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In Wonderland They Lie?

Today's Russia: A Testimony of the New Soviet Enthusiasm in the 1930s by August Cesarec

This article examines a set of ego-documents (*Today's Russia* by A. Cesarec) to pose a question: does the paradigm of fear in Stalin's 1930s exclude the paradigm of enthusiasm? Have the memories of the horrors and fears of the Great Terror and the Gulag era erased the memory of the enthusiastic atmosphere and happiness of the Soviet Golden Age? Cesarec's *Today's Russia* evokes the same skepticism which, according to Kuromiya, Western historiography held towards Soviet memoirs on their exploits and successes in the 1930s, labelling them as Soviet propaganda, i.e. historically improbable material, *lakirovka* or fraud. The main task of this article is to decipher, i.e. to reconstruct, Cesarec's image of the 'facts of the epoch', as Iurii Lotman put it in his book *Within Thinking Worlds*.

The creation of our world is marvellous,
We have done the deeds of centuries in a few short years.
It is our right to seize happiness
We love passionately, and sing like children.
And our scarlet stars
Shine unparalleled
Over all countries, over the oceans,
The stars of a dream come true.

March of the enthusiasts [Marsh entuziastov] (music: Isaak Dunaevskii; lyrics: Anatolii D'aktiľ)
from *The Shining Path* [Svetlyi put', 1940], directed by Grigorii Aleksandrov.

We live in an age of great fear. Fear forces talented intellectuals to renounce their mothers, to fabricate their social origin, to climb to high positions [...] In a high place, the danger of exposure is not so terrible. Fear pursues a man [...] No one does anything without a shout, without being put on a black list, without the threat of imprisonment or exile [...] Destroy fear, destroy everything that fear generates – and you will see what a rich creative life will blossom in the country.

Fear [Strakh, 1931], Aleksandr Afinogenov.

Enthusiasm and Fear in the 1930s

In the preface to her memoir *Dragon's Teeth. My 30s* [*Zuby drakona. Moi 30-e gody*, 2015], film historian and cultural scientist Maia Turovskaia recalls that the 1930s were years of great endeavours – of Stalin's five-year plans, rapid industrialization, an obsessive race against the West, conquering the Arctic and other such feats. However, she also mentions their dark side – the widely known atrocities of the time: the 1930s were years in which horror was legitimized; these were bloody years of monstrosities, the Gulag, absolute censorship and total terror (e.g. Blium 200, Applebaum 2004). At that time, revolution was overshadowed by restoration in theoretical considerations, the avant-garde 'Culture 1' was replaced by the neoclassical style of what Vladimir Papernyi called 'Culture 2' (Papernyi 2006), or 'Stalin's style', his project of total art (Groys 1988). In 1934, socialism became the only acceptable poetic doctrine, which sent literature back to the Middle Ages, according to Katerina Clark in her 1981 book *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, because Soviet writers lost power over their

texts, i.e. the possibility of composing original texts, thus making them only messengers of history or, according to Clark, its mere narrators, like medieval chroniclers.

The utopian constructivist instability of the revolutionary 1920s was replaced by a stable socialist realist paradigm, which used proven forms of the past in order to simulate eternity and thus leave an indelible mark. This is best seen in spatial artefacts, i.e. in the Stalinist landscape of the 1930s (Naiman and Dobrenko 2003) supported by the new (realistic, national, and monumental) theory of architecture (Khmel'nitskii 2007). The Moscow Metro construction project and the Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow are two such monumental examples of this new spatial policy of the 1930s, but also of a new type of discourse. Mikhail Ryklin (2003) even speaks about the 'metro discourse', initiated by Lazar' Kaganovich – the man in charge of the construction of the metro system). The 1930s were a time of formation. Evgenii Dobrenko shows us that this was the time of the formation of the Soviet writer and his reader (Dobrenko 1999; Dobrenko 1997) It was in

