



Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. 369 pp. \$42.00 cloth; \$24.00 paper.

Reviewed by Robert Campbell, Indiana University

Slava Gerovitch's fascinating book extends over a variety of themes—the emergence of the science of cybernetics in the West and in the USSR, the development of Soviet computers, the language used in Soviet ideological and scientific debates, and the nature of academic controversies in biology, linguistics, physiology, economics, philosophy, and other fields. All these themes are brought to bear on what Gerovitch describes as the “historical encounter between the language of cybernetics and the Soviet ideological language” (p. 3).

The central story line of the book is the way the discourse in a number of scientific fields and the associated controversies shifted from “newspeak” to “cyberspeak” in the years after Josif Stalin's death. *Newspeak* refers to the “floating signifiers” such as *cosmopolitanism*, *formalism*, *idealism*, and *mechanicism*, which were of varying content and at times meaningless. They were employed to wage political and scientific battles in the last couple of decades of the Stalin period. These battles took place between the political and ideological overlords of the system and the scientific community, on the one hand, and within the scientific fields themselves, on the other. Gerovitch proposes the interesting idea that instead of open conflict, Communist Party officials and scientists were often engaged in a symbiotic relationship, each maneuvering and skillfully manipulating whatever campaign was under way.

In the period of greater openness that followed Stalin's death, scientists sought to replace newspeak with a more objective and precise terminology for scientific discourse, drawing from cybernetics. Gerovitch calls this new discourse “cyberspeak,” a language involving concepts such as feedback, control, algorithm, machine intelligence, information, and communication. Proponents of the new discourse believed it would become a universal language suitable for conceptualizing and setting the research agenda in all scientific fields. Proponents also saw it as a tool for the de-Stalinization of science and as a social movement for radical reform in science and society at large. The partisans of this shift succeeded in their effort insofar as cyberspeak did indeed come to dominate the discourse in many scientific fields and ultimately began to be adopted in political and social discourse as well. Cyberspeak was employed not just to wrest control of scientific discussion from the hands of Communist Party ideologues, but also to establish a new language of controversy within the scientific community. Ironically, however, as this shift took place, cyberspeak, which was never as precise and comprehensive an idiom as its proponents originally thought, became bastardized and finally turned into another set of “floating signifiers” as protean and meaningless as the original newspeak. Gerovitch aptly describes cyberspeak as an inverted version of newspeak.

A large literature exists on many of these themes, and although Gerovitch's book

does not contain a regular bibliography, the footnotes provide an extensive guide to sources that will be very useful to anyone who may know some parts of the story but not others. In addition to drawing on these materials, Gerovitch has made extensive use of previously unexploited archival materials. Whatever may have been said on some of these themes before, Gerovitch's unique achievement is to absorb the many diverse developments and to integrate them around the issue of language.

This is an absorbing story that incorporates numerous side plots in addition to the main dramatic plotline—small potted histories of individual controversies, computer development, actors, and institutions. These are often full of paradox. At the same time that computers were being denounced as tools to support the class interest of the capitalists and irrelevant to socialism and that cybernetics was being denounced as superstition, Soviet leaders were frantically trying to develop computers to support their military programs. But because the military-related program was a secret effort, this Soviet dependence on computers could not serve as an argument against the anti-cyberneticists. But in the final triumph of cyberspeak, scientists engaged in research for military purposes played a vital role. The main ideological scourge of cybernetics in the period of its early vilification—the philosopher Ernest Kolman—was finally defeated as an enemy of cybernetics, though he then made a comeback by working the other side of the street.

I am not in a position to evaluate Gerovitch's treatment of the smaller vignettes, but in the one area I did follow in detail—the effort to use computers and cybernetics in economics—his treatment seems a bit out of focus. He never mentions the term *SOFE*—the system of optimal functioning of the economy. In contrasting market proponents with the cybernetics vision of perfect planning, he speaks of *khozraschet* as an ideologically dubious notion, whereas *khozraschet* was actually one of the sacred cornerstones of the Soviet approach to planning. In addition, he is a bit vague when discussing the internal contradiction of a linear programming approach to perfect planning. He suggests that the full decentralization of decision-making would be possible if perfect prices were provided, but the problem is that getting these shadow prices implies having already solved the task of devising perfect quantity directives for all the actors. I also found it surprising that Gerovitch seems to have turned up no mention of the *tektologiya* of A. A. Bogdanov (Malinovskii). This was an early effort in the USSR to create something like systems research or cybernetics—Bogdanov called it the “*vseobschchaya organizatsionnaya nauka*”—a universal science of organization and purposeful action. Given Bogdanov's position as an opponent of Vladimir Lenin, it is not surprising that he was never enlisted as a Soviet pioneer of cybernetic ideas. But Bogdanov's work was always there in the background. He was invoked in Stalin's famous commentary on *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, and during the glasnost era in 1989 his *tektologiya* was republished.

One of the virtues of a good book is that it stimulates questions beyond its self-imposed compass, and this book does that. On the whole it tells a sorry history of language abuse, and one cannot help but wonder why so noble an effort to improve the discourse and rescue it from dogmatism foundered so badly. The Orwellian take on the tendency toward newspeak is that it is a more or less universal social propensity.

Obviously this trend was reinforced by many features of the Soviet system, but one wonders whether something in Russian culture makes it difficult to reject these semantic wastelands and engage in simple plainspeak. Another chapter may need to be written in this saga in a few years.



Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. 359 pp. \$45.00

Reviewed by Hiroaki Kuromiya, Indiana University

This stimulating book is a welcome addition to the already voluminous literature on the Russian Revolution. Unlike the majority of works written in recent years, Holquist places the revolution, as the title suggests, within a wider historical context: the continuum of crises (war, revolution, and civil war) from 1914 to 1921. This perspective alone may not be entirely new—some recent books deliberately downplay the singularity of the revolution and depict it merely as a byproduct of the First World War—but Holquist goes much further than any other recent author on the Russian Revolution and the founding of the Soviet state and makes two important claims. First, he argues that the Bolsheviks' actions, characterized by mobilization and violence, were not a radical departure from the past but emanated from practices common to all warring powers in Europe. The "violence of the Russian civil wars," he avers, "appears not as something perversely Russian or uniquely Bolshevik, but rather as the most advanced case of a more extended European civil war, beginning with the Great War and stretching years after its formal conclusion" (p. 3). Second, he contends that, despite these similarities, the Russian (Bolshevik) experience did make an important departure from the European "norm." After the fighting ended, the other European countries, including Germany, did not perpetuate the measures used during the war (mobilization and violence), whereas the Bolshevik government in Russia did. This peculiarity of Russia, Holquist maintains, stemmed from the Bolsheviks' Marxism-Leninism: "What distinguished the Bolsheviks was the extent to which they turned tools originally intended for total war to the new ends of revolutionary politics, during the civil wars but especially after their end," the new ends signifying "the revolutionary transformation of society" (p. 287).

Holquist's description and analysis are admirably detailed yet lucid and are supported by extensive research in newly opened Russian archives. His theoretical propositions are well borne out by his empirical work. To prove his points, Holquist focuses on the Don Territory, the region of the Don Cossacks in southern Russia. His choice is deliberate. It was in this region that the anti-Bolshevik forces gathered their troops to fight against the Bolsheviks (indeed, Holquist's Ph.D. dissertation, from which this book emerged, is titled "The Russian Vendée"), and the Don Territory provides an excellent setting in which to analyze and compare the political practices of the two camps. Holquist focuses his analysis on three areas of political practice: "state manage-