

Introduction

ALYSSA DEBLASIO AND JULIE DRASKOCZY
EDITORS

As a political system, Stalinism remains a controversial and popular topic of scholarly debate. Is Stalinism limited to the arena of politics or can it be applied to the sphere of culture? Is Stalinism inherently pejorative or merely descriptive? What exactly is Stalinism and can it be defined at all? While the “-ism” in Stalinism automatically engenders a host of provocative questions, the topic of Stalinist culture—the theme of the sixth issue of *Studies in Slavic Cultures*—is more open-ended and neutral. The recent notable publications of biographies of Stalin and analyses of Stalinist culture have brought the historical and aesthetic features of the ruler’s era to the forefront of academic analysis. Just as Stalinism may have certain characteristics, Stalinist culture may be noted for particular recurring tendencies, including but not at all limited to: *lakirovka* or varnishing, the tension between nature and science, the popularity of heroic narratives, and the modification of language to meet political goals. The articles in this volume of *SISC* encompass many of these different themes.

Andy Hicks’ article, “Semen Babaevskii and the Struggle to Revivify the Rural Theme,” addresses the late Stalinist period and the author Babaevskii in the context of Thaw-era debates over the Stalin cult in literature. His analysis makes productive use of the symbolism surrounding the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, drawing connections between the role of this prestigious award in Soviet society, in Babaevskii’s own career (he won three Stalin prizes), and in his novel, *Bearer of the Golden Star* and its sequel, *Light over the Earth*.

Moving to the early Stalinist period, Dennis Ioffe’s article, “Alternative Language Theory Under Stalin: Philosophy and Religion at the Crossroads in the Nascent Soviet Union,” examines the linguistic philosophy of prominent Russian thinkers Aleksei Losev and Sergei Bulgakov. Ioffe places these philosophers not only in the context of the repressions of the Stalinist period, but links them through his treatment of the conception of *imiastavie*, or onomatodoxy, which the author sees as one of the founding theoretical elements of both

Losev's and Bulgakov's work.

Matthew McGarry's article "Ode to the Great Leader' or 'Ode to the Poet': Identifying the Hero in Osip Mandel'shtam's 'Poems about Stalin'" provides a detailed analysis of Mandel'shtam's controversial poem about Stalin, shedding new light on both authorial intention and the identity of the intended addressee.

Oliver Johnson, in his article entitled "*Kul'turnost'* or Kitsch? Varnishing Reality in the Art of Aleksandr Laktionov," examines "high Stalinist art" through the paintings of Laktionov. By using visitors' guides from the 1952 All Union Exhibition as primary texts, Johnson creates a fascinating portrait of the public reception of Laktionov's work while demonstrating how popular taste evolves over time.

Returning to the late Stalinist period, Maxim Djomin's article, "The Birth of Life out of the Spirit of Soviet Science, or the Case of Ol'ga Lepeshinskaia," addresses pseudo-scientist Lepeshinskaia and her controversial theory of "living matter." Djomin's article not only presents the history of living matter, from the introduction of the term in 1896 to its various lives in the work of Soviet authors and scientists, but demonstrates how the concept is representative of Stalinist cultural dynamics as a whole.

The five articles that make up the sixth issue of *SISC* span a number of disciplines—from art history to literary studies, from philosophy to history. This eclecticism not only demonstrates the prevalence of the Stalin era in contemporary scholarship, but also provides a multi-faceted illustration of the time period as it is viewed from a variety of perspectives and through a number of mediums.

* * *

The theme of *SISC*'s seventh issue is PERFORMANCE. The editors welcome submissions of graduate-student work investigating drama, film, linguistics, literature, music, or any other aspect of the topic in relation to Slavic culture.