this period that Soviet mythology, the concept of *homo novus* and Soviet archetypes, i.e. the Soviet canon, were consolidated (Giunter and Dobrenko 2005). Cosmopolitanism and horizontality (the terms Papernyi used to define the 1920s) seemed too revolutionary in the 1930s, and were replaced by autarky and verticality. However, Dobrenko (2020) points out that, unlike the 1940s, the 1930s were still characterized by an international character, i.e. a connection with the revolutionary discourse of the previous decade, and that key determinants of totalitarian Stalinist discourse (imperialism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, etc.) took root only after the Second World War, when love for Stalin became universal, i.e. when the new-fledged Generalissimus started being thoroughly mythologized. Sheila Fitzpatrick (1999) depicts Soviet everyday life in the 1930s, emphasizing primarily its negative aspects, such as shortages and constant breadlines. She also pays special attention to the atmosphere of fear, denunciation, and surveillance, i.e. terror. Both Fitzpatrick and Turovskaia emphasize the fact that this Soviet decade is under-explored. According to Turovskaia, it is perceived too simplistically (she refers to the

Manichaeian division in which the 1930s are portrayed as either a triumph of the Government or an apotheosis of blood and terror). My argument is the following: instead of an either/or approach to forming memories of the 1930s, the memoir *Dragon's Teeth* suggests a far more complex both/and model, which shows that over this decade two conflicting emotions coexisted – enthusiasm and fear.

Turovskaia pointed out the ambiguity of the decade, often referred to as the golden age of the Soviet way of life, as early as in the first chapter of her memoir. This was a dictatorship, but one that had a very specific feature: it was ‘accompanied by the enthusiasm of the majority’ (Turovskaia 2015: 21). It should also be noted that this exaggerated emotion was not feigned; according to Turovskaia, the enthusiasm was not just mere propagandistic fabrication – it was real, it ‘truly governed the minds and souls’ of Soviet people (Turovskaia 2015: 330). Naturally, this does not mean that Stalin’s cultural paradigm (written about by Boris Gasparov), which was propagandistic by its very structure did not support this ecstasy – and not only through industrialization (i.e. material artefacts), but also through so-called spiritual val-

ues. Therefore, it is not surprising that Soviet culture, including literature, cinema and art in the 1930s, would cultivate the myth of happiness, basing its narratives not only on negativity, i.e. the negation of others (such as the victory over class and other enemies), but also on positive affirmations, such as the idea of happiness, the joy of living, the belief in a bright future, etc., which will be discussed later. Therefore, in her introduction Turovskaia admits: 'I would be lying if I said that life consisted of fear. It was a life full of enthusiasm and fun' (Turovskaia 2015: 16). However, just one page before this passage, Turovskaia makes a completely contradictory claim, which only confirms that the narrative both/and model that I have already pointed out is correct, the model in which the paradigm of enthusiasm does not negate the paradigm of fear: 'Fear has become an eternal companion of our lives. It was not so much a matter of fear of poverty and imprisonment, but of a painful lack of freedom, of a sinister irrationality of fate. Fear was a constant coefficient of life right up to the end of the dictatorship' (2015: 15). Eric Naiman expressed it even more radically in his study *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (1999: 289),

where he concluded that, judging by the level of fear in everyday life, there is almost no period in all of Russian history that could surpass the 1930s.

Testimonies of Foreigners

The question this article aims to pose based on the selected ego-document is: does the paradigm of fear exclude the paradigm of enthusiasm? Have the memories of the horrors and fears of the Great Terror and the Gulag era erased the memory of the enthusiastic atmosphere and happiness of the Soviet Golden Age? Soviet memoirs (published in the USSR) about the years of Stalinism, as well as those published in the West (such as the memoirs of emigrants), are of great historiographical importance, although there are considerable differences between them. They were summarized by Hiroaki Kuromiya in his paper *Soviet Memoirs as Historical Source* (1985), where he pointed out the justifiable scepticism that Soviet ego-documents elicited in Western historiographies, which in turn highlighted the so-called Western Soviet memoirs, which might also lack objectivity:

Yet the heavily political and moral nature of memoirs dealing with the Stalin years

appear to give little compelling reason to believe that the memoirs published in

the West are more “objective” than are Soviet memoirs. This is not to downplay the utility

of the memoirs published in the West, but to point out the difficulties involved in memoirs

as a historical source pertaining to the Stalin years (Kuromiya 1985: 294).

