

Book Review: Flowers Through Concrete: Explorations in Soviet Hippieland by Juliane Fürst

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Juliane Fürst, *Flowers Through Concrete: Explorations in Soviet Hippieland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, 477 pp.; £65.00 hbk; ISBN 9780198788324

In *Flowers through Concrete*, Juliane Fürst describes the 'sistema' of Soviet hippies, which outlived the Western subculture that inspired it and linked like-minded people in distant cities across Soviet republics, as 'the largest and most significant network in the Soviet underground' (p. 104). Unlike the better documented dissident movement, Soviet hippies were not primarily concerned with securing future freedom by changing society. Instead, they sought to live as freely as possible in the oppressive present, creating a peaceful, petal-strewn alternative to the austere and restrictive Soviet state. According to Fürst, 'their future was now' (p. 189).

Hippies' emphasis on living in the moment has implications for the historian. Fürst conducted over a hundred in-depth oral history interviews to reconstruct their parallel universe. In addition to this rich repository of recollections, a compelling chapter on 'Materiality' explores hippie material culture. Fürst argues persuasively that though they did not produce many written texts, hippie things can be 'read' as an embodiment of hippie ideals: creative, colorful, distinctive, provocative. She shows that despite arguably instantiating 'the lost heart of the revolution' (p. 211), hippies shunned overt expressions of ideology, which they associated with the norms of Soviet society, and had 'no definite political conviction' (p. 143). They drew on eclectic influences, from far eastern mysticism to western pop culture, resulting in a loose set of beliefs characterized by 'free love, pacifism of a kind, conspiratorial theories, spiritualism, and fierce individualism' (p. 51). These abstract ideas coalesced into concrete rituals and manifested practically in hippies' everyday lives: housing, sexual relationships, drug-taking, clothing, holidays, leisure activities, and work (or ways to avoid it).

Fürst situates herself within this narrative, adopting a self-reflective methodology of 'radical authorial transparency' (p. 14) appropriate to her subversive materials. She acknowledges difficulties in accessing sources, describes the process of tracking down her interviewees over many years and reflects on how her own shifting concerns became entangled with her subject. The book's final chapter, 'Gerla', on women hippies who proved elusive despite playing a prominent part in the 'sistema', discusses how her ideas about feminism, shaped by a western European upbringing and education, sometimes conflicted with those of her interviewees, expressing regret for failing to press them on these issues while questioning her own previous commitment to a mode of history writing in which the historian remains invisible (p. 407).

Soviet hippies took inspiration from hippies in the West – they idolized The Beatles and sought out American jeans – but Fürst argues that their version of hippiedom was always distinctly Soviet, sometimes due to accidents of misinterpretation, sometimes due to material conditions and often in ways that challenge stereotypes about late Soviet life. She concludes that Soviet people were broadly less sexually inhibited than their Western peers, for example, leading to a different version of 'free love'. She also explores the specificities of Soviet hippie drug culture. Unable to obtain LSD easily, Soviet hippies instead created cocktails from over-the-counter drugs, as well as consuming morphine and cleaning products. Meanwhile, a lack of regulation and pervasive ignorance among

Soviet authorities meant it was fairly easy to buy cannabis: 'Moscow was a much better place to smoke weed than San Francisco' (p. 336). In one memorably absurd anecdote, Komsomol officers are described as targeting hippies for their long hair while failing to notice their huge bag of weed.

The book's core thesis is that despite hippies' self-styled outsider status and hatred of the Soviet regime, they were nonetheless part of Soviet society. Füst does not analyze the flowers in isolation from the concrete but explores 'the reciprocal and ever-evolving' relationship between them (p. 25). By examining the Soviet hippie subculture, *Flowers through Concrete* provides fresh insights into the dominant culture, exposing paradoxes and complications characteristic of late socialism.

Soviet hippies experienced state repression but just as they creatively adjusted existing objects to suit their style, they also learned how to evade or adapt aspects of the system. The book's eighth chapter, 'Madness', brings such contradictions into focus. Spending a stint in a psychiatric hospital was almost a rite of passage among hippies who were commonly diagnosed with schizophrenia. Indeed, many hippies deliberately got themselves committed to avoiding military conscription and psychiatric hospitals were sites of hippie sociality. Cracks in the concrete were evident in examples of sympathetic doctors, as well as in practices of self-medication that produced 'fun and freedom' in conditions of repression (p. 367). Yet Füst is clear that treatments in psychiatric hospitals, including insulin shock and forced medication, could be incredibly cruel, bordering on torture. Soviet hippies may have identified with the language of madness, shunned Soviet 'sanity' and deliberately transgressed behavioural norms, but disturbing hospital experiences, as well as drug or alcohol-induced breakdowns, demonstrated that subverting hegemonic language and institutions often had a psychic cost.

Narratives of western countercultures that flourished in the sixties tend to be told as stories of co-optation and recuperation. Attempts to integrate youth countercultures were both later and clumsier in the Soviet context. Capitalism was quick to absorb and profit from youth movements, depriving them of their subversiveness, whereas Soviet hippies were able to 'defy and live' (p. 437) for longer. Many individuals did not survive the brutal transition to capitalism, but ultimately Soviet hippies outlived the Soviet Union itself.