was far from the perfect pundit and there was much that he got wrong about Russia's future once the USSR had collapsed. However, his efforts to shape US cultural policy were important.

Hence, Van Oudenaren's work is a particularly valuable addition to the scholarly literature on Russian-American soft-power relations over the last half-century.

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Alexandar Mihailovic, *Illiberal Vanguard: Populists Elitism in the United States and Russia*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023, xiii. 282pp, Index, \$79.95, Hardback.

In *Illiberal Vanguard*, Alexander Mihailovic examines the similarities of and links between the radical right in the United States and Russia. The parallels have intrigued Progressives ever since Donald Trump emerged as a political force, and they account for the media's uncritical acceptance of evidence manufactured in 2016 by Hillary Clinton's lieutenants linking the Trump campaign to the Putin regime. Mihailovic wisely avoids that morass and instead tackles the subject through the lens of his specialty, literary criticism.

To this end, Mihailovic engages in a rambling discussion that, at different points, examines the poetry of Pushkin and the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, explains the similarities he sees between Steve Bannon and Lenin, disparages Dostoyevsky's, Tolstoy's, and Chekhov's criticisms of the Russian intelligentsia, and after pages of analysis, reaches the startling conclusions that public monuments have symbolic meanings, homosexual relationships thrive in prison, and online forums play a major role in today's political discourse. He does this in the postmodern newspeak favored by progressive intellectuals, littering his prose with terms like "heteronormative elitism" (p. 61) "antihumanism" (p. 94), "behavioral antinormativity" (p. 33), imagined prelapsarian" (p. 62), "ventriloquize" (p. 98), "carceral subtext" (p. 153) and "self-queering" (p. 150) that will leave even the well-educated scratching their heads. Finally, the author sums up: "It is precisely their resourcefulness in aggregating and hybridizing cultural memes that makes it possible to speak of new-right elites and of a right-wing intelligentsia that regards itself as engaged in a legitimate category of labor" (p. 209).

What might a reader learn from this extraordinary combination of the pretentious and the pedestrian? The reviewer lacks the expertise to comment on Russian political thought, but in the United States, what we call "populism" has a long history, little if any of which is to be found in *Illiberal Vanguard*. It mentions Andrew Jackson only once (and omits him from the index), while neglecting William Jennings Bryan and Joseph McCarthy entirely. Each in his own way capitalized on the widespread belief among Americans that an elite was "stacking the deck" in its own favor while ignoring the interests of ordinary citizens, and though they exaggerated their case, Jackson and Bryan, at least, had a point. (Joseph McCarthy is another matter.) Bryan was even an evangelical Christian and an important figure in the early history of Fundamentalism, movements to which Mihailovic devotes much attention. This history had infinitely more impact on modern American populism than anything that happened in Russia.

To the degree that parallels exist between conservative populists in the United States and Russia, it reflects a common response to similar conditions.

Mihailovic's discussion of these is, unfortunately, shallow. His examination of economics rarely extends beyond references to "late stage capitalism"—a phrase favored by progressives that connotes little more than a hope that capitalism is withering away, all evidence to the contrary—and formulaic denunciations of "globalism" and "the Washington consensus," which being associated with capitalism must be bad things. Capitalist development over the last forty or fifty years was a complex process with many unanticipated outcomes, but it reduced the portion of the world's population living in what the World Bank calls "absolute poverty" from about 40 percent to less than 15 percent. It deserves more than smug disdain.

Illiberal Vanguard provides a better discussion of LGBTQ issues, but it still makes glaring omissions. The Russian Orthodox Church and many evangelical churches in the U.S. both oppose the growing acceptance of those who fall under the LGBTQ rubric, but most of the latter have aligned themselves with churches in Africa, not Russia. Hostility to all things LGBTQ is strong in Africa and the Islamic world, and to posit a homophobic axis between American and Russian populist-conservatives while ignoring it distorts the situation.

Illiberal Vanguard does have lessons to impart, but not those that the author intends. For instance, it helps explain the decline of literary criticism. Once, writers like T.S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, and Lionel Trilling had broad followings, but they have no modern successors. If Alexandar Mihailovic is representative of modern literary criticism, it is easy to see why. His prose is impenetrable and his analysis—to the extent that a reader can decrypt it—often pedestrian. It is inconceivable that anyone would read *Illiberal Vanguard* for pleasure. The author also provides valuable insight into the rise of Donald Trump. In the last presidential election, he won a majority of votes even though much of the electorate, including a substantial portion of his own supporters, had doubts about his judgment and character. The latter simply concluded that the alternative was worse. If *Illiberal Vanguard* is typical of the thinking of Trump's progressive opponents, it is easy to see why.

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