David-Fox, Michael: *Showcasing the Great Experiment. Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-199-79457-7; 396 S.

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Cultural diplomacy, in Michael David-Fox's definition, is „the systematic inclusion of a cultural dimension to foreign relations, or the formal allocation of attention and resources to culture within foreign policy" (p. 14). Through cultural diplomacy, states have sought to influence foreign public opinion throughout the twentieth century, albeit with dissimilar methods, agendas, and degrees of success. But few states have done so with as much effort and caused as much controversy as the Soviet Union. For the Soviets, cultural diplomacy was an integral part of their revolutionary challenge to the world; they „aspired [...] to alter not merely the views but also the world views of visitors" (p. 16). David-Fox sets out to describe and explain the emergence, operation, and decline of Soviet cultural diplomacy in the interwar years. He does this, first, through a pioneering history of the institutions of Soviet cultural diplomacy; second, through an original analysis of the interactions between foreign visitors and the products and protagonists of Soviet cultural diplomacy; and third, through an exploration of cultural diplomacy's ramifications for the Soviet system itself. Based on research in four Russian archives and scholarship as international as his topic, David-Fox has produced a multi-faceted, subtle, and eminently instructive book.

The first two chapters deal with the emergence of Soviet cultural diplomacy following the famine of 1921. Led in the first crucial years by Ol'ga Kameneva (Trotsky's sister and Lev Kamenev's wife), the main institution of Soviet cultural diplomacy, VOKS (the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties), from the beginning focused on a non-communist, bourgeois „intelligentsia" audience. To engage ideological sympathizers, an international network of ostensibly independent „Friendship Societies" was set up, organizing lectures, exhibitions, publications, and contacts to Soviet dignitaries. But VOKS also sought to cooperate with non-partisan opinion-makers – institutions and individuals whose interests in the Soviet Union were economic, diplomatic, or scholarly. Such partners could be ideologically distant as long as they were strategically placed to influence opinion outside leftist circles – David-Fox mentions the „Deutsche Gesellschaft zum Studium Osteuropas", a scholarly and politically conservative society that enjoyed close links with the German Foreign Office, and the half-hearted attempt in 1932 to cooperate with the „Arbeitsgemeinschaft zum Studium der sowjetrussischen Planwirtschaft", a society that included fascist intellectuals. From among such groups, active and „worthy" members were invited to participate in VOKS's program of tours to the Soviet Union, the central and most innovative element of Soviet cultural diplomacy. Together with the much larger group of Intourist visitors – who unlike VOKS invitees were viewed primarily as a source of hard currency – about 100,000 foreigners visited the Soviet Union in the interwar years.

The better part of the book is devoted to VOKS-organized visits, which are analyzed through several case studies of mostly well-known intellectuals. Much writing has been devoted to understanding and explaining foreign visitors' often positive and uncritical assessments of the „Soviet experiment." Previous scholarship has typically focused either on the Soviet side, stressing the control and manipulation of visitors, or on the visiting intellectuals and how their assumed dispositions and desires determined their perceptions of the Soviet Union. David-Fox now argues that the *interactions* between Soviets and Western visitors played a critical and overlooked role, and that neither the projection of preconceived views onto Soviet reality, nor Soviet manipulative efforts alone adequately explain the successes and failures of Soviet cultural diplomacy.

In his multi-faceted discussion of these interactions, the relationships between foreign intellectuals and their Soviet „handlers" emerge as having played a particularly important role. As the foreigners' point of con-

