

RE CONF: Stalin's Cultural Legacy (Bristol UK, 15.-16.03.03)

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16.03.03)

As the organiser of the forthcoming conference in Bristol entitled 'Stalin's Cultural Legacy' and the individual responsible for devising this title I would like to respond to the messages posted by Piotr Kopszak and Reuben Fowkes. Firstly let me state categorically that no offence was intended, nor I believe, should be inferred from the title of this conference. As a scholar of Russian cultural history I am of course aware of the devastating atrocities enacted upon innocent victims by Stalin's regime. I also recognise that, being fortunate enough never to have experienced such circumstances, it is inevitably beyond my comprehension what that suffering could have meant to individuals, their families and friends. In line with countless scholars worldwide who choose to study this period in world history, I unequivocally condemn those atrocities. However, I do not feel that to deploy the term 'cultural legacy' can or should be regarded as putting a positive slant on that history or its culture. A 'culture' is something that exists in its various forms for all societies in all periods, regardless of whether that culture is interpreted from within or without as positive or negative. I find it inconceivable that the Stalinist period did not have a 'culture' however much the formation, boundaries and values of such may, and indeed must, be debated. Indeed it is precisely this issue that the conference seeks to address. As much as there is a historical legacy there is also surely a cultural legacy to this period and, at the risk of repeating myself, I struggle to imagine how the simple recognition that such exists and the positing that it is precisely this question that needs to be explored, might be construed in any way as avoiding or diminishing the atrocities perpetrated in the name of Stalinism.

Reuben Fowkes is correct in assuming that the purpose of the title was to stimulate debate and to allow speakers to address the complex impact of Stalinist cultural policies both during the Stalinist era and later. He, and I might add no other, of the participants in the conference, judging by the large number of proposals received, have

interpreted the title either as foreclosing debate or indeed, implying 'positive overtones'. The conference call for papers and subsequent announcement has, I am delighted to say, attracted considerable international attention and many comments suggesting that the exploration of this concept is indeed crucial to any understanding of twentieth century history. To study both the culture of that era and the effects that the legacy of that culture have had on subsequent eras and continue to have to this day seems to me to be an important and worthy venture. The alternative to engaging directly with the cultural legacy of the Stalin era might be to ignore, underestimate or simplify its significance. To quote a (relatively) recent author referring to the impact, and this could certainly be extended to the cultural legacy, of Socialist Realism, 'it is an act of historical retouching to efface its profound and critical voice. In any other context we would label this vandalism'. (Joad Raymond: 'Under the Skin of Ideology' in the Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism under Stalin 1993).

None of the above is intended as a rebuttal to Piotr Kopszak. Rather I offer my thanks for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity to clarify any potential misunderstandings. Nor do I intend here to launch, or participate further, in a 'virtual' debate regarding this matter. I simply offer an explanation as to why I, and many, many others, feel comfortable with the title 'Stalin's Cultural Legacy' and do NOT regard it as 'inappropriate'. On a more pragmatic note, as I managed to get the conference web-site address wrong in my recent 'conference announcement' I might also take the opportunity to suggest that anyone who might require further information regarding this event visit:

<http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/ArtHistory/stalinsculturallegacy.html>

Reference:

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