

The Myth of the Soviet Potemkin Village

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Summary

At the Origins of the Concept

The concept of Potemkin villages dates to 1787. In that year, Catherine the Great's favorite, Prince Grigorii Potemkin, welcomed his monarch and a glittering array of European diplomats and dignitaries on a trip to "New Russia" (Crimea). As the story goes, Potemkin had hollow façades of villages constructed to impress the visitors and demonstrate the success of Russian power and civilization in colonizing the new imperial lands.

The late academician Aleksandr Panchenko convincingly called these stories about Potemkin villages a "cultural myth." Panchenko documented how hostile rumors of false façades erected by Potemkin actually emerged several months before Catherine and her party departed Petersburg. While elaborate entertainments staged for Catherine's entourage were undoubtedly spectacles designed to project the extent of Russian imperial might, "here is what is important: Potemkin did in fact decorate the city and settlements, but never hid the fact that they were decorations. Dozens of descriptions of the journey to New Russia and Tauride have been preserved. In none of these descriptions made in the actual course of events is there a trace of 'Potemkin villages,' although the decorativeness is recalled constantly." Thus did enlightenment spectacle—refracted through politics, intrigue, geopolitics, and an enduring European-Russian cultural divide—turn into myth.

In the 1920s, when the Soviets designed a novel and indeed unprecedented system to display model institutions and sites of socialism, the concept of Potemkin villages re-emerged with a vengeance among Western travelers. Why did the legend persist?

There are very good reasons why Catherinian (and, I will argue, Soviet) Potemkin villages represent one of the world's most enduring myths. First, they described an elaborate, top-down political stagecraft that was convincing to foreign and domestic observers alike, for it was in fact lavishly enacted on a regular basis. Second, they tapped into a discourse about "Russia and the West" that was perpetuated since the first early modern European visitors visited Russia. If in Muscovy the tradition centered on Russian backwardness and barbarism, after Peter the Great's Westernization it emphasized incomplete civilization, inauthenticity, and deceptiveness. After Potemkin, the notion of façades was at the very heart of the Marquis de Custine's *La Russie en 1839*, one of the most influential books ever written about Russia. To Custine, the vast empire was nothing but a gigantic "theater," on

whose stage Russians were less interested in being civilized than making Europeans believe they were so. To scratch a Russian European was to find an Asiatic Tatar. But European stereotypes about Asiatic Russia were embedded in a much broader and more consequential comparison between “Russia and the West.” During the rise of Russian national consciousness in the nineteenth century, assertions of superiority and inferiority became central on both sides of the European-Russian relationship. The Potemkin village myth tapped into this contest of mutual evaluation, which was heavily inflected by geopolitics. By exposing Russian achievements as staged, the accusations about Potemkin villages exposed Russia itself as mendacious.

In the period after 1917, the constant evaluations of superiority and inferiority, intertwined in complicated ways by Western visitors and Soviet cultural diplomats, became even more ubiquitous and more powerful, because for the first time large numbers of Westerners believed socialism (but not Russia) was in certain ways superior, and because of the controversial nature of Soviet ideological claims to be creating a more advanced society.

Potemkin Villages in the 1920s

Thus, a remarkable resurgence of accusations about Potemkin villages occurred in the 1920s, when the Soviets invented a unique system of receiving foreign visitors that centered around model institutions. Foreigners who remained unconvinced frequently labeled these places Potemkin villages, implying that there was something primordially Russian about Soviet practices. The Hungarian poet Gyula Illyés wrote in his travelogue from the early 1930s of a “Potemkin complex” in which “the eye becomes a magnifying lens making an elephant out of a flea, while at other times it turns a cow into a mole...”

There were good reasons that visits to selected sites became the linchpin of presenting the Soviet system to outside visitors. *Prima facie* conditions—what visitors could see, smell, and feel in the here and now—were hardly favorable for the kind of awed public praise from visitors that the Soviets craved and, in this era, so often received. Getting beyond outsiders’ often negative first impressions, reshaping the perception of general conditions, became a crucial task of presenting the Soviet Union to Western visitors. Designating models became a quintessential practice for a group of revolutionary modernizers with scarce resources in a sea of “backwardness.”

