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Title

Soft Matter: The Poetics of Weakness in Late Soviet Socialism by Julia Vaingurt. Studies in Russian Literature and Theory. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2025. 288 pp. \$110.00. ISBN 978-0-8101-4816-1

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1687g4wv>

Journal

The Russian Review

ISSN

0036-0341

Author

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Publication Date

2026-03-16

DOI

10.1111/russ.70147

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BOOK REVIEW

Literature and Fine Arts

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Northwestern University Press, 2025. 288 pp. \$110.00. ISBN 978-0-8101-4816-1**

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This book addresses the ethical and emotional ramifications of the underdog valorization characteristic of the late Soviet period, as expressed in mostly—but not only—underground or unofficial literary production. Julia Vaingurt proposes a theory of weakness or “weak subjectivity” conditioned by the rejection of absolute knowledge and authoritative discourse, as demonstrated by a range of late-Soviet male writers: Venedikt Erofeev, Evgeny Kharitonov, Andrei Bitov, Sasha Sokolov, as well as some curious Soviet interpretations of non-Russian writers (in a chapter devoted to the libretto by Yuly Kim for a play based on Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*).

Vaingurt uses the substantial first chapter to trace a “typology of weakness,” comparing, contrasting, and also linking the heroes of her study to other major ethical trends and types in the (mostly nineteenth-century) Russian literary tradition: the holy fool, the superfluous man, and the little man. (The early Soviet period also offers important performances of weakness, perhaps most notably the protagonists of Andrei Platonov.) While these types inform, on at least a subconscious level, the weak heroes of the late Soviet period, Vaingurt argues that the circumstances of Soviet political and social life created optimal conditions for the development of the weak subject as an unlikely figure of resistance. Drawing on the philosopher Gianni Vattimo (among others), she proposes that “the in-betweenness of weak subjects allows them to operate within a dominant discourse, and yet subscribe to it ‘weakly’—that is, tentatively and questioningly—and thus to extricate themselves at least somewhat from its influence” (p. 11). Dmitri Aleksandrovich Prigov, a late Soviet figure curiously absent from Vaingurt’s purview (probably because her study does not examine poetry—an extremely rich area for performances of exaggerated weakness), called this specifically Soviet postmodern strategy *nevlipanie* (not-getting-stuck). Barely hanging on to unimpressive jobs, adamantly unsuccessful, these men dabble in a noncommittal way between discourses and thus remain, in some way, free (though some of them, like Bitov, remain bound to an unattainable ideal of unsung genius).

Vaingurt’s study importantly brings together both official and unofficial writers in a way that is simultaneously unforced and illuminating. As she points out, for “unmoored, restless, and aimless” Soviet (intelligentsia) men in the late 1960s through the 1970s, embracing weakness became increasingly mainstream: rather than “being superfluous, extraneous, or out of place [...] [being weak] is precisely being current, contemporary” (p. 25). The protagonists of the book are exemplary “in-betweeners,” variously integrated into and dropping out of Soviet cultural institutions, producing different kinds of work for different audiences or with different layers visible to different types of reader. Vaingurt’s boldness in addressing controversial topics like antisemitism and gender subversion is thus all the more welcome: the chapter on Evgeny Kharitonov actually tries to get to the bottom of his perplexingly persistent antisemitism, which Vaingurt reads as a convoluted but “essential” part of



his project of “inscribing homosexuality into Russian culture, of authenticating and legitimizing it” (p. 91).

The fascinating and wide-ranging chapter on Kim’s adaptation of Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* for Moscow’s Theater of the Red Army also addresses subversions of gender and sexuality, in this case, with the soldiers’ pantomime (cross-dressing) performance. Vaingurt acknowledges the carnivalesque and temporary nature of cross-dressing, while asserting that in the play, gender subversion functions as a device that enables the characters to find humility (*smirenje*). More than the Kharitonov chapter, the discussion of the neo-avant-garde staging foregrounds the absence of women (in both Vonnegut’s book and the play, and Vaingurt’s book). For this reviewer, the woman question looms large over the whole study. While Vaingurt frames her exploration of weakness within the larger context of the late-Soviet “crisis of masculinity” and at least obliquely acknowledges the (often deliberate) sidelining of women in both official and especially unofficial cultural spheres, her decision to focus entirely on male performances of often explicitly gendered “weakness” enacts the same exclusion of women from the narrative of late Soviet culture. To put it bluntly, the men needed the women to not be there for these performances to work, and in Vaingurt’s book, they are still conveniently absent.

Importantly, and not uncontroversially, Vaingurt claims that the late Soviet weakness of her focus is less self-isolating than previous modes (like individualistic superfluity or the disenfranchisement of the “little man”). The weak late Soviet subject identifies with their community “on the basis of vulnerability and failed strivings,” and “[f]rom a condition of being in the world, weakness thereby becomes a mode of connecting with it” (pp. 5–6). In the epilogue, Vaingurt comes back to this community-oriented weakness, suggesting it as a potentially viable political mode for the 2020s, with its global resurgence of strongman politics. Perhaps—but again, when weakness remains stubbornly coded feminine, what role can be played by actual women in this political scenario?

Soft Matter is a carefully researched, thought-provoking, and informative piece of interdisciplinary scholarship that illuminates the paradoxical subjectivities of late Soviet period literary production. Literary scholars, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, as well as their graduate and undergraduate students, will all find much to ponder and build on in this book.