

Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back*, Laurie Bernstein, ed., introduction by Laurie Bernstein and Robert Weinberg, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

This marvellous book chronicles the thirty-four year odyssey of a young American woman making her way alone in Stalin's Soviet Union. In 1931, at the age of fifteen, Mary Mackler Leder arrived in Soviet Russia with her family, left-wing Russian-Jewish Americans who had come to build a socialist Jewish homeland in Birobidzhan. After taking one look at the mud of Birobidzhan, Leder journeyed on alone to Moscow, where she managed to find work, a bed in a workers' commune, and to learn Russian. Two years later, her disillusioned parents renounced their dream and returned to the United States, but by then, Leder had applied for Soviet citizenship in order to keep her job and, despite her desire to accompany her family, she was not permitted to leave. Leder would come of age and spend her entire young adulthood in the Soviet Union. We follow her as she joins the Young Communist League (Komsomol), begins work at the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow, studies at Moscow University, trains as an intelligence officer at the Commissariat of Defence, and works for the Soviet news bureau, TASS. Leder takes us through the horrors of the Second World War, including the death of her only child, to post-war Berlin, where her husband was stationed in 1946-47. Finally, she describes the rising anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union after the war, the wave of arrests among those with foreign connections, and her complete disillusionment with Soviet socialism. In 1959, her husband died and Leder began a struggle to return to the United States. Six years later, she left for good.

Leder's plainly-written memoir thus describes many different contexts, from the world of fellow travellers working in Moscow in the 1930s to post-war Berlin. In particular, she provides the best description of everyday life in Stalinist Russia I have ever read. This is due to her marvellous memory for detail and to her frankness, but also to the fact that she writes as both an insider and an outsider in Soviet society. She sketches the intricate system of privileges that allocated food, clothing, housing, and medical care. She describes the various places she lived right down to their plumbing facilities, showing us how people interacted in communal apartments and exploring manners and social assumptions. Leder discusses at length the relationships between men and women, how she and her friends reacted to changing laws on abortion or marriage, and explains how people organized their sexual lives in crowded conditions. At the same time, Leder conveys the thrill of being a young person building socialist Moscow in the 1930s as well as the terror that came to infuse all aspects of life and raised nagging doubts about the regime.

Leder also provides fascinating insight into how the system of informers functioned. This is another aspect of life that was ubiquitous, but that memoirists rarely describe in personal terms. In 1938, the enthusiastic Komsomol activist was first recruited to inform on her colleagues at the publishing house. Leder describes in detail the “courting” process of recruitment, how she was reminded that the Soviet Union was surrounded by enemies and how her handler explained that the state needed information about public attitudes in order to consolidate socialism. Neither in 1938, nor during the war when she was again recruited, did it occur to Leder that she might refuse to co-operate. Indeed, although she remembers being rather evasive in her reports, this was not because she doubted the system, but because she believed that the police were targeting the wrong people. Leder also shows how people involved in the informer system sometimes tried to warn their targets. For example, in late 1947, one of Mary’s closest friends, Ahsia Shoyet, was recruited to spy on her. She immediately informed Mary and, after each appointment with her operative, Ahsia would go to the Leders’ room, where they would analyse every detail of the meeting and plot strategy for the next session. For this reason, ironically, Leder writes that she owes her life to Ahsia. Sober thinking for those given to seeing the world in black and white.

Finally, Leder takes us into the world of Soviet Jewry in the 1930s and 1940s. We visit the beginnings of the Jewish socialist homeland in distant Birobidzhan and encounter the community of native and foreign left-wing Jews in Moscow. Indeed, the reader is struck by how Leder’s knowledge of Yiddish helped her get by in Moscow before she learned Russian. Later, we meet her husband’s family of Jewish artisans in Rostov on Don and read with horror of their extermination by the Nazis. Leder’s father-in-law had refused to leave Rostov, despite his son’s urging, because he remembered the Germans as “civilized” occupiers during the First World War and was convinced that reports of Nazi atrocities were merely Soviet propaganda. Finally, Leder remembers the first time that her Jewishness became an issue: in 1944, when an official implied to her that she had been turned down for Party membership because of her ethnicity. According to Leder, the vicious anti-Semitism of the post-war years proved very disillusioning for her circle of highly assimilated, left-wing Russian Jews.

This memoir deserves the attention of a wide variety of audiences, from those interested in Stalinist culture, women’s history, and Jewish studies to scholars of the Left in the mid twentieth century. It will most certainly appeal to undergraduate students. Moreover, the book is available in paperback, it is illustrated with interesting photographs, and includes a useful list of further readings. Laurie Bernstein and Robert Weinberg supply a brief, accessible introduction.

A brief review cannot do justice to the many subjects addressed in Leder's absorbing book. I only wished that she had not stopped with Stalin's death, but described at greater length the last six years of the story – the period of de-Stalinization and her battle to return to the United States.

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John Ryder, *Interpreting America: Russian and Soviet Studies of the History of American Thought* (Nashville and London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).

John Ryder has produced a remarkable study of the reaction of Soviet philosophers to American philosophical and political thought. Ryder systematically covers major American thinkers from the colonial period through the twentieth century, and from Puritan Messianism to naturalism. As Ryder notes, Soviet philosophers took history and the history of philosophy quite seriously, and their studies of American thought are also serious. One reason for this is that Marxists believe that the social, political and economic context of a given nation will strongly influence thought. These thoughts concern such fundamental issues as freedom and workers' rights in various political systems. Soviet interest in American thought had much to do with understanding the system that was opposed to it during the Cold War. Another reason for Soviet interest in American thought was that both nations were born of revolution. Soviet scholars emphasized class and economic interests as major motivating factors in philosophy, with bourgeois interests permeating all thought. Ryder focuses almost exclusively on Soviet writers from the 1950s onward.

*Interpreting America* covers a series of interesting topics and philosophers that Ryder discusses thoroughly and precisely. In his discussion of Puritan Messianism which developed, unlike its British form, in the absence of feudal social institutions, Ryder notes that Soviet scholars were reasonably concerned about the place of religion in American secular society, an important subject for them given that theirs was a society that officially promoted atheism. They had interest in Roger Williams as the most significant representative of Puritan thought, as well as in Increase Mather and Cotton Mather. They explored the ideas of Samuel Johnson who had been stimulated by Berkeley's *Treatise on Principles of Human Knowledge* and his *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. Ryder then turns to the American Enlightenment and aspects of American political theory: the notion of the necessity of central government,