But model-based methods of guiding and teaching foreign visitors—which became known in the 1920s as “cultural show” [*kul’tpokaz*—also held a deep and many-faceted ideological resonance. Model communities, such as those rehabilitating prisoners or forging new people, harked back to utopian socialist community-based blueprints for socialism and the religious, political, and experimental communes with which socialist utopianism was historically intertwined in both Russia and Western countries.

But were the Soviet “sites of socialism” really Potemkin villages? If Potemkin villages are taken to mean façades erected to fool visitors, in this case foreign travelers, I will argue that the answer is no.

In looking at the places foreigners were shown in the interwar period, it is useful to make a distinction between *showcases*, a relatively small group of places that were substantially influenced by the fact that they became the most prominent destinations for foreign visitors, and a broader number of working institutions designated as *models* [*obratsovyi*] within various Soviet hierarchies. These models were also sites that came to be considered desirable for foreign eyes. Each of these labels is an ideal type: not all showcases were created as such, certain parts of institutions could evolve into showcases for foreigners, and even those places designed most deliberately for foreign eyes also played major roles for Soviet actors and audiences. Even the relatively small number of the most famous and well-visited sites historically had major significance not just for visiting dignitaries but internally within the Soviet system. It is also the case that far from all the places visited by foreigners were either show or model institutions. A larger number of sites were simply in good enough condition that they made it onto long lists of places approved for foreign visits.

(In the lecture, examples will be given to show how the Soviet system of displaying model sites functioned in the 1920s and 1930s.)

Soviet “cultural show” thus arose as the increasingly codified practices involved in presenting all these sites of various kinds open to foreigners. All of them were supposed to play the role of microcosms from which foreigners could make positive generalizations about the new Soviet society as a whole. Many states have tried hard to display their most attractive sides; it is the sheer extent of the Soviet effort to shape foreign visitors’ views, first and foremost through the presentation of such a large array of models, which was the most distinctive innovation of the Soviet approach to foreign visitors.

Models in Early Soviet and Stalinist Culture

The significance of model institutions was hardly limited to “cultural show” directed at foreigners; simultaneously, they were part of an emerging Soviet and Stalinist domestic order centrally concerned with altering the psyche of its own citizens. The practices and strategies that emerged to convince foreigners arose at the same time that the Soviet state and Soviet culture designed unprecedentedly widespread methods of molding the outlooks of the domestic population.

Model Soviet institutions were widely designated as “model” or “model-experimental” within the wave of institution-building that started after 1917, not because they were later connected to the reception of foreign visitors. Designating models fit in with a deep Soviet political logic of instruction through signals and official approbation; they provided flesh and blood for a future-oriented ideology and culture, anticipating the

centralizing and sacralizing features of Stalin-era Socialist Realism. The need to present images of progress to the world became one more factor spurring the designation of unrepresentative models; lavish and prestigious foreign praise, in turn, demonstrably served to increase the authority of those already designated as special institutions.

(The lecture will give examples of the most important “models” crucial to Soviets, and not only to foreign visitors: factories, the secret police’s commune for juvenile delinquents at Bolshevo, and even the city of Moscow as showcase city.)

Cultural Show and Socialist Realism

Even as showcases and models carried with them a sense of pathbreaking exceptionalism inside the Soviet system, cultural show presented them to foreign visitors as miniatures, through which one was encouraged to generalize about the current state of, say, kindergartens or maternity wards throughout the land. Quality would be transformed into quantity. At the same time, perhaps even to the most hard-headed and ruthless Bolsheviks, model sites appeared to hold out the possibility of mapping the future landscape of socialism—the best microcosms would become universal, heralding what socialism could be once the heritage of the past was overcome. This was something not necessarily staged for foreigners.

