

Olga Baysha, **The Mythologies of Capitalism and the End of the Soviet Project**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014, pp.188, \$84.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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At the time of publication, Olga Baysha was assistant professor at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow. In ***The Mythologies of Capitalism and the End of the Soviet Project***, she has conducted a framing study of unusual and enduring significance. In summary, her conclusions suggest that interpretations of discourses of market reform in the closing years of the Soviet Union were widely divergent, as between representatives of the working class and representatives of the intelligentsia. The first wanted empowerment; the second clamored for “civilization.”



Representatives of the working class expected that privatization would take institutional ownership and managerial authority out of the hands of the *nomenklatura* and return it to the workers. In common with Mikhail Gorbachev, their expectation was a reform of socialism that would reduce inequalities of power, realize social justice, enhance the responsiveness of the political system to the needs of workers, and significantly improve their material lives. Even as late as January 1990, very few working-class representatives believed that *perestroika* was about capitalism. Their primary desire was to eradicate nonegalitarian, nonsocialist elements from Soviet society. People were unwilling to hand over the revenues that had been earned by the enterprises for which they worked to third party profiteers.

The intelligentsia, on the other hand, at first entertained romanticized, dehistoricized notions of both democracy and the self-correcting power of the market, unchecked by careful assessment of these concepts with respect to their historical specificity, ties to imperialism, colonialism, war, social stratification, grossly unequal distribution of resources and their limited responsiveness to social needs. The certainty of the intelligentsia suggested cultist religiosity. They offered no frames other than their own by which progress could be assessed. Grotesquely, they presumed that the benefits of unregulated markets would coexist with the USSR’s existing infrastructure of socialist benefits. Toward the final days of the Soviet Union, as the real direction of the ideology of market reform became more apparent, the intelligentsia continued to deploy the same language as before, but, now emptied of its original meaning, this language signified a substantially different political and social order than the one anticipated by workers, an order in which the intelligentsia would seize competitive advantage. Baysha sees more than mere error here, but asserts that some intellectuals avoided calling things by their proper names, instead inventing new mythological constructions.

Baysha examined two Ukrainian newspapers, 1989–1991, throughout the most crucial period of Gorbachev's perestroika. Both newspapers were distributed in Kharkov, of which Baysha was once a native and where she worked as a broadcaster and journalist, and which was one of the leading educational and scientific centers of the former USSR. One paper mainly represented the voices of Moscow-leaning intelligentsia, influential politicians, and famous figures associated with perestroika. The other mainly represented the voices of local authors, workers of Kharkov's industrial enterprises, and the opinions of nonintellectuals.

Intellectuals tended to share Gorbachev's vision that broad democratization of Soviet society would lead to progress and civilization. They associated progress with the West and considered the USSR backward. Many were preoccupied by what they considered the immorality and inhumanity of the Communist Party. The party and its supporters, many of whom could not understand why they needed another party to represent their interests, were perceived as a major obstacle to reform, deserving of no right to preserve their familiar way of life. Intelligentsia associated democracy with economic success, ignoring examples of successful economies grown by authoritarian regimes. They produced the impression that the state was not an important agent of social life and ignored the likelihood that sudden destruction of the state would more likely lead to economic bust than boom. Civil society was presented as an abstract norm, one that could easily be implanted anywhere. They lauded the multiparty state, but forgot to share with their fellow Russians that such a system was inherently connected to the existence of different economic interests of stratified capitalist societies.

Intelligentsia celebrated the United States as a horn of plenty, the embodiment of democracy, prosperity, and egalitarianism, stressing only the positive aspects and misunderstanding much of even these (e.g., mistaking share ownership with a form of workers' participation). Many stories about U.S. life in newspapers were produced by U.S. professional propagandists. Real-life complexity was reduced to a fairyland myth. Neither of the papers examined by Baysha published a single article that critically evaluated the presentation of the United States as a model of social equality. Inequalities were assigned to the consequences of slavery. The Soviet Union, by contrast, was presented as regressive, while the U.S. and NATO were presented as progressive voices of peace.

In brief, Baysha's analysis amounts to a major condemnation of Soviet intelligentsia. While working people were preoccupied with the worsening of their living conditions, intelligentsia created a virtual, circular, illusory, self-congratulatory world of myth that fed directly into, and of course was fed by, a sophisticated Western propaganda apparatus, as they lusted for the extension of capitalist markets and the material wealth they thought this would bring them personally. They delegitimized their own institutions for personal gain while the vast majority of their compatriots were pushed unprotected into deep material poverty and spiritual disorientation.

Baysha deploys sophisticated theoretical frameworks, from Barthes to Beck, for explaining this clash of the imaginings of modernity and postmodernity, but, from a practical point of view, the sting that will most likely puncture the mind of the generous reader is of the grossness, absurdity, and arrogance of the errors of an intellectual class, visited upon masses of their fellow human beings. Of course, the

analysis urgently requires much more ambitious and broader ranging investigations of media coverage across the former Soviet Union. But this early venture offers no comfort as to what might likely emerge.