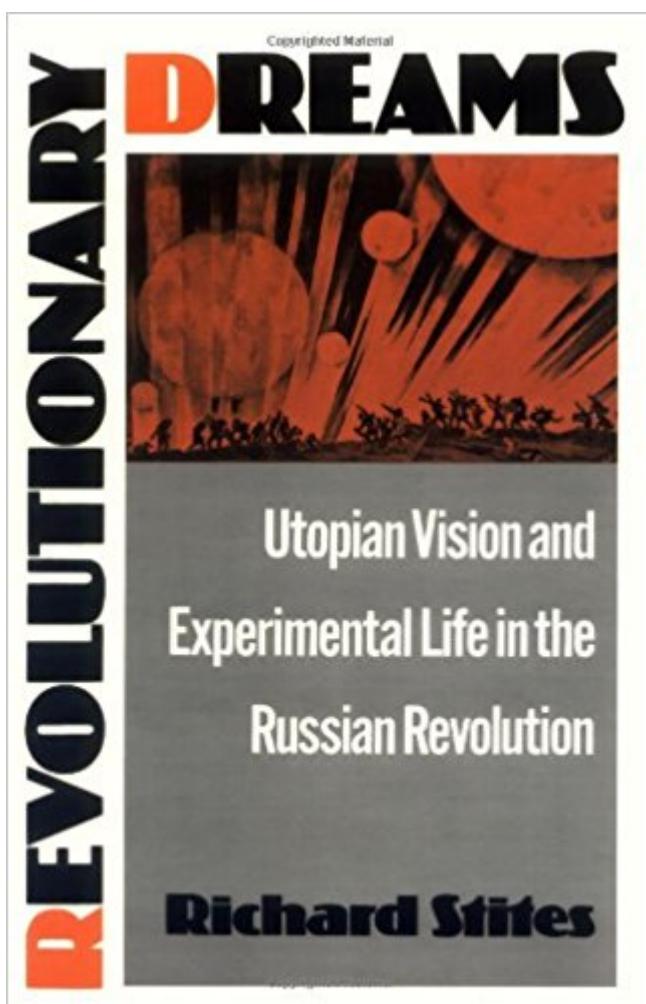


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# Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision And Experimental Life In The Russian Revolution



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This intriguing book will be read with profit not only by historians of Russia but also by anyone interested in utopian visions and utopian experiments. Stites casts his net widely to draw in a varied catch of science fiction writers, architects, efficiency experts, student communards, and Bolshevik leaders. By dissecting their ideas, he provides a provocative analysis of the hopes of the Russian Revolution."--American Historical Review" A dazzling compendium of the manifold ideas and projects that flashed across Russia after 1917."--Times Higher Education Supplement"Unlike many previous studies of the subject, this book was not written with a cynical or condescending

smirk...Stites is one of a small but increasingly influential group of American Slavists who have dumped the righteous tone of cold war discourse about the Soviet Union. Instead the author delights in revealing diversity."--*New Statesmen & Society*"A major contribution to the social and cultural history of the USSR. Moreover, given its lucid and compelling style...there is no reason why [it] will not sell well to a broader reading public."--Ronald G. Suny, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor"Rich, learned, and stimulating...What Stites captures beautifully in this fine book is the excitement and the sense of possibility of the time when the Russian Revolution could still inspire utopian hopes."--*Utopian Studies*"[An] original study...Stites has his subject well in hand and writes smoothly, and his work becomes a portrait of the Russian people as they reveal themselves by their dreams."--*The New Yorker*"Recommended for all libraries."--*CHOICE*"An exciting book that will be read and enjoyed by everyone interested in the history of Soviet culture and society. With grace and intelligence, the author illuminates myriad possibilities of social and cultural development that took shape in the revolutionary era. His unique contribution is to show the ambiguity of the first decade of Soviet society, when dreamers from Lenin...to pionerring artists and composers let their imaginations range freely. The result is also a new view of the 1930s as the era when dreams were smothered and the state declared 'war on the dreamers.'"--Jeffrey Brooks, University of Minnesota"Thoroughly researched and extremely informative...A book to be enjoyed."--*Political Studies*"A comprehensive and sympathetic look at a long-gone age of revolutionary dreamers and utopia-builders."--*SLOVO*"One of the most original and exciting books in the field of Russian History I have read in well over a decade. Revolutionary Dreams is a wonderfully imaginative book, a work of power, sweep, and energy. Stites has succeeded in breaking down the barriers between political and cultural history, enabling us for the first time to grasp the unique frameworks of thought and feeling (especially and most originally 'feeling') that attracted a wide variety of Russians, both educated elite and 'people,' during the turbulent post-Revolutionary years, and to grasp the significance of the sad fate suffered by many of those who took the emancipatory goals of the revolution seriously. It is nothing less than a tour de force."--Reginald Zelnik, University of California, Berkeley

Richard Stites is at Georgetown University.

