

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

Fall 1992

Review Of "How Things Were Done In Odessa: Cultural And Intellectual Pursuits In A Soviet City" By M. Friedberg

Robert Weinberg

Swarthmore College, rweinbe1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Robert Weinberg. (1992). "Review Of "How Things Were Done In Odessa: Cultural And Intellectual Pursuits In A Soviet City" By M. Friedberg". *Slavic Review*. Volume 51, Issue 3. 633-634. DOI: 10.2307/2500123
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/148>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Review

Author(s): Robert Weinberg

Review by: Robert Weinberg

Source: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Autumn, 1992), pp. 633-634

Published by: Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2500123>

Accessed: 11-04-2016 13:47 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Slavic Review*

Based on this assumption, Schmid proposes a way of reading specific to the peculiarities of Pushkin's prose. He calls this meticulous, slow reading "poetic," maintaining that it makes us discover deeper links between all elements of the text.

In part I, entitled "Poetry and Prose," Schmid expounds the theoretical basis of his book. Part II, "The Analyses," devotes one chapter to each tale and contains an additional excursus on proverbs in "The Captain's Daughter." According to the author, poetic reading is appropriate to Pushkin's prose, for therein we can find an interference of prosaic and poetic constitutive means which has increased the semantic potential immensely. In fact, the promised new insights into the world of "The Tales of Belkin," reconstructing it through poetic as well as prosaic means, prove astounding indeed.

Characteristic of Schmid's method is his distrust for conventional treatments of the subject, including such seemingly unequivocal formulations as Pushkin's famous definition of the virtues of prose. But unlike many scholarly texts with a strong theoretical foundation, he does not intend to "refute" other approaches; instead, he intends to explain them. Combining synchronic and diachronic coordinates with a thorough scrutiny of the text genesis, Schmid offers a sort of three-dimensional system which is able to reconstruct the author's intentionality as well as the differing hermeneutic lines drawn by interpreters at various times, consequently juxtaposing and relativizing them.

The monograph, which was preceded by more than ten major articles on the topic published between 1981 and 1989, reflects the critical debates over those articles and synthesizes them on a new level of generalization. Despite its theoretical intensity, the book's style is characterized by a noble clarity, avoiding syntactical or terminological contortions. In the long run, it might serve to overcome some widespread skepticism towards the practical benefits of literary theory, for here so obviously the respect for the work of art, not for the theoretical concepts, is primary.

PETER ROLLBERG

The George Washington University

How Things Were Done in Odessa: Cultural and Intellectual Pursuits in a Soviet City. By Maurice Friedberg. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991. xii, 145 pp. Photographs. Hard bound.

This volume provides a fascinating portrait of Soviet cultural and intellectual life in the 1970s. It is based on interviews, conducted by Maurice Friedberg, of some 100 émigré Odessans (mostly Jewish professionals) who participated in the Soviet Interview Project directed by James Millar of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. The respondents, who have first-hand experience with Odessa cultural and educational organizations as a result of study and work, offer revealing glimpses of the highly politicized workings of such institutions as museums, libraries, the mass media, public entertainment, schools and the arts.

The reminiscences and observations of Friedberg's respondents confirm what many of us already know from Soviet friends and acquaintances about the long arm of government censorship and Party control during the "years of stagnation." Their stories vividly illustrate the insidious nature of official anti-Semitism, the consequences of efforts to shape cultural life according to some overarching plan, the endemic shortages of much-needed medical supplies and equipment, and the rampant graft and corruption that characterized life during the Brezhnev years. The recollections underscore the tragicomic quality of life in Brezhnev's Soviet Union: comic because some of the incidents presented by Friedberg border on the absurd, yet at the same time tragic because a whole society suffered as a result of officious meddling by incompetent, capricious ideological watchdogs.

How were things done in Odessa? Admissions officers routinely sold forged high school diplomas to unqualified students seeking entry into institutes of higher edu-

cation. Another émigré recounted how nurses in one hospital manually sharpened needles dulled by overuse. More than one respondent told of book burnings at libraries in order to clear the stacks of books whose authors had fallen into disgrace. In one such purge at a trade union library, some 3,000 volumes were destroyed. One librarian recalled that the “process of book burning was so thorough and strict that upon discovering that some of the books to be burned were missing from the shelves. . . , we actually *purchased* a number of them. You see, we did this because we were afraid that otherwise the inspector might think that we had *concealed* these books, and this was a serious offense. As I said, the extra books we had bought were burned together with the others.” Another respondent recalled how the director of the Odessa Opera, who kept in reserve several dozen seats for Party dignitaries who might decide to attend a performance at the last moment, was ironically fired from his job because he kept these seats empty. His crime—“embezzling state property.”

Despite its brevity, *How Things Were Done in Odessa* tends to be repetitive in spots and is long on revealing anecdotes which enable the author to capture the full flavor of his respondents’ observations. However, the book is short on analysis. Nonetheless, Maurice Friedberg has performed an admirable service to the profession by presenting the invaluable reminiscences of former Soviet citizens in a compelling and lucid fashion. The reader of this book will come away with a more nuanced understanding of the structural problems of Soviet culture and politics before the advent of glasnost’ and perestroika.

ROBERT WEINBERG
Swarthmore College