That memoir prose played a propagandistic role in the 1930s is hardly news, just like the fact Kuromiya points out, that much of the rich Soviet memoir opus from the second half of the 1930s remains unpublished. However, when it comes to the first half of the 1930s, the preponderance of memoirs ‘focused on major achievements of the regime: rapid industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture’ (Kuromiya 1985: 295) is noticeable. As censorship and arrests grew, both before and during the times of the Great Terror, the number of published memoirs declined; however, some were

published. Among these the autobiography of the famous miner Aleksei Stakhanov’s *Story of My Life* [Rasskaz o moei zhizni, 1937], which had a cult status due to enthusiasm for the Stakhanovite movement, is worth mentioning.

Be that as it may, of the many categories of memoirs about the Soviet Golden Age, the most important genre for this article is that which Jacques Derrida dubbed ‘returns from the USSR’ (Derrida 1991: 197), i.e. memoirs of those political tourists – intellectuals, writers and other people in the field of culture – who came to Stalin’s Russia in the 1930s as ideologically like-minded people, i.e. Communists or at least their sympathizers. Ryklin (2009) summarized the selected memoirs – the dominant feelings and perspectives from which observations about the Soviet world are expressed, referring in many respects to Derrida. The pilgrimages of the *leftist* intellectuals to the New Jerusalem, i.e. Moscow, began as early as in the first half of the 1920s. In ego-documents and travelogues by foreign intellectuals, Moscow often played a synecdochical role or was singled out as a separate topos of the Soviet imagery. Katerina Clark (2011) confirms the im-

portance and the magnetism of Moscow even in the Stalin's 1930s:

Moscow under Stalin never attained the stature of a Rome, nor did it function as *the* cultural mecca for the rest of Europe. [...] But around 1935 Soviet cultural leadership was a distinct possibility throughout the transatlantic intellectual world [...] This attraction of the Soviet capital was enhanced by the Great Depression in the West and the rise of fascism – for the cause of Soviet cultural and ideological hegemony, total gifts (Clark 2011: 27).

Derrida and Ryklin point out the testimonies of Bertrand Russell and Walter Benjamin as key documents for understanding the early Soviet phase. I have discussed their importance in an earlier work:¹

¹ In my book *Od Oktobra do otpora. Mit o sovjetsko-jugoslavenskom bratstvu u Hrvatskoj i Rusiji kroz književnost, karikaturu i film. 1917.–1991. [From October to Resistance. The Myth of the Soviet-Yugoslav Brotherhood in Croatia and*

Political tourism in the Platonic proletarian utopia created in the October Revolution

spread in bourgeois societies like an epidemic and brought the first testimonies.

Alexander Flaker also wrote about them, highlighting the Moscow trips of Paul Morand,

Georges Duhamel and Egon Kisch. Jacques Derrida in turn pointed out the Moscow episodes

of René Étiemble, André Gide and alter. Benjamin, while Mikhail Ryklin added to them the

experiences of Arthur Koestler, Lion Feuchtwanger, Bertolt Brecht and Bertrand Russell (Peruško Vindakijević 2018: 15).

Russia through Literature, Cartoons and Cinema. 1917–1991, 2018], I dedicate an entire chapter to Soviet memoir prose of Yugoslav Croats – writers and intellectuals in Russia – and I contrast Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* with the travelogue *A Trip to Russia [Izlet u Rusiju, 1925]* by the great Croatian author Miroslav Krleža, which I consider to be one of the best and most complex ego-documents on Lenin's Moscow and post-October Russia in general.

There are four important Croatian testimonies (by Miroslav Krleža, August Cesarec, Ante Ciliga and Karlo Štajner), which are either rarely or never mentioned in contemporary Western publications, although some of them were truly pioneering works of world literature. In the 1930s, two completely different Croatian testimonies were published, which reflect the complex layering of the 1930s Turovskaia highlighted – namely the two emotional extremes that complicate the perception of that time – enthusiasm and fear. The books in question are the travelogue *Današnja Rusija* [*Today's Russia*, 1937] by the Croatian poet, prose writer and revolutionary August Cesarec, who greatly marked Croatian modernity, and a different type of travelogue – a testimony from the Siberian Hades *U zemlji velike laži* [*In the Land of the Great Lie*] published in Paris in French language – *Au Pays du Grand Mensonge* (1938) by Ante Ciliga, a Croatian publicist, politician and exile, who lived in Italy and France and whose discourse was revolutionary and extremist. Although Ciliga's testimony was a worldwide sensation in its time because it was the first memoir of a Gulag witness in the world (!), and although his books were written about in

