

Rolf Harbers en Maurits Hoenders

Orlando Figes and his love affair with Russian history

an interview

De Britse historicus Orlando Figes bezocht op vrijdag 3 oktober 2003 Amsterdam om de vertaling van zijn laatste werk, *Natasja's dans. Een culturele geschiedenis van Rusland* (Utrecht 2003), te presenteren. Dit werk handelt over de Russische cultuurgeschiedenis van de negentiende en twintigste eeuw. Twee redacteurs van *Groniek* interviewden hem over zijn werk, zijn fascinatie voor Rusland en zijn geschiedopvatting.

What was it that attracted you to write about Russian history? How did your interest in Russia develop?

My interest in Russia arose quite accidentally. Initially, I was interested in German intellectual history. I intended to do my PhD in Oxford on that subject, but then my supervisor, Norman Stone, dissuaded me from doing this. He told me that it is too tough for a young man to battle with the complex philosophy of Hegel and other German intellectuals. And in a way, I think he was right. Now that I am a teacher I would never advise students of mine to do intellectual history, because I think it is better to do something more empirical, so that you can learn your craft as an historian. But anyway, Stone advised me to choose a more concrete subject, Russian peasants for example. I had always been interested in Russian literature and I had money to attend Russian language courses (I did not have any background in Russian), so I did my dissertation, which is my first book, on the Russian peasantry in the Revolution and in the civil war.¹ After the publication of my dissertation I just got stuck in Russian history and I never looked back. I gradually fell in love with the country, I suppose.

¹ Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, civil war. The Volga countryside in revolution (1917-1921)* (Oxford 1989).

Between 1984 and 1986 you did research in the Soviet Union. How was your stay there from the perspective of a researcher? Did you run into any problems?

Yes, I had endless problems. When I went to Moscow in 1984, the way of working in archives was entirely different. You had to have special permission to work in archives and if you were studying a politically sensitive subject like I did – peasants in the Revolution – it was even more difficult to do research. Initially, I wanted to study a specific peasant rebellion against the bolsheviks, but that turned out to be impossible, because I just could not consult the sources I needed. Therefore, I decided to change my subject: I chose to research the Russian countryside as a whole during the Revolution. Nevertheless, it was still difficult to gain access to the archives. I only got in through the help of a Soviet historian whom I became friends with. He had good relations with the archivists. But even then, once you were inside the archives, you didn't have access to the catalogues so you didn't know what you were ordering and you didn't know what to order. You had to work from the footnotes of Soviet historians.

In those days I smoked – and that was very useful. In the Soviet archive where I was doing my research – the archive of the October Revolution, it was called – there was a special reading room for foreigners. You were not allowed to mingle with the Soviets at all. The one place where you could meet them, was in the toilet, because the archives didn't have separate toilets for foreigners. Many Soviets went there to smoke, and as I said, I, too, smoked at the time. As I didn't have anything to read the first six months in the archive, simply because I didn't have access to any material, I spent most of my time in the toilets. So, many times I went there, waited for Soviet historians and archivists who came down to smoke and offered them some cigarettes. While smoking with them, I told them what I was researching and they offered to look up some documents in the catalogue for me, which had to do with my subject. They were willing to write down some numbers of the documents for me, so that I could order them.

The only way the Soviets could deprive you of access to the information you needed, was by not giving you the catalogue numbers. But once you had the number of certain documents, they could not deny that they existed. So, before I met the Soviets in the toilets, I didn't even know what I was missing. It was like working in the dark, hoping that you would get something: it was practically impossible to do any serious work then.

I suppose you missed much information because of the limited access to the archives

Of course I did. I was probably among the first historians to see the inventories of each archival collection. But we didn't get those inventories until about 1987. So, to some extent, I could benefit from my conversations in the toilet in 1985, but when I look at what you can get today, obviously, I missed much material. But still, when I look at my first book now, its archival basis is pretty strong. And actually, there is not any book since the publication of mine with such a detailed description of village politics – which was the centre of the book. It is quite interesting to look at the Revolution from that perspective. I was interested in what happened to the village institutions during the Revolution, in how the Soviet system implanted itself into the village. The only way you could get at that was by looking at the village committees, looking at what they were doing and who was running them. That was only possible by getting these Soviet village papers, which I was lucky enough to get in 1985.

The title of your book refers to a passage in Leon Tolstoy's War and Peace. In that passage Natasha, a woman from the Russian elite who has had a western education and was accustomed to the western way of life, was all of a sudden able to perform a traditional Russian dance which she had never been taught – as if it just came to her naturally. This passage suggests that Russian identity is not something you learn, but something you just have. Why did this image attract you that much that you decided to refer to it in the title of your book?

