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Origins of the Stalinist Superiority Complex: Western Intellectuals Inside the USSR

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Abstract

This paper explores one little examined shift within Soviet system that can be traced through the reception of Western visitors to the USSR during the 1920s-1930s. During the 1920s, even as restrictions on coveted Western contacts were installed, the new regime assumed it had much to learn from advanced Western modernity; by the Stalinist 1930s, Soviet culture was declared superior in all respects and anti-foreign terror accompanied the purges. The paper traces the dynamics of this transformation through the Soviet tours of American writer Theodore Dreiser in 1928-29, a group of right-wing German intellectuals in 1932, and French fellow-traveler Romain Rolland in 1935. A transnational approach based on new archival materials, it argues, shows how the interwar "pilgrimage to Russia" was about more than just Soviet manipulation and Western utopianism; it was also an episode of intense mutual appraisal in which shifting Western and Soviet assertions of superiority and inferiority clashed.