reputable studies in the world (which have been translated into almost all the major languages!), no work by Ciliga has been translated into Russian so far, including his pioneering book *In the Land of the Great Lie*. The same holds true with Cesarec's travelogue, who, unlike Ciliga in his testimony on the Gulag, not only avoids questioning the correctness of the Stalinist way of life, but glorifies it and portrays it with great enthusiasm in his travelogue. If we start from the premise that the Gulag prose and other testimonies of the suffering and fear in the 1930s are indisputable, i.e. that they are an undeniable and authentic document of the time (like Ciliga's testimony), does that mean that any positive memories from that same Stalinist decade should automatically be regarded as not credible, fraudulent, a lie?

The New Russia and the New Enthusiasm: *Today's Russia* by August Cesarec

The study *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (2009), edited by Marina Balina and Evgenii Dobrenko, deals with happiness as an important paradigm of Stalin's era. Experts have often analysed the myth of happiness in Soviet art and everyday life, inspired by Stalin's frequently

quoted statement: 'Life has become better, comrades. Life has become happier'² at the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites in 1935. However, it would be wrong to think that the myth of happiness entered Soviet socialist realism or Soviet cinema after Stalin's speech (I refer primarily to the genre of the Soviet musical as the *most joyous* genre of Russian cinema in the Soviet times); happiness – just like the famous *udarniki* surpassing their work quotas – was the first prerequisite for the feat.³ One must be careful with the concept of happiness, however. Indeed, Clark (2009) questions the validity of the term in the context of the *happy* 1930s. She associates happiness with persistence and longevity – determinants that were not immanent to the cultural paradigm of the 1930s. In the three-layered scheme offered by Clark (contentment – happiness – bliss), happiness is described as something positive and stable, i.e. a state that Clark ranks a step above the sense of contentment, but also a step below the state of bliss. In other

² 'Zhit' stalo luchshe, tovarischi. Zhit' stalo veselee'.

³ In his speech, Stalin identified four sources that made the feat possible: happiness (a more joyful life), the absence of exploitation, technology and a new type of people.

words, 'happiness is not about the ecstatic' (Clark 2009: 189), and it is precisely enthusiasm that prevails in Cesarec's descriptions of Moscow and the Russian countryside.

Before the analysis itself, some technical details should be given. The travelogue *Today's Russia* by Cesarec is the result of the writer's three-year stay in the USSR (1934–1937), as stated in the afterword to the 1982 edition (Mladost, Zagreb). Cesarec's ego-document was written in the Soviet Union (and not after the author's return!). The very act of its publication in Zagreb can be considered a big success: 'When publishing *Today's Russia*, Galogoža (editor-in-chief, author's note) had to steal sheet upon sheet from under the police's nose from the printing office' (Jelić 1982: 282). Because of the anti-communist climate and political circumstances in Yugoslavia in 1937, Cesarec was even forced to publish the book under the pseudonym of Vuk Kornelije. The travelogue *Today's Russia*, other writings on Russia by Cesarec (three brochures in the cycle *Putovanje po Sovjetskom Savezu* [Travelling the Soviet Union] and the newspaper articles about the USSR published in 1939 form a coherent whole in terms of tone, idea and content, which differs sig-

nificantly from the texts published by Cesarec after his first trip to the USSR (1922–1923), as Jelić points out in the afterword. I must add that for the purposes of this article, I will use the most complete edition of Cesarec's 'returns from the USSR' (J. Derrida) which is closest to the original.⁴

The travelogue *Today's Russia* was written immediately, without the distance of time (which is normally characteristic of memoir prose). Unlike other texts on the USSR by Cesarec, *Today's Russia* originated on Soviet soil and differs from most travel books insofar as it is not generically "pure", but a combination of a travelogue, an essay and a journal. Moreover, it is not devoid of political involvement (its goal is to popularize socialism so it also has some features of a political brochure).⁵ If we add other travelogue essays

about Soviet Russia by Cesarec to *Today's Russia* (which he wrote on his return from the Soviet Union and which form a unified whole in his Collected Works), an impressive itinerary is obtained. Unlike other European writers and authors of 'returns' (who reduced their itineraries mainly to Moscow and the then Leningrad), Cesarec really offered a much wider geographical panorama in his notes. His *Today's Russia and other travelogues in the Soviet Union* (Collected Works, Vol. 18, Mladost, 1982) is divided into six chapters, i.e. geographical units: *Today's Russia, Remembering Leningrad, The Urals and the Volga, In the Ukraine, The Small Soviet Nations*. The sixth chapter departs from all the rest because it is actually Cesarec's interview on Soviet literature for the magazine *Trideset dana (Thirty Days)* (1940) – *August Cesarec on the Soviet Writer*. The book could be structurally and geographically divided into two parts: the city and the countryside. Since Moscow has a central place in the book, the same will apply to this article.

