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Making a Self for the Times: Impersonation and Imposture in 20th-Century Russia

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Reinvention is what revolutions are all about. This has implications not only for the nation (society, polity) but also for the individual. When revolutionaries assume the task of remaking their society, they also pledge to remake themselves and their neighbors as citizens and patriots of the revolutionary state. In the case of the Bolshevik Revolution, the stated aim was to produce a "new Soviet man" (*novyi sovetskii chelovek*), often pictured as a citizen of the socialist future, free from the crippling legacy of capitalism. But in addition to this generic new person of the future, there were millions of individual men and women who, in a practical and immediate way, needed to reinvent themselves as a consequence of the Revolution. The social hierarchy of the old regime had been discarded along with its political institutions. Status, rank, and honor had been deconstructed. The social personae of the old world were no longer appropriate in the new.

This essay is an exploration of the process of individual reinvention of self associated with the Russian Revolution (broadly understood as a process of political and social transformation beginning in 1917 and continuing through the 1920s and 1930s). My notion of "reinvention" involves both changes of self-presentation and changes in self-understanding. Since self-understanding is an extremely elusive target, however, I will focus primarily on self-presentation, particularly the presentation of a social self identified in class terms. Class identification was all-important in the young Soviet state because of the Bolsheviks' conception of the Revolution as a class conflict (the proletariat triumphing over the bourgeoisie) and their belief that class and political allegiance were inextricably linked. To make one's way in the new revolutionary world, it was necessary both to reinvent oneself as a Soviet

citizen and – even more urgently – to establish an acceptable class identity. Of the two tasks, the latter was by far the most challenging for those – the great majority – who were not unambiguously "proletarian." If impersonation, in the sense of assuming new personae, was the task of virtually everyone touched by the Revolution, imposture, involving deception about identity, was scarcely less prevalent. Among the sociopolitical consequences of this, I suggest, was the acute fear of concealed and disguised **[End Page 469]** "enemies" – impostors – that was so marked a feature of Soviet politics and society in the first two decades.

Definitions: Identity, Impersonation, and Imposture

"Identity" is a concept that has recently been much over-used, with a multiplicity of meanings.¹ I use it to mean a self-identification and/or self-understanding constructed with reference to currently accepted categories of social being. There is, of course, a difference between self-identification (a labeling process which may carry only an instrumental purpose), and self-understanding (implying belief that the self is as one understands it). My definition intentionally elides this distinction, since my assumption is that the self-understanding of subjects is accessible to historians only through practices like self-identification. In this essay, "identity" is shorthand for the complex revisions of self-identification and self-understanding that were associated with the Russian Revolution.

In my definition, individuals always have multiple identities, i.e. self-identifications that mark their location in the world and relationship to other people. This is because "identity" can be construed in many different ways – it can be social, gender, ethnic/national, familial, confessional, political, and so on. Assuming identities to be the classifications that a person accepts as applicable to him/herself and expects the outside world to recognize in him/her, a single person may simultaneously embrace the identities of, for example, man, worker, Communist, husband/father, Russian. In the early Soviet case, the axes

Articles

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