

I wrote review of
All Russia is Burning!

American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): Margaret Foley

Source: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), pp. 714-716

Published by: [American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3220275>

Accessed: 01/11/2010 12:23

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=aatseel>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Slavic and East European Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

and Scientists,” is dedicated to a discussion of Neizvestny’s influence on his contemporaries who “found in Neizvestny a kindred spirit and an intellectual equal. His vision of art ennobling humanity and his use of new technology in his sculptures and architectural projects coincided with the scientists’ own vision of technological advances and discoveries that would free human potential and create a more just society. [...] Neizvestny had charisma, what the Russians called *lichnost*’, a unique personality. He was clearly a genius and a man who did not suffer fools” (164).

It seems that the story has a happy ending, and, naturally, one expects to see Neizvestny returning to his native country as a hero who openly celebrates his triumph. This does not, however, happen. Leong reveals the real state of affairs in the section “Moscow’s Art Mafia”: “[N]ot everyone in Russia welcomed Neizvestny back. Anger and anxiety gripped those responsible for Neizvestny’s torment and forced exile when the man, whose surname meant ‘unknown one,’ returned to the Soviet Union with honor and acclaim” (212). Even Gorbachev’s reforms could not change the situation. Leong’s explanation is that the bureaucracy and corruption had deep roots, the extirpation of which would take time. He examines the consequences of the regime established by Gorbachev’s predecessors, and he concludes that the same atmosphere of corruption seized the art bureaucracy. “The reappearance of Neizvestny in their midst was, indeed, cause of alarm. [...] Mediocrity always outnumbers genius: the Soviet state therefore favored unthreatening nonentities, and the Moscow mafia made the most of its strength in numbers. When these official artists saw the honors and commissions being heaped on Neizvestny, they roused themselves and schemed to undermine him. And Neizvestny, not suffering fools, took every occasion to mock and humiliate them” (213). Each new visit makes Neizvestny realize that he has become “an American in taste and temperament. He felt less and less at home in the Moscow of gambling casinos and nouveau riche entrepreneurs. Even though Yeltsin once offered Neizvestny an apartment in the Russian capital, the artist had no need of one” (285–86).

Centaur is a truthful and beautiful work of art in its concept, subject, and design. The photographs of Neizvestny and his works become an integral part of this biography.

V. Ulea (Vera Zubarev), *University of Pennsylvania*

Cathy A. Frierson. *All Russia is Burning! A Cultural History of Fire and Arson in Late Imperial Russia*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2003. Illustrations. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. x + 306 pp., \$45.00 (cloth).

All Russia is Burning! is an excellent study which provides thought-provoking insights into post-Emancipation Russia through a fascinating analysis of the history of fire. The enthusiasm and interest Frierson shows toward her subject is reflected in the engaging writing style and the wide range of materials—court and government documents, periodicals, photographs, *zemstvo* records, and literary works—she uses to produce a multi-layered examination of an issue that affected all strata of Russian society.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part provides an overview of the multiple uses and meanings of fire in Russian society. Frierson begins with an analysis of the role of fire in the home, followed by what happens when fire escapes the confines of the home or is put to other uses, and finally the effects of fire. In the home, fire had many benign functions, ranging from cooking and heating to fumigation, medicinal, and religious uses. She convincingly shows that such types of fire were viewed as relatively harmless, but when it raged outside the home, it took on a myriad of other meanings. The second and third parts of the book examine the role of arson and attempts at preventing and controlling fires.

Although Russia's physical environment, agricultural practices, wind patterns, and use of wood as a primary building material made fire very likely, the subject did not receive much attention until the second half of the nineteenth century. Frierson locates the beginning of what she calls "national fire narratives" in two events. The first was a series of destructive fires in St. Petersburg in 1862, which led Russia's educated urban elite to the realization that fire was a social menace. The second factor was the emancipation of the serfs, which necessitated a constant reworking of the terms of interaction, association, and responsibility between peasants and the rest of society. This new, uneasy, and, to a certain extent, ambiguous relationship was reflected in the inability to control and understand fires. The two groups needed to understand each other if the "fire question" was to be answered.

The section on arson illustrates one of the book's great strengths, which is to reconceptualize approaches to Russian history. Historians of Russia have traditionally argued that peasants used arson as a weapon of protest to attack landowners and the upper classes. Frierson argues instead that while arson could be used in this way, it actually functioned in a much larger context which revealed "tensions, conflicts, and most fully, social control within the peasant community itself" (107). She provides numerous examples to show that arson was more likely to occur within the village community rather than outside it. An act of arson could serve a variety of purposes: protest, justice, malice, or simply the desire to collect an insurance premium. According to Frierson, there was a moral component to arson, which often sanctioned attacks on resources, such as grain or hay, but rarely sanctioned attacks on homes and personal property.