Cesarec's *Russia* evokes the same scepticism today, which, according to Kuromiya, Western historiography held towards Soviet memoirs on their exploits and successes in the 1930s, label-

⁴ The edition used is A. Cesarec, *Današnja Rusija i drugi putopisi po Sovjetskom Savezu [Today's Russia and other travelogues in the Soviet Union]*, Vol 18 of A. Cesarec, *Sabrana djela [Collected Works]* (Zagreb: Mladost, 1982).

⁵ Cesarec's stay in the USSR was, after all, political in nature, given the fact that he was there as a member of the delegation of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia to the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, which then became part of the delegation that embarked on a study tour.

ling them as ordinary Soviet propaganda, i.e. historically improbable material, *lakirovka* or fraud. Kuromiya ultimately substantiates the justification of Western scepticism by citing the example of the memoir *Zhizn' inzhenera* by the engineer I.P. Bardin, who dictated it to the writer I.P. Zaslavskii. The memoir was published in Moscow in 1938, but the published version is not the same as the edited one – Kuromiya believes that someone made additional changes to it. There is no doubt that Cesarec's Soviet documents had a political rather than an artistic character (in them Cesarec departed from both the expressionist discourse he cultivated in his early works and the realist one, which he accepted later on). Indeed, his testimony about the USSR could be interpreted as an attempt at establishing and strengthening the political relations between the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) and the Soviet Union in the period right before World War II, which it probably is. The final judgment on how historically credible Cesarec's memories of Moscow and Soviet Russia in the 1930s were will eventually be made by historians. Even though it is impossible to avoid the issue of historical credibility in this article, I see its

task as follows: to decipher, i.e. reconstruct, Cesarec's image of 'the facts of the epoch' – as Iurii Lotman put it (Lotman 2004: 337). In accordance with Lotman's assertion that each genre chooses its own facts omitting (intentionally or unintentionally) others, it is important to outline which facts Cesarec chooses, fixates (i.e. which events he highlights), and transmits to readers for interpretation.⁶ It is equally important to note the so-called *non-facts* in Cesarec's document, i.e. all those 'enormous layers of reality which are not considered facts and are not subject to fixation', which is why they do not appear in the document (Lotman 2004: 337).

The first task is to reconstruct, in Lotman's words, the codes used by the author and to decipher his subjective reconstruction of the facts, i.e. the text itself (if we agree with Lotman that the text is a fact). Cesarec assumes the point of view of a naïve (or more accurately surprised) and objective observer of Moscow life, who, as I have argued elsewhere (Peruško Vindakijević 2018), resembled Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. He substantiates his objectivity with

⁶ According to Lotman, every fact chosen by the addressee is wider than the meaning attributed to it. Therefore, the fact is subject to interpretation.

factual data – percentages, figures, years, etc. However, his factual objectivity serves to express enthusiasm over what he has seen. All the data in Cesarec's text are intended to record growth, development, success:

An old librarian showed me his budget growth statistics. In 1930, the library had a budget of 10,690 roubles, in 1933 50,000, in 1934. 60,576, and in 1935 it had already reached 81,500! (Cesarec 1982: 110). A socialist industry has been created. The village is already 75% collectivized. Socialist ownership over the means of production solidified to 96% of the total ownership of such assets in the country (Cesarec 1982: 42); Stalin's district alone – one of ten – is building 135 workers' housing buildings for 20,000 inhabitants, in addition to 12 infirmaries, 81 kindergartens for 4,800 children, 18 nurseries for 1,123 children, and 85 canteens and kitchens for 215,000 people (Cesarec 1982: 36).

