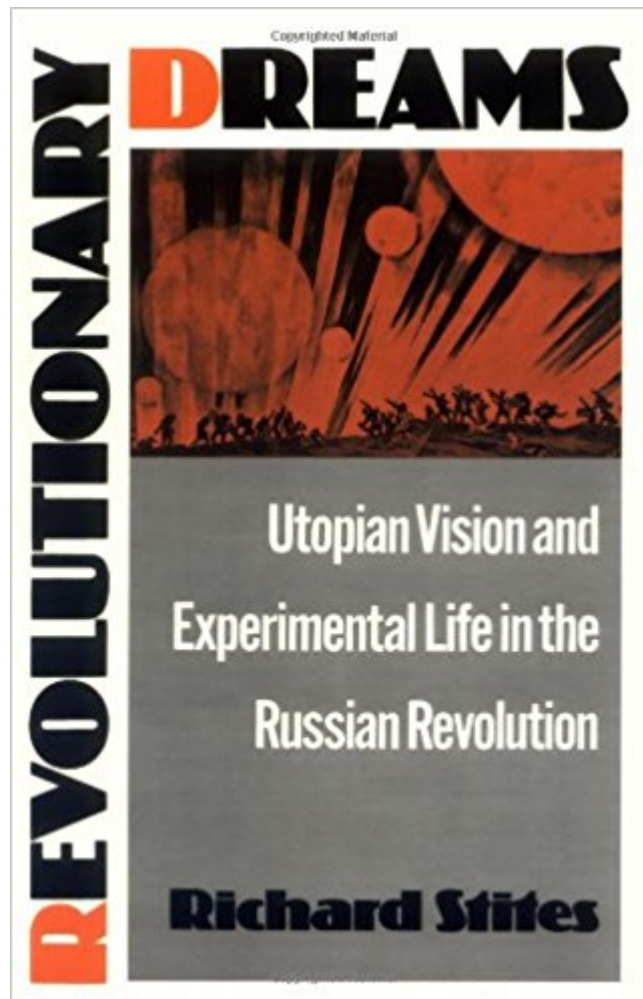


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Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision And Experimental Life In The Russian Revolution



Synopsis

The revolutionary ideals of equality, communal living, proletarian morality, and technology worship, rooted in Russian utopianism, generated a range of social experiments which found expression, in the first decade of the Russian revolution, in festival, symbol, science fiction, city planning, and the arts. In this study, historian Richard Stites offers a vivid portrayal of revolutionary life and the cultural factors--myth, ritual, cult, and symbol--that sustained it, and describes the principal forms of utopian thinking and experimental impulse. Analyzing the inevitable clash between the authoritarian elements in the Bolshevik's vision and the libertarian behavior and aspirations of large segments of the population, Stites interprets the pathos of utopian fantasy as the key to the emotional force of the Bolshevik revolution which gave way in the early 1930s to bureaucratic state centralism and a theology of Stalinism.

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Customer Reviews

It's hard to fully describe a book like this, except by saying that the author has really outdone himself in surveying his subject. And even that is an understatement. Richard Stites' "Revolutionary Dreams" is by far the best book on Russian utopianism ever written, and it is both impressive in its scope and quality and inspiring in its portrayal. Stites' book describes the manifold ways in which utopianism, and revolutionary novelty, were introduced into every aspect of life and society in Russia during the revolutionary period (roughly 1917-1928). This goes from science fiction books depicting the utopias and dystopias of the future, to socialist burials and marriages, to children called "Melor" (Marx-Engels-Lenin-October Revolution), to communal living in apartments, to garden

cities, to egalitarianism in dress and pay, to popular festivals, and so much more. Stites also pays extensive attention to the various top-down ways in which revolutionary reformation of society was attempted, such as the League of Time, the neo-Taylorists, the Godbuilders, the Atheist societies, and so on, all of which sought to remold the old society into a new and shining future. The author does a fantastic job of showing how after the October Revolution there was, among artists and intellectuals but even among peasants and workers in Siberia, a general feeling that anything could now be done, that anything truly was possible. Now was the time to build the future on a better basis than anything that had gone before.

What would one do if he or she had the power to completely change the social, cultural, political, religious, and economic structure of an existing society and create a utopia? Richard Stites, professor of history at Georgetown University, offers a fascinating look into the "revolutionary dreams" and fantasies of utopian thinkers articulated in the "feelings, thoughts, words, and actions that express, evoke or symbolize what has been called 'the utopian propensity'" (p. 3). This spiritual and mental expressionism of the revolution, encompassing the people, the state, and the radical intelligentsia, was deeply rooted in the "traditions of popular and religious utopia" and "manifold layers of previous [Russian] history" (p. 3). These utopian visions were enormously altered by Russia's industrialization, what Stites calls its "technological revolution" that resulted in an almost religious worship of the machine and American icons Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford. (p.3, 252). Stites culls from a vast array of imaginative sources including science fiction, to illustrate the experimental "programs and designs" in city planning, communal living, dress, speech, art and culture of a perfect society that could have been but was doomed by Joseph Stalin's scalpel and systematic "fantasctomy" (p. 235). Various conflicting emotions and ambiguities surface throughout Stites work. The essential conflict stems from the polarization of rationality versus far-flung daydreaming. To further illustrate this friction, the author introduces the variety of forms in which utopian visions take and an equal number of social/political groups that adhere to its varied manifestations.

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