

Halfin, Igal. *Red Autobiographies: Initiating the Bolshevik Self*. Donald W. Treadgold Studies on Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. viii + 197 pp. \$30.00 (paper). ISBN 978-0-295-99112-2.

In his short but forceful essay “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” Carlo Ginzburg drew attention a couple of decades ago to inquisitorial records that documented witchcraft trials in medieval and early modern Europe, suggesting that these “archives of repression” could provide scholars with much richer evidence than was commonly believed. Usually seen as a reflection of brutal exercise of power, mixed with “theological oddities and peasant superstitions,” inquisitorial records were dismissed as distorted (see his *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 1989, p. 157). Ginzburg did not dispute the distorted character of these documents, but he radically reframed the nature of this distortion. As he maintained, in many cases the “distorting” activity of inquisitors could be also seen as a historically specific operation of “translating—or, rather, transposing—beliefs fundamentally foreign to them into another, more unambiguous code” (p.162). Inquisitorial records, in other words, were also records of inquisitors’ own semiotic activity.

Igal Halfin’s new book shares the epistemological sensibility advocated by Ginzburg. Using as his main source autobiographies written by people who wanted to join the Bolshevik party during the initial postrevolutionary years, Halfin demonstrates how these Bolsheviks-to-be learned to narrate their lives in the language of the new political regime. For many, as Halfin reminds us, the process of writing one’s autobiography was an imaginary realization of aspirational desire. To join “the brotherhood of the elect,” the individual had to persuade his/her own peers of his/her own worthiness. Just like the records of witchcraft trials, Bolshevik autobiographies were fundamentally dialogic in their disposition. Anticipating reactions of their potential interlocutors, autobiographers pre-empted or, at least, responded in their texts to the inquiries that usually emerged during public meetings of the party cell.

Throughout the book, Halfin insists on the necessity of “treat[ing] Bolshevik poetics seriously” by paying close attention to both “the workings of the composition of the text and the condition of its reception” (p. 28). Yet this richly textured study does not really develop a robust analytics of early Soviet poetics. At most, the study of autobiographical narratives implies the tracing of recurrent themes—such as attaining “universal consciousness” (p. 65), or “transcending” unwanted identities (p. 72), or precipitating one’s “political awakening” (p. 136). A close reading of multiple autobiographical texts normally amounts to very informative but largely descriptive summaries of these documents. As a genre, “red autobiography” comes with surprisingly few narrative devices of its own: by and large, we are dealing with much truncated versions of the *Bildungsroman* familiar from other historical periods and other cultural milieus.

Of course, the minimalist outcome of the poetic analysis of red autobiographies is hardly unexpected because the very sociopolitical nature of these documents was not entirely conducive to elaborate plots and complicated rhetorical structures. There is another reason, too. The specifics of a narrative genre or expressive means preoccupy Halfin's interest only to a point. As in his earlier research, it is the "substance," the historical phenomenon of "the Bolshevik self," that continues to occupy the center of Halfin's new engagement with "archives of repression"

Autobiographies—like the confessions from the Great Purges scrutinized in Halfin's previous study—provide the historian with yet another angle to explore "a unique, richly elaborated system of meanings" that was the Bolshevik self (p. 5). This dictates the overall structure of the book. The three main chapters outline (somewhat) different paths from darkness to light—"the Bolshevik conversion"—that were available to and were eventually mustered by the representatives of three respective groups (workers, peasants, and the intelligentsia). In each case, admission to the party was a lesson of learning "a set of stratagems for describing and classifying people" (p. 21).

These orienting sets, as Halfin convincingly documents, were indeed only orienting: "the center never had, nor could it have had, full control over how class vocabulary was used" (p. 120). Translation and transposition, then, became the key mechanisms through which normative categories were put into productive use. Yet it is crucial to keep in mind Halfin's ultimate conclusion. Despite all the elaborate practices of discursive displacement and appropriation of the categories of the regime, "it is nearly impossible to find individuals resisting in the name of values external to Bolshevism" (p. 157). Conversion became irreversible; or, as one of Halfin's autobiographers said, "Communism was unavoidable" (p. 110).