

Igal Halfin. *Red Autobiographies: Initiating the Bolshevik Self*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010. 224 pp. \$30.00 paper. ISBN 978-0-2959-9112-2.

For more than fifteen years, Igal Halfin has been a master craftsman in the academic cottage industry of "Soviet subjectivity." His work is essential reading, and his texts provide both historical and methodological inroads for the ways discourse enveloped Soviet citizens' self-representation. While his arguments remain controversial, their influence on our understanding of Soviet subject formation cannot be denied. It was Halfin along with Jochen Hellbeck who turned Michel Foucault into a permanent fixture in Soviet Studies. Halfin has urged us to take language, narrative structure and their deployment seriously. He even introduced a distinct Halfinian lexicon: "the self," "brotherhood of the elect," "the soul," "towards the light," "subjectivity," "conversion," "poetics," and "eschatology." Whatever one thinks of his methods and conclusions, one cannot pose questions about the Soviet subject without engaging Igal Halfin's work.

*Red Autobiographies* analyzes the autobiographies Party candidates and members wrote to Party admission and purge commissions and the process by which the commissions scrutinized the texts in the early 1920s. The autobiography formed the nexus of Bolshevik discourse and Soviet citizens' replication of its progressive narratives. In the autobiography citizens reproduced their life stories with elements of Bolshevik discourse to prove themselves worthy of Party membership. According to Halfin, communist autobiographies were conversion narratives in which the author narrated his development from an immature political subject into a fully conscious communist. The authors focused on a "decisive moment" in which their "consciousness and the Party line were supposed to be merged." (p. 4) These conversion narratives are important because they reveal an emergence of an "illiberal subject" valorized in the collective rather than the individual. The autobiographical text, however, is only one part of the story. Essential to the construction of the illiberal subject was the commissions' interrogation of the applicant's autobiography. Halfin claims that these interrogations functioned like Michel Foucault's confessional model, in that they served as a space for penetrating "the mind" to determine "whether one was 'conscious' and 'developed' enough to be trusted with Party duties." (p. 10)

*Red Autobiographies* charts the process of subject formation in four chapters. The first provides an overview of the autobiography's place in the process of Party admission and purges. Admission and purge committees, which were often one and the same, were the most important bodies within the Party structure. They were the gatekeepers of the "brotherhood of the elect." For Halfin, Party admission was "the most important rite of passage in the early Soviet society" because it conferred a social and spiritual status similar to acceptance into a religious sect. Once accepted, the Soviet subject became the physical embodiment of the Party's worldview. Indeed, Halfin writes, "a

convert was believed to have exceptional epistemological capabilities – he or she had an intimate understanding of the historical process and its impact on the progress of the human mind.” (p. 45)

Interestingly, an individual possessed these epistemological capabilities regardless of his class origin. In fact, communist conversion rendered class background insignificant. Once admitted into the Party, one's class position mattered little as long as the convert fully disclosed his background, broke with his past, and produced a conversion narrative that satisfied his peers. Naturally the Party desired toiling classes more than others and scrutinized peasants and intellectuals, not to mention “former” classes (priests, nobles, merchants), far more earnestly. Yet once an applicant had proven he had converted, his life became precarious. While an applicant could explain political mistakes before conversion as immaturity, when holding a Party card lapses of faith became deliberate expressions of willful deceit.

In the core of the study Halfin analyzes a wide variety of party documents to reveal that what constituted a worker, a peasant, and an intellectual was locally constructed through Party interrogations. The lower rungs of the Bolshevik Party did not understand class as a sociological category but as an expression of consciousness. A peasant became a peasant by virtue of his consciousness vis-a-vis the Bolshevik concept of revolutionary time. For the Bolsheviks, ironically, class was rooted in the intangible essence of the soul. And a person's soul expressed itself in his understanding of his place in the world. Ultimately, the Bolsheviks measured class and identity as expressions of the sublimation of the self into the romanticism of the revolution and universal emancipation.

In chapters two through four Halfin convincingly shows that the proletariat, peasantry, and intelligentsia each had its own particular autobiographical narrative. Each class took a different road to narrate itself into the collective. A proletarian, for example, possessed innate consciousness and merely had to prove that he was actualizing his “built-in potential” to enter the Party. (p. 60) Party commissions viewed intellectuals as pampered, narcissistic, opportunistic, crafty and downright treacherous. In order to pass their “merciless examination,” candidates from the intelligentsia carefully documented “every movement of their soul, revealed every inner spring of their intentions, and described every inch of their personal growth in cerebral terms.” (p. 126) A successful intellectual's conversion narrative had to stress his fidelity to the revolution and the proletariat not as a leader and teacher, but as a helper and pupil. But peasants wrote the most interesting autobiographies, for a peasant had to shed his peasant identity in order to become a party member. Successful peasant autobiographies emphasized aspirations to become workers and/or their break with the village and its dark traditions. Ironically, the peasant was the locus of the real revolution since his conversion to communism ultimately meant ripping the petit-bourgeois essence out of his soul and re-fashioning into a completely different entity.

While Halfin's exposition of the "Soviet subject's" illiberality is clear, its explanatory power and historical implications are somewhat opaque. What do we really learn about the person behind the subject? Was there a singular Soviet subject that transverges space and time? Did the synchronic subject have a diachronic life? Halfin's response to these questions is pessimistic. He does not believe that the subject or the self have a life beyond the contingencies of the text. We are left with a celebration of the text since to assume a self behind it means to reproduce our own narcissism by seeing ourselves in the mirror of history.

The subtitle of the book, *Initiating the Bolshevik Self*, offers certain answers. "Initiating" can mean "admitting" or "beginning." Both suggest a brief moment in time, a spark of creation absent of a past and a future. Halfin's souls are fleeting and momentary. Halfin is not interested in a unified self, or his existence after leaving the optic of the Party commission. Neither does he believe that this "self" can be representative of any interior truth or "authentic person." Therefore, Halfin is not concerned with questions of sincerity or imposture. In fact, on this last point Halfin is emphatic. A historian's claim to have some insight into a past social world, he suggests, amounts to excavating pyrite. Following Irving Goffman, Halfin asserts that the only things at our disposal are the "performers, audiences, and dramaturgical strategies." There are no masks to cast off, dialects to be spoken or hidden transcripts to decipher. "There is simply no domain outside of theater where real interactions takes place, where true words are spoken," Halfin writes. (p. 10) All the social relations that may influence the proceedings of admission and purge interrogations, particularly those conducted in universities – horizontal and vertical peer relations, friendship and comradeship, cliques, rivalries, popularity, and ostracism – find no recognition. So while Halfin does an excellent job identifying and describing the subject and its self articulation, the reader is left wondering about the experiences that make humans, well, human.

Nevertheless, one should not force Halfin into the realm of social history. His methodological modesty is appreciated and any dissatisfaction with *Red Autobiographies* should serve as a platform for others to do more thinking about the "Soviet subject" and its various contingencies. After all, whatever one thinks of Halfin's conclusions, he consistently provides analytically rich, theoretically challenging and inspiring works. To dismiss his penetrating and creative revisionism is to suffer from a more intellectually debilitating form of myopia.

Sean Guillory  
guillory@pitt.edu

University of Pittsburgh