
Anthony Olcott. *Russian Pulp: The Detektiv and the Way of Russian Crime*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 207p.

ELENA BARABAN
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

Russian Pulp is the first monograph about the genre of detective fiction in Russia. It is a long-awaited contribution to the field of Russian cultural studies, for the incredible popularity of detective fiction in Russia is a phenomenon that has intrigued scholars since its rapid ascendancy after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Rather than focusing on the issue of *how* the new Russian *detektiv* resonates with and express the concerns of post-Soviet society, Anthony Olcott takes a more historical approach and documents the continuity between the new Russian *detektiv* and its Soviet predecessor. Olcott's other task is to compare the Russian *detektiv* to its Western counterpart. The Russian form is "very rarely a logical puzzle of the sort that many western mystery readers enjoy" (24); often the villain is known from the very beginning (24) and Olcott offers to interpret the "rare" exceptions to this rule as "self-conscious imitations of western genres" (24). The range of material studied by Olcott in his project is truly impressive. His work covers more than two hundred Russian *detektiv* and forty-two thrillers and mysteries about Russia written by British and American authors.

In comparing Russian and Western detective fiction, Olcott explores the relationship between Russia's legal system and its effects on the actual writing of crime fiction. For Olcott, the detective genre is a "rewarding source of insights into the specifics of Rusianness" (10). Olcott's ultimate goal is to explain the values that Russians regard "as most dear" (13) as well as the differences that exist between Russian society and what Olcott refers to monolithically as "the West." According to Olcott, the *detektiv* reflects Russians' hopeless irremediable lack of distinction between good and evil as well as the tendency to believe that justice may be "found only in heaven" (150). The Russian *detektiv* is a "morality play" teaching individuals to subordinate themselves "to the larger entity of the state" (46) or a "larger community" such as *mir*, *obshchestvo*, *narod*, or *Rodina*. The Western genre, on the contrary, shows the triumph of the individual (185).

The theoretical framework of *Russian Pulp* is based extensively on Tim McDaniel's study *The Agony of the Russian Idea*, for the point of departure for Olcott on this work is the assumption that there exists an imminent "Russian character," unchanging throughout Russian history. One of McDaniel's fairly biased beliefs is the view that Russia is, by cultural and historical constraint, anti-individualistic. Following from this, Olcott argues that Russian detective fiction

cannot feature amateur private investigators such as we find in the eccentrics or loner outsiders in Western fiction. Simply stated, there is a lack of contemporary Russian prototypes “suitable for this role” (24). Still, one might note that some novels by Alexandra Marinina (an author analyzed by Olcott) do feature private investigation and private detectives. In *The Black List*, lieutenant colonel Stasov privately investigates a series of murders in a coastal town, while he is on holidays. In *The Posthumous Image*, Stasov is already a private eye after his employment with the Moscow police force has ended. Unfortunately, neither of these two novels was analyzed by Olcott. There are also independent female investigators in the novels by Marianna Bakonina, Viktoria Platova, and Inna Bulgakova, authors who are not presented in *Russian Pulp*. Among the novels squarely within Olcott’s bibliography, there are a few which also go against the scholarly conclusion of anti-individuality in the *detektiv*. *Unicum* by Varvara Kliuyeva, *What a Woman Wants* by Tatiana Polyakova, and *Lunch with a Cannibal* by Daria Dontsova are all works about amateur female detectives. Boris Akunin, the most popular detective writer of the end of the 1990s, is also on Olcott’s bibliography, and in *Coronation*, Akunin’s famous protagonist Fandorine is a private eye conducting his investigation independently. Akunin’s other famous protagonist is the nun Pelageia, an amateur detective. Olcott himself does mention Yelena Yakovleva’s novel *All Joking Aside*, which features “a former investigator who has gone over to the private sector” (93).

So while there may be a certain anti-individualism generally displayed in Russian history, this is not the uniform point of the post-Soviet *detektiv*. With a powerful influx of individualism and personal idiosyncrasy in the real world of cops and robbers of the 1990s, there cannot help but be a corresponding role for the individual in the fictional world of the *detektiv*. Indeed, one of the distinct characteristics of post-Soviet detective fiction of the 1990s is the forcing by circumstance for state-employed policemen to pursue investigations privately. We see such detectives in popular tv series such as *The March of Turetskii*, based on Nieznansky’s writings. Sergei Chelishchev from Andrei Konstantinov’s novels was further popularized by the tv series *Bandit Petersburg*. Omitted references to counter-examples that are within works cited in Olcott’s bibliography, as well as works that well-deserve to be on the list (e.g., Konstantinov and Nieznansky), ultimately serve to weaken Olcott’s conclusion as to “the almost complete failure” of the Russian *detektiv* “to elaborate the private detective as a genre hero” (33). The weaknesses of the volume notwithstanding, *Russian Pulp* will be instructive for specialists, students, and general public interested in Russia, its people, and its culture. ❀