There was a direct link between “cultural show” directed at foreigners and the doctrine of Socialist Realism” directed at Soviet citizens as it emerged in the early stages of Stalinism. Maxim Gorky was a crucial conduit in this shift. Gorky, who lived in Europe and was extensively involved in presenting the Soviet Union to Western intellectuals in the 1920s, returned in 1929 to make a special tour of model institutions around the USSR, which he wrote about in his new Russian-language journal *Our Achievements*. An explicit goal of the journal was to present the Soviet Union to its own people in a manner similar to the methods developed for foreign visitors. Gorky later became perhaps the key architect of Stalinism in culture and a main voice in the articulation of the new doctrine of Socialist Realism.

There is ample evidence that Soviet politicians, guides, and *apparatchiki* involved in Soviet cultural diplomacy were well aware that many foreigners were skeptical of Potemkin villages. Even highly Sovietophilic visitors to try suddenly to change their schedules in order to foil pre-arranged plans. But the entire system for receiving foreigners worked against allaying distrust of Potemkin villages with more freedom of movement. Quite the opposite; given the overwhelming desire and political need to avoid anything that might spoil a favorable evaluation, the most Soviet hosts could do was to attempt a kind of planned spontaneity: home meetings and teas with selected workers in model apartments.

By the same token, itineraries were controlled and honored visitors were overloaded from morning to night with official meetings, ceremonies, banquets, and festivals—precisely to minimize unexpected exploring. Especially in the 1930s, Soviet reception

of foreigners became invested in planning, limiting, and controlling travelers' freedom of movement; but in so doing, it became impossible to avoid rumors and accusations of Potemkin villages. This I call the Soviet Potemkin village dilemma; this was the circle that the Soviets could not square.

Although the Soviets never resolved the Potemkin village dilemma, their methods of "cultural show" first designed for foreigners, insofar as it was genetically intertwined with socialist realism, should be seen as far more than a mere deception of foreign visitors: they had a profound impact on the Soviet Union itself. Socialist Realism was not only codified in 1934 as the doctrine guiding literature and the arts under Stalinism but, seen in the broadest sense, for decades became the dominant mode of presenting Soviet reality to the Soviets themselves. In other words, Socialist Realism can be understood not only as an aesthetic doctrine but as a core cultural and ideological orientation in the Stalin period, a mode of depicting reality as filled with the promise of showcases.

Conclusion

There was hardly a single model shown to outsiders that did not have its own important role for insiders. It was as if Potemkin's decorated villages had been promulgated on a mass scale to inspire Russian peasants throughout the land. Katerina Clark has called the naming of a "canonical model" to function as a beacon for all lesser examples of the phenomenon a "defining" tendency in Stalinist culture that, she says, was already present in the early 1930s. In my view, this date needs to be pushed back nearly a decade. The promotion of the exceptional miniature—from communes to all sorts of sites and institutions designated as leaders—started off as the key part of early Soviet cultural show, directed at foreign visitors, and moved in ever-more centralized and hierarchical form to the very center of Stalinist culture, the very building blocks of which were imagined and tangible showcases.

However, in the original myth, Potemkin villages were not merely façades for foreign visitors but first and foremost the means to fool Catherine the Great; they can thus be interpreted as a form of self-deception.

There were Soviet practices that did recall that original sense. The "Potemkin methods" witnessed by at least one Western journalist of preparing the *mise en scène* for particularly important visitors such as Bernard Shaw in 1931—cleaning up buildings, evacuating the unsightly sick and homeless children—are also strikingly similar to the preparations made for the visits of top Soviet leaders in the regions, most famously later in Soviet history.

Ironically, as the nature of Soviet model-building shifted and model sites became less the blueprints of expectant hope and more like altars in a state religion, models acquired the status not merely of experimental or specially designated institutions but of a central means for shaping the world-view of the new Soviet person. As such, they became a primary vehicle of the Soviet Union's trumpeting of its superiority and

success internally, to itself. In this sense, the model sites of socialism came full circle back to that original connotation of Potemkin villages as a form of self-delusion—this time, not as farce but as tragedy, in that it involved the delusion not merely of the tsar but of an entire civilization.