Regardless of whether these data correspond to reality, it should be noted that this is a skilful

strategy for objectifying the outlined observations. However, it does not imply negative statistics. All the negative data are reserved for the pre-revolutionary past (in the numerical comparison of the Soviet and the Imperial, i.e. the contemporary and the past, the latter category always loses). The second goal of listing so many figures and statistics is to get the reader to surrender before the undeniable success of Soviet (socialist) life. And the figures assure us that he surrendered to reconstruction, which has crept into all segments of life. *Reconstruction* is the key conceptual and narrative thread around which facts are grouped in Cesarec's interpretation of Moscow in the 1930s, which after the adoption of the Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow in 1935 (made by architects V.N. Semënov and S.E. Chernyshëv) truly underwent an urban *perestroika*. Indeed, some of the urban designs that resulted from the Master Plan are still part of the recognizable visual identity of the Russian capital. The travelogue *Today's Russia*, as well as all other texts on Russia and the Soviet Union by Cesarec, also record a more comprehensive reconstruction – political, social, cultural, artistic and psychological. His texts on the countryside

are characterized by many dialogues, i.e. the emphasis is on conversations with workers, peasants and their exhilaration about a transformed life – from transformations in space to the newly acquired rights and a psychological metamorphosis:

Look, comrades, what has happened over the last five years... You can't recognize the village today! Stating the following fact should be enough. One of the locals here in Krasnoarmeisk, now an aviator, who had not been in the village for all those five years, came to the Pozna station recently, arrived in his village in the evening, looked at it and didn't recognize it. And he lived in it for twenty-two years! He went to some other village. That's a fact, comrades! (Cesarec 1982: 49).

Even Ciliga admitted in the opening remarks to his camp memoir: 'Yet it seems to me that the image of Soviet life I have painted, despite the dark colours, also contains patches full of light' (Ciliga 2007: 20). One of these bright patches is the vitality of Moscow, which even the former prisoner and first author

of the memory of the Stalinist Gulag doesn't deny:

The city brimmed with life. The *piatiletka* was approaching. We could criticize Moscow as much as we liked. We could lament over the contradictions between reality and ideals, between promises and their fulfilment, but the vitality that made the city come to life and that was felt everywhere could not be denied. Moscow's supreme law was a desire for life (Ciliga 2007: 93).

What Ciliga calls vitality and desire Cesarec calls enthusiasm. Moscow, of course, holds a special place in Cesarec's book, as it does in the 'returns' by Gide, Russell and other European intellectuals. However, unlike most 'returnees' who expressed mixed emotions or disappointment in their 'returns', Cesarec retains his enthusiasm for what he has seen – crowded streets, shops full of wares, thriving factories, the reconstruction of the city, art, science, and, ultimately, a new type of people (the so-called *homo novus*). In Cesarec's document, all these categories are intertwined through relationships of cause and effect, so, for example, the workers and

their transformed consciousness and enthusiasm are responsible for the growth and development of production in Moscow as described by Cesarec. Soviet workers prove their ideological loyalty through their work and by surpassing their work quotas, which is often used to show contrast in relation to the West. A passage called *Dostići i prestići!* [*Catch up and overtake!*] – incidentally, a quote from Lenin’s article *Groziaschaia katastrofa i kak s nei borot’sia* [*Threatening Catastrophe and How Fight against*] from 1917 and later a Soviet political cliché encouraging the Soviet spirit of competition with the West – illustrates this best: ‘[...] – we are making progress! We haven’t caught up with Ford yet, but we’ll catch up with them! [...] We’ve caught up with the most advanced capitalist countries and even surpassed them in many respects [...]’ (Cesarec 1982: 62). Cesarec’s active narrative role should also be pointed out, as he not only frequently engages in dialogue with his interlocutors, but also leads them to the answers with his questions:

“And on what do you base all this progress and your belief in even greater progress?”

“On what? Well, on what we can all say: this is my factory, my kolkhoz, my tractor, my conveyor! You have seen how our workers work! We have thousands of *udarniki*, and they don’t even need to be members of the Party, but they still fight for socialism!” (Cesarec 1982: 62).