tact with the Soviet system, these persons mediated Soviet reality to visitors, shaping their experiences and influencing their public articulation during (but also before and after) the visit. In the 1920s, these „mediators" were often non-party members of the intelligentsia. By the late 1920s, when they came under attack, their role was taken up by another, smaller group of accomplished intellectuals with extensive knowledge of European culture, whom David-Fox awkwardly labels „Stalinist Westernizers." They included leading figures of the party-state (such as Radek or Bukharin), cultural figures (such as Gorky, Kol'tsov or Apletin), and certain Soviet diplomats (Maiskii, Arosev). Political intellectuals were often committed anti-fascists, and were pulled by „a powerful cultural romance" (p. 227) to Soviet Russia and the West respectively. They and their Western interlocutors shared important preoccupations; they respected, and even admired each other. Such personal relationships became the focus of many visitors' relationship to the Soviet Union. They could be highly effective in smoothing over visitors' doubts, teaching them the „right" way to view Soviet reality, and to suppress criticism in public statements and writings. This is particularly important as privately voiced skepticism and disapproval appear to have been more common during visits than is evident from public statements and travelogues. David-Fox argues that the intervention of Soviet „mediators", and many visitors' acceptance of a „code of friendship" that required public praise in return for a visit and Soviet attention, account for frequent self-censorship – as does the character of many reports and travelogues, which were often carefully crafted political interventions.

For David-Fox, Soviet cultural diplomacy operated under the shadow of the history of Western-Russian interactions and perceptions. Far from overcoming it, the Bolshevik revolution only intensified the old obsession to overcome Russia's perceived backwardness vis-à-vis Western powers. It radicalized the „dialectic of rejection and imitation, hostility and engagement" (p. 11) that for centuries had characterized Russian attitudes to the outside world. Soviet perceptions of visiting Westerners were marked by expressions of ideological superiority, frequently paired with exaggerated respect. But comparative sensitivities remained ingrained on both sides, and account for widespread manifestations of a sense of cultural superiority on the part of Western visitors. At the same time, cultural denigration of Russia often appears to have eased the articulation of ideological praise for the Soviet state.

Finally, David-Fox is concerned to demonstrate the ways in which Soviet cultural diplomacy operated at the intersection of the „internal" and „external" dimensions of the Soviet system. Thus, what many visitors suspected to be „Potemkin villages" specifically set up to deceive them, the „model sites" of socialism were in fact a characteristic expression of Soviet political culture. If they staged a largely non-existing Soviet world, their key function was not to deceive visitors, but to impart a particular way of viewing Soviet reality to foreigners and Soviets alike. While socialist „achievements" were to be viewed as significant harbingers of the future society, present problems were to be discounted as the diminishing legacies of the pre-Soviet past. On the one hand, visitors were being misled when asked to generalize from these unrepresentative institutions, as indeed they often did. But more importantly, many willingly accepted the Soviet perspective on the relative significance of „achievements" and „problems" – meaning that the whole question of representativeness became less acute. VOKS's method of „cultural show" (kul'tpokaz), developed in the 1920s, thus appears as an anticipation of a phenomenon that, under the heading of Socialist Realism, became a hallmark of the Stalinist system. In much of the book, David-Fox also retraces the impact of the evolving Soviet system on the practice of cultural diplomacy. This includes notably the emergence of a „Stalinist superiority complex" during the years of the Great Break, and the crippling effects of the increasing conflation of domestic with foreign enemies, which culminated in the almost complete annihilation of VOKS personnel and the „Stalinist Westernizers" in 1937.

David-Fox's dual focus on both the external and internal interactions of Soviet cultural diplomacy productively blurs conven-

tional dividing lines between foreign policies and domestic developments; but it also creates centrifugal tendencies and further complicates what is already an intricate subject matter. The book's organization, moreover, does not always make for the most lucid presentation of the arguments. David-Fox greatly expands and complicates our understanding of the mechanisms and processes at work in Soviet-Western interactions, yet precisely that makes generalizations and an overall assessment of Soviet cultural diplomacy and its results more difficult. We learn much about *how* Soviet cultural diplomacy scored surprising successes and *why* it suffered failures. But beyond the assertion that doubts and criticism were more common among visitors than previously assumed, and that Sovietophilia was on the whole not dominant among visitors, the general picture resulting from Soviet cultural diplomacy remains elusive. For those who want to deal with this question, David-Fox provides an indispensable foundation.

HistLit 2012-3-035 / Alexander Frese über David-Fox, Michael: *Showcasing the Great Experiment. Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941*. Oxford 2011, in: H-Soz-Kult 16.07.2012.