The final section of the book focuses on preemptive and defensive methods to end the fire menace. The burden of formulating fire prevention strategies fell largely on the *zemstva*, which developed insurance plans, inspection programs, and building regulations. In fact, many hoped that regulation and the restructuring of village layouts would make rural Russia more rational and orderly. Despite the fact that many of the regulations imposed on peasants were not of their choosing, and that there were disputes between village and *zemstvo* over the process and costs of fire prevention, Frierson shows that many peasants took an active role in devising ways to protect their villages, ranging from enforcing regulations to developing their own methods of fire prevention.

For example, Frierson discusses attempts to convince peasants to build structures with fire-resistant materials, such as clay, stone, or stucco. One of the most flammable parts of the house was the thatched roof. An obvious remedy was for peasants to use tile or metal, but even with subsidies or other forms of financial assistance, these solutions cost more than most peasants could afford. In this regard, she provides an interesting description of the development and use of the "Adamov roof" (219–21), named after a peasant who developed a simple method that mixed straw with clay and greatly reduced the chances that a fire would jump from rooftop to rooftop. Even a few roofs of this kind could prevent the total destruction of a village.

Frierson's study also shows how firefighting, in many ways, transcended social class. Many fire brigades had noble or wealthy patrons, who supplied equipment and training. Firefighters attended conferences where they learned about techniques used all over the Russian Empire. They had their own journals and developed their own culture. Since fire brigades were almost exclusively male, one of the consequences of their formation was that women became excluded from village firefighting. Before standard firefighting methods developed, women took part in the often haphazard attempts to put fires out by, for example, salvaging and watching property and fetching water. With the professionalization of firefighting, women found themselves "pushed from the scene to observe [...] but not to participate in the battle against fire" (261). As a result, Frierson argues, it was only the male population of the village that was learning new organizational and communication skills that would help them become more effective members of a modernizing society.

Although *All Russia is Burning!* could be classified as social history, one also learns a great deal of economic, environmental, and general European history. In fact, while Frierson's focus on Russia is sharp and incisive, one is also able to see the country through an impressive theoretical and historical framework that provides a blueprint for new approaches to the study of Russian history.

Margaret Foley, University of Redlands

Kaarle Nordenstreng, Elena Vartanova, and Yassen Zassoursky, eds. *Russian Media Challenge*. Helsinki: Kikimora, 2001. Appendix. 292 pp., 29 € (paper).

The challenge referred to in this collection's title is the establishment of a free press in post-Soviet Russia. Since the perestroika and glasnost policies of Mikhail Gorbachev (appropriately enough, the author of the prologue), new publications and broadcast outlets have mushroomed at an impressively rapid rate and have even come to resemble Western counterparts. However, this evolution has engendered a paradox: despite the media explosion, such obstacles as President Vladimir Putin's authoritarian tendencies preclude complete openness. It is precisely this paradox that preoccupies the authors of the seven essays in this volume. While each profiles the myriad new publications, radio stations, television networks, and Web sites, they all reiterate the roadblocks and the need to remove them. The value of this work lies in the authors' passion and their systematization and analysis of the changes that have been occurring in Russia over the last decade.

Elena Vartanova's opening essay, "Media Structures: Changed and Unchanged," provides an appropriate overview, highlighting Russia's transformation from a "reading" culture to a "watching" one and the resulting diversity of media outlets. Although this piece, like several others here, is occasionally redundant and unorganized, it successfully paints a picture of contemporary Russian society. Considering all media (television, radio, magazines, newspapers, Internet), she attributes developments to the fact that the central government no longer controls all information. In addition, prohibitive costs have curtailed wide newspaper dissemination. Consequently, the media have drifted from their "vertical" hierarchy, which culminated in the Kremlin, to a "horizontal" structure where local outlets coexist and seek to fulfill the demands of members of all social strata. In addition, the newfound realization that media are not only an instrument of influence, but also a business, has spawned such entities as niche publications and commercial radio stations. Statistics aid the essay as Vartanova discusses, for example, preferred weekly magazines. The primary impression she leaves is one of a thriving media marketplace. It is equally significant that Vartanova begins the book's refrain when she enumerates some of the hurdles the new Russia faces: Russians have not yet learned to exploit advertising markets to their fullest potential; bribery continues to prevail; and unprofessional journalistic practices are pervasive.

Vartanova's reservations about the media's evolution lead into the next essay, Ivan Zassoursky's "Media and Power: Russia in the Nineties." Although Zassoursky in many ways echoes Vartanova, he adopts as his focus the dynamic between politics and media. He reminds readers of the pragmatic origins of the relationship between independent media entrepreneurs and the government: between 1990 and 1995 the media executives allied themselves with the government simply because they assumed that they would be able to retain their independence as long as then-President Boris Yeltsin kept the Communists out of power. As a result, businessmen came to wield great influence, such that "the role of the [political] parties was played by the media holdings" (80). By the end of the 1990s, Zassoursky reports, four entities played out their political aspirations via the media: the state, Boris