From the cited example, one of the key determinants of Cesarec’s text is visible: the elevated mood. This is realized in the text by the overuse of exclamation points, especially in dialogues. The people’s enthusiasm, i.e. general enthusiasm that prevails in the Soviet capital and other parts of the Soviet Union, radiates in Cesarec’s text (often accompanied by songs). Here are two examples that illustrate this – in the first one, Cesarec chose ecstatic statements made by workers, while in the second one he uses someone else’s speech and thus quotes a statement given by the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš:

“These are our own workers!” Abramov told me. “And it’s not our only orchestra! We have more of them! And this is just a small part of a great artistic self-activity, which our

workers use for cultivation, both here in the factory and at the club [...] There was no canteen, there was no red corner, let alone music! We are now free!" (Cesarec 1982: 60);

I was impressed by the scale and pace of construction in the USSR, the grandiose achievements and opportunities of building that great land in all areas and – which really leaves a deep impression – inexhaustible energy and enthusiastic diligence (Cesarec 1982: 169).

Still, the greatest level of enthusiasm can be seen right at the beginning of the travelogue *Today's Russia*, and it is already evident in the very title *Jest metro! Jest metro!* [*The metro! The metro!*]:

[...] "But what led you, what gave you so much enthusiasm for the work?" "What? Well, building the metro! Our socialist metro! The most beautiful, the best in the world! Our fathers once fought the most beautiful, most heroic underground struggle for socialism, and we, their

children, wanted to show what socialism can do under the ground after victory!" (Cesarec 1982: 33).

If we compare Cesarec's ecstatic description of the opening and the meaning of the Moscow Metro with Mikhail Ryklin's article *The Best in the World. The Discourse of the Moscow Metro of the 1930s*, there is a striking similarity in what is described. Ryklin analyses Lazar' Kaganovich's speech at the opening of the Moscow Metro on 14 May 1935, and using it he synthesizes the main features of the so-called metro-discourse. Ryklin thus, for example, noticed that building the metro in Moscow was by no means a mere technical (transport) issue. The metro had become an attribute of the (Communist) government itself with a very distinctive feature – secrecy. The conspiratorial atmosphere surrounding the construction of the metro was linked to the idea of competitiveness (Ryklin even calls it a war against nature) and achieving a miracle. Cesarec notes this same principle of the subjugation of nature in his chapter devoted to the metro:

The terrain is heavily under water, and entire lakes were encountered while

drilling. These were managed by artificial freezing, and the terrain itself was frozen, it was artificially petrified with liquid air. Despite this and many other difficulties, the metro was built incomparably faster than all other metros in the world (Cesarec 1982: 32).

The concept of achieving miracles is realized by relying solely and exclusively on one's own strength: 'The metro had to be constructed in the shortest possible time, regardless of the difficulties or sacrifices required' (Ryklin 2003: 264). Cesarec took over Kaganovich's metro discourse on Soviet self-sufficiency, and he mentions the People's Commissar in his panegyric to the metro: 'In addition to everything, it is still remarkable that the construction was conducted only by domestic specialists and only domestic material and machines were used' (Cesarec 1982: 32). Still, the socialist realist imperative of achieving miracles and overcoming obstacles on the road to a better tomorrow will allow enthusiasm to emerge again and again as a leitmotif throughout *Today's Russia*: 'The speed of construction can be thanked only to the intense enthusiasm of its builders, the

metro engineers' (Cesarec 1982: 32). The most interesting part of the metro discourse is its utopianism: 'The architect should neither hide the undergroundness of the metro nor treat it as a positive quality; instead he had to create the illusion of a palatial space truly present somewhere on earth but ideally away from any specific location: a utopia' (Ryklin 2003: 264). Light played a very important role in this – Kaganovich mentioned it in his speech, using it as a metaphor for the victorious socialism.

Cesarec describes the aesthetics of the three main (first) Moscow stations in detail, highlighting the key stylistic determinants of the neoclassical metro-aesthetics in which the (conquered) underworld, as Cesarec remarks well, is transformed into an "underground castle" – full of marble, white columns, chandeliers and light: 'This is how the symphony came about, a symphony of marble, colour, light, shapes (...) A marvellous fountain of light, some twenty of them in a row; if the Soviets believed in gods, I would say this was all a temple in which they honoured their gods with great, golden vases' (Cesarec 1982: 33-34). Of course, Ryklin doesn't forget to mention another feature of Kaganovich's metro discourse; the construction of the

Moscow Metro is not only a fight against the old Russia, it is also a race with the West, in which the motto 'Catch up with and overtake the West!' is once again current. Naturally, it is also current for Cesarec:

Not only is it here, not only does it exist, it is without a doubt the most beautiful metro in the world. Many foreign journalists have acknowledged it during their visits to Moscow (...), and the most authoritative recognition has been given by American and English experts, who came to Moscow for this metro alone (Cesarec 1982: 36).