The book is very complicated and it is quite difficult to explain what I am trying to say with the title. First of all, somebody advised me to let the title refer to something beautiful – and I think the passage in *War and Peace* on Natasha performing a Russian dance is very beautiful. Secondly, it opens up all the major themes of the book, for example the meeting between European aristocratic culture and Russian native culture and the contradictory impulses between them. If you deconstruct the scene, you will see that all elements in it, as well as in Russian culture, are in fact cultural borrowings and that there is no such thing as an organic centre. Russian culture is dynamic and it is made up of diverse elements and traditions, it is a sort of unity in diversity. Another element of it is that it is a mythical creation; in fact it is a performance, like Natasha's dance. Natasha's dance is a mythical recreation of a peasant dance: she is not dancing a peasant dance, she is

dancing her version of a peasant dance. At another level Tolstoy is romantically imagining that there is somehow a connection between her and the peasantry. In Russia, especially in Tolstoy's age, when the aristocracy was so estranged from the peasants, because of virtually two hundred years of westernisation, all you could do was to recreate cultural unity as a mythical construction. All things considered, I think using this title is a good way of introducing what I wanted to argue in the book: Russia is much too big and too diverse for a single sort of organic culture to hold or to be passed off as a national heritage.

Do you think there is a difference between Russian culture and European culture?

Yes. Although, to some extent, I am willing to go along with the idea that there can be some sort of Russian temperament, which is difficult, if not impossible, to define, I think European culture has more essence. For example, one could more easily speak of a sort of *Zeitgeist* for the Netherlands. This becomes clear if you compare my book with Simon Schama's *The embarrassment of riches*. His view of culture is very different from mine, because he argues that there is something called 'Dutchness'. In his view, Dutch culture is an expression of Dutch unity. It is a reflection of a national unity which is already there. You can't say that of Russia. Russian culture kept alive the illusion of unity, it, in the words of Benedict Anderson, invented a community. And the importance here is not to deconstruct the myth of unity, but to find out what its consequences were. The myth became a space that people inhabited; people modelled themselves by literary, fictional characters and they subscribed to the values of artists, writers and poets. It created a kind of mindset which existed in opposition to the state. There was no Russian nation state, but just the empire, the tsars and the church. But people didn't live by that. They lived by ideas that were given to them by cultural practitioners. So, in Western Europe culture is a reflection of a heritage, whereas Russia did not have that heritage. In Russia culture has a more shaping function.

Some critics say that your view of Russian culture is too one-sided. In their opinion, you underestimate the influence of western culture. For example, they point out that you seem to have forgotten, that the fascination of the elite for the farmers is not typically Russian, but inspired by the German Karl Marx, and that nationalism and romanticism is something European, too. What would you say to this criticism?

Obviously the interest in folklore, which characterises many Russian writers and artists in the nineteenth century, is something which is common to all European romanticism. I am not saying it is not. Russian romanticism has its roots in European romanticism, but what is different about the Russian experience of it, is that it is much more fundamentally political and therefore much more crucial. In fact, there were two nations in nineteenth century Russia: the Russian elite, which spoke a europeanised form of Russian and had merged with European culture, and the peasantry, oppressed and speaking a different language. The Napoleonic war, which ended in 1812, in a way united all Russians in an overarching patriotism against a common enemy. After the war, the grave inequality in Russian society stood in sharp contrast with the apparent wartime unity. That ignited the desire of the elite to build a bridge between the two nations. Russian romanticism was embodied in that desire. It got a political dimension with the Decembrists of 1825, who propagated democratic nationalism.

Nevertheless, from the end of the nineteenth century, the elite became disappointed, because their created unity with the peasantry turned out to be an illusion. Their love affair with the Russian peasants was, like Natasha's dance, a romantic and mythical image. This rude awakening of the cultural dream of unity caused a sharp division within the Russian intelligentsia.

Although you praise some Soviet filmmakers, like Eisenstein and Barnet, you seem to consider the Soviet era as a kind of cultural intermezzo, in which there was no place for Russian culture as it had been before the Revolution.

There is a very profound difference between political and cultural elements. Politically, you can say that there were lasting institutions. In fact, Soviet communism was a continuation of the Russian autocratic tradition. But could you say that there were lasting cultural legacies? There were some experimental thoughts, but they didn't amount to anything. And the longer lasting Soviet thoughts on social realism were essentially a hideous distortion of the nineteenth-century tradition, because it became nationalistic and was deprived of its humanist content. The only meaningful culture of Soviet Russia in the twentieth century was the one that had a home in St. Petersburg. I focused mostly on Rachmaninov and Shostakovich, because I wanted to stress the extent to which people identified with something that was a continuum. For example, when Rachmaninov, an obvious exponent of nineteenth-century cultural tradition, died, many people came to his

funeral. They were identifying with the continuum going back to Peter the Great. In fact, they were, in a subtle way, opposing the Stalinist regime.

