

Tear Off the Masks: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia. By Sheila Fitzpatrick (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005) 344 pp. \$65.00 cloth \$24.95 paper

The Soviet Union, argues Fitzpatrick, was particularly impervious to “social historical” analysis because, paradoxically, “class identity” was so important to the Soviet project of transformation: Privilege and mobility were granted to those with the right class credentials and denied to those without. In order to operate within the new Soviet system of class identity, individuals had to learn to mask their incorrect selves, to re-invent themselves, to deceive, and to role-play. Fitzpatrick is explicitly interested in social practice and everyday life rather than discourse and theory. She draws on an extensive trove of archival, memoir, periodical, and published documentary sources. The result is a genuine tour de force—lively, empirical, and analytically stimulating.

Five related sections group distinct essays, most of them published before but reworked for this volume. Some are conceptual, such as discussions of class identity and women’s autobiographies. Others are briefer case studies. All of the essays range widely and connect centrally with comparative approaches to similar historical problems of identity, imposture, denunciation, and distinction.

Part 1 explores “class identities,” updating early articles (published before Soviet archives had become really open) on the importance of class identity in the first two decades of the Soviet Union. The period of the New Economic Policy was critical in setting the standards for the presentation of a class self, as the regime wavered between emphasizing social origin and occupation as the defining feature of social identity. Part 2, “Lives,” offers case studies in identity formation, relying in large part on personal narratives and public presentations of self (such as the

ubiquitous purge hearings of the 1930s, when individuals had to account for their “Sovietness” by referencing the proper social typologies). Part 3 explores identity in action, in the context of appeals and petitions to power. Fitzpatrick presents a classification of petitions by type (including appeals to patrons), and by type of language. In addition to illustrating her general arguments about identity, the chapters in Part 3 offer an unparalleled guide for understanding these sorts of documents.

Part 4 turns to denunciations, another distinctive form of Soviet communication that has rich comparative connections.¹ Most of its chapters concern the 1930s, and, as in the preceding section, offer a classification, as well as an analysis, of this widespread social practice. A new chapter looks at postwar marital relations, based on petitions from aggrieved wives, suggesting that women fought for marital fidelity in the post-1945 period, unlike the era before.

Part 5 looks at the phenomenon of “imposture,” drawing on the trickster tradition as embodied in the Ilf and Petrov’s fictional scamp, Ostap Bender, but this section also includes an extended commentary on the perceived connections between Jews and conmen, and on the role played by antisemitism in the post-1945 Soviet Union.² An afterword explores these themes in the post-Soviet context, more suggestively than conclusively, but with Fitzpatrick’s hallmark analytical insight.

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1 See Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately (eds.), *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789–1989* (Chicago, 1997).

2 Illia Ilf and Evgenii Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs* (New York, 1961; orig. pub. 1928); *idem*, *The Little Golden Calf* (New York, 1932; orig. pub. 1931).