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. Because there had been different utopian currents before the Revolution, as Stites describes in his opening chapter, this led to very different conceptions of what should count most in the new society; in particular the struggle between efficiency and modernization utopians on the one hand and the freedom and equality utopians on the other hand was a perpetual one. But in these days it was very well possible for societies to form and try to design and build Russia according to their own views of the future (as long as they were leftist), without this leading to repression or death, such as would later happen with Stalinism. In this, Stites also demonstrates the essential difference between Soviet society in the Leninist period and the later USSR from Stalin on. We learn all about Constructivism and Futurism in art, about the symphony orchestras without director, about the peasant anti-landlord movement, about the ambivalent attitude towards the architecture and sculpture of the Czarist society, about Lunacharsky and his Commissariat for Enlightenment, about Zamyatin and "Engineer Menni", about iconoclasm and godless religion, and about Mozart's requiem for those fallen in the struggle against oppression. In short, this book is absolutely essential reading for anyone whose heart still goes out to the possibility of a better world.

Great book. great writing. Exciting read. Not too wordy. I understand everything. I recommend this book to any one interested in the first 10 years of the Soviet Union.

This is one of the best pieces of Russian History I have read, better than Billington or Pipes to be sure. Stites explores the long tradition of Russian Utopias and cultural myth, he digs up amazing

bits of early Soviet cultural practice, and carefully analyzes it all with an impressive set of theoretical tools. Best of all this is an extremely engaging book, nothing dry about its careful historical work, just fascinating subject matter in a clear, sensible form. I was so engaged by Revolutionary Dreams when I first saw it in a friend's library that he had to lend it to me to get me to go home. Finally, I know of nowhere else that you can learn about what made the Rosa Luxemburg chocolate bar special.

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. For example there are administration utopia, "a rational light beamed into the perceived darkness of the barbarous village world" versus popular/peasant utopia, based on the concept of Pravda (truth) and volya (freedom) (pp.15-18). The revolutionary iconoclasm that declared war on the luxury and symbols of the old regime, culture (Nihilism), and intellectualism (Makhaevism) through wanton vandalism, had to eventually be stifled by the very establishment that implemented it (Bolsheviks) lest every national treasure be destroyed. The conflict over urban versus rural life also presented a quandary. Cities were known for being centers for cultural and political activity as well as havens for crime, vice and the squalor of industrial waste. There was even thought of eliminating the cluster of cities all together in favor of a continuous avenue of

modular housing that stretched in a straight line far into the vast Russian hinterland. Stites seems to not take a stand against the more absurd side of utopian daydreaming. The author does, however, differentiate between its two main political protagonists, V.I. Lenin and Stalin. Stites perceives Lenin as sympathetic to the utopian propensity, however, with one rational foot firmly placed in reality. Stalin, on the other hand, had both feet cemented in a realist agenda of "spontaneous euphoria and terror" (p. 227). Perhaps the oddest ambiguity of all is a "fantasy state" or "panegyric utopia" under Stalin, rising from the ashes of the revolutionary utopia Stalin supposedly hated so much. According to Stites, Stalin "detested disorder, freedom of expression, experimentation for its own sake, and especially experimentation in building autonomous communities and promoting equality," all of the attributes of revolutionary daydreaming. Stites concludes, "Stalin's intense hatred of revolutionary utopianism and his emerging totalitarian system were not simply two independent ingredients of Stalinism but inextricably related" (p. 246). The most important theme of the book is "the Russian Revolution drew on a rich tradition of ritual culture, of forms traditions and motifs rooted in the past" (p. 79). Stites draws from an impressive list of Russian and western literature to stress this point. One comes away with a better understanding of the connection between the old peasant traditions and what was to become some of the basic tenants of communism, yet, like other scholars before, Stites does not succeed in bridging the gap between peasant and revolutionary intelligentsia. Nevertheless, Stites has contributed a provocative analysis that should stand the test of time. Stites acknowledges the lack of primary sources but hopes that his work will invite similar scholarly works. Stites, himself has contributed a significant sequel with *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) as well as, his previous work: *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978). Stites has also edited a number of anthologies dealing with Russian history.

A beautifully written and insightful exploration of political thought in Russia during the industrial revolution.

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