You also wrote a chapter about Russian émigrés. That implies that Russian culture survived more outside Soviet Russia than within.

Well, the émigrés certainly thought that. Soviet culture was not Russian at all according to them. Studying them is a very useful way of testing what was really important about Russian culture in the Soviet era. Was Russian culture tied to the Russian land, was it partially physically existing, or was it just something immaterial, spiritual? In fact, it was both. On the one hand, there was a set of values and ideas that represented the mythical Russia. On the other hand, there was something about the physicality, a sort of yearning for the land.

Some critics believe that your style is too narrative and that there is a lack of method and structure in your work. Does it perhaps have something to do with your view of writing history?

I believe strongly that history is powerful literature. Furthermore, I think that historical meaning has to be conveyed in part emotionally. To reach historical understanding you have to feel the meaning as much as comprehend it rationally. I suppose most historians analyse explicitly and tell you what to think: A happened because of B and therefore C is what you should think. Nevertheless, I reject the idea that my work lacks theory and analysis. My work does contain analysis and theory, but it is embedded in the narrative. I just don't spell it out. It is necessary to create a narrative, because it carries the emotional meaning of history. If you read a book like Ian Kershaw's *Hitler* there seems to be only one interpretation you can have. I don't like this kind of rigorous and determinist reasoning, because there is not one universal truth. That is why you should not pretend there is one. When you are analysing a complex historical event like the Russian Revolution you can't just say: this is the meaning of the Russian Revolution. People, the historical actors as well as the readers, experience it from different perspectives and the historian should leave space for that.

In a way, historians create the past. Ranke's ideal of 'bloß zeigen wie es eigentlich gewesen' is outdated. It is exactly this creative element of writing history that made me want to become an historian in the first place. Writing history is a kind of art, a craft. For me, the real fun of writing is to try and make the readers feel history. In order to accomplish this, I give it a shape, a colour and an emotional impact.

Do you think Russia, after the fall of communism, will develop more in the direction of the west?

Only bits of it will. Moscow is very western, as well as St. Petersburg. The profitable bits of Russian economy, like the oil industry, will become little clones of western capitalism. Nevertheless, Russian culture is another matter. In a sense the old debate between westerners and slavophiles is more acute now than it has ever been, because Russia is, in fact, being westernised at the moment. It may become the most dominant economical force in Europe within our lifetime. It would not surprise one, because it is a tremendously rich country when you look at its resources. But it is also a country of immense inequality and it has always been. In that sense, Russia will still be different from the west for a very long time. Generally, I think Russian culture is now, like all other cultures, being threatened by globalisation.

In the Netherlands globalisation also seems to have a counterpart: it seems to make people more aware of their 'Dutchness'. They are asking themselves what makes them specifically Dutch in contrast to other countries.

I don't think that has happened yet in Russia, but I think it will happen. I think it is under the surface now. There are certain slavophile elements who don't want to be westernised. At the moment there is a small minority of the population concentrated in Moscow, among other places, that is being westernised and that benefits from western influence. There are still large areas in the country that live in poverty, isolated from western influences. For the people living there, westernisation – and therefore a renewed quest for Russianness – has not yet become an issue.

Our final question: what project are you working on at the moment?

I have a big project now. I am collecting family archives from the Stalin era. These documents have never been given to archives, but can be found in people's homes. I am interested in what happened to the private sphere, what happened to family relationships and how people lived during the Stalin era. I found two connected family archives. This subject is almost biographical, because the theme is making moral compromises. We have a stereotypical image of what it was like to live under Stalin's regime. We tend to think that everybody worshipped Stalin, but in fact most people collaborated just to survive. No one ever really studied what that meant in terms of human relationships. I found a subject which allows me to do that, to look at people who got sucked into the system and how that af-

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fected their relationships. Of course, Stalinism partly consisted of political structures and oppression, but that was not the essence. The essence of the system, the reason why it lasted so long, was that the people internalised its values. It is very interesting what moral choices people made in the Soviet era. I think I should examine this now, before everyone is dead and we will only have stereotypes left.

Op 26 februari 2004 zal Orlando Figes een bezoek brengen aan het Groninger museum, naar aanleiding van de tentoonstelling over *Het Russische landschap* die vanaf 14 december te bezichtigen zal zijn.

Orlando Figes (1959) studeerde geschiedenis aan de University of Cambridge. In 1989 promoveerde hij op *Peasant Russia, civil war. The Volga countryside in revolution (1917-1921)* (Oxford 1989). Verder verscheen van zijn hand onder andere *A people's tragedy. The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (Londen 1996), dat met vele prijzen werd bekroond. Momenteel is hij als hoogleraar verbonden aan het Birkbeck College, University of London.