Conclusion: *Today's Russia* and the problem of non-facts

There is no doubt that Cesarec's image of the epoch is problematically one-dimensional and propagandistic. However, it turned out to be true. Indeed, Cesarec's Soviet document,⁷ with its unequivocal *political enthusiasm*, deviates from most Western European ego-documents of that time, but at

the same time it should be noted that some segments of the image of the facts about the epoch provided by Cesarec are comparable and even compatible with modern studies of certain aspects of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Cesarec's detailed description of the reconstruction of Moscow, changes in the architectural and aesthetic paradigm or *enthusiasm and pride* surrounding the opening and the meaning of the metro is partly complementary to studies of the reconstruction of Moscow, the new architecture, the concept of Stalinist happiness, etc., as exemplified by Ryklin's text. However, in the end, I must also touch upon the problematic truth-falsehood dichotomy. Did the ego-document of a convinced Croatian Communist – who wrote a farewell message, 'Long live Soviet Croatia!' on his cell wall the day the Ustasha authorities decided to kill him – lie about the Soviet Wonderland in the 1930s? The 1937 Foreword to *Today's Russia* signed by Vuk Kornelije states that the author is an Istrian emigrant who went to the United States looking for a better life, where he began writing short articles for the *New Times*, after which he was offered a job of a US correspondent in the USSR, to report objectively about everything he found there. All this,

⁷ By that term I want to emphasise that it was written in the USSR.

of course, is a lie – starting from the name (Cesarec was forced to publish his travelogue under a pseudonym) to his origin and the story about America (Cesarec wasn't an Istrian emigrant nor had he been to America). Therefore, many passages in Cesarec's book are false. For instance, the one where he was fascinated by the number of books printed in the Soviet Union in 1934, where he says: 'As an American citizen, I was sorry that I couldn't find this information for America as well' (Cesarec 1982: 20). Still, the boldest example of Cesarec's false allegations, in which he uses the false discourse on origin for (political) propaganda, is the following:

I also talked to these children in the hallway and in some classes. They almost dragged me into one of them so I could tell them about America. Their interest in everything is huge, in everything that is happening abroad and how workers live there. And the passion in them is great, they offered immediate help for the unemployed American workers. They looked at me in wonder when I told them that I did not come for

their help; to those little pioneers of the idea of solidarity, I really must have been incomprehensible! (Cesarec 1982: 106).

For the sake of comparison, here's how Ciliga introduced the so-called *American theme* at the beginning of his book, in the context of the Moscow situation in 1926. It was in a completely different light:

My clothes and bad Russian give me away as a foreigner. And that's why the coachman speaks to me thus:

"You are from America? Well, you have a good life there. And not like us. You can buy whatever you want, and everything top quality... And the prices are not high. And over here, the clothes are shoddy, and they cost an arm and a leg. Well, that's why everybody wears nothing but rags" (Ciliga 2007: 24).

Finally, we must address the non-facts of the era mentioned by Lotman, which are more than obvious. In geographical terms, Cesarec's travel records left out the Russian North, more specifically Siberia. But the Gulag, that huge part of Soviet reality, is not

the only one that Cesarec omits. The last Soviet year in Cesarec's text is 1937 – a year which happened to mark the beginning of the Great Terror. Not only does *Today's Russia* by Cesarec not ask questions, it chooses to interpret one type of facts on the basis of which it builds an image of the epoch, neglecting what Lotman calls non-facts, parts of reality that the interpreter leaves out, which is why they are not subject to fixation. Therefore, in Cesarec's ego-document of the 1930s one should not seek show trials, enemies of the state, threats, arrests, terror, dictatorship and fear, i.e. the other face of Soviet enthusiasm, which

Ciliga highlighted from the icy Hades:

One who did not live in Soviet prisons, concentration camps, and exile, where there were over five million prisoners, one who does not know the largest penitentiary ever seen by history, in which people die like flies, in which they are killed like dogs, in which they are driven to work like slaves, he cannot have the faintest idea of what Soviet Russia and Stalinist *classless society* really are (Ciliga 2007: 164).

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