Yvonne Howell, ed. *Red Star Tales: A Century of Russian and Soviet Science Fiction*. Montpelier, VT: Russian Life Books, 2015. Various translators. 480 pp. $20.00 (paper).

When news broke that it was Yury Gagarin, a Soviet citizen, who had become the first human being to leave Earth on April 12, 1961, the response was not wholly euphoric. As an anecdote from the time noted, “To leave the Soviet Union, to fly around the world – and all this only in order to come back? One has to be crazy” (quoted in Barker & Grant, *The Russia Reader*, 660). Literature often skirts the border between the realistic and the imaginary, between having your

feet firmly planted in this world and escaping into another. This tendency is most blatant in science fiction, a form the very name of which draws out a tension between fact and fantasy (between "*nauka*" and "*fantastika*"). The urge to escape, while by no means limited to those living under the authoritarian rule of tsars or Soviets, became particularly apt in twentieth-century Russia.

As Yvonne Howell's introduction to *Red Star Tales* emphasizes, the intersection between art and life took on great import: "Science fiction mattered" (8). It mattered because it offered a projection of society's vision for itself, created by those with both utopian and dystopian inclinations. The three sections of *Red Star Tales* generally map the ebbs and flows of these perspectives. The first section begins with the late-nineteenth-century embrace of technology found in Fedorov and Tsiolkovsky and continues through the "apocalyptic anticipation" of Briusov's Modernism (11). With a new ideological mandate, writers of the second section, such as Beliaev, had to "defend the value of the genre on the shifting terrain of Soviet cultural politics" (12). Howell points out the relevance of a real-world context of trauma in Yefremov's 1944 "The Nur-i-Desht Observatory": "The entire story of the magical archaeological dig seems to take place out of time, yet our awareness of the historical events that are unfolding in the devastated background make a difference" (15). With the third section picking up after 1953 and running through the first post-Soviet year, the competing impulses of the here and the there, the present and the future, reach a crescendo.

This is an impressive and ambitious anthology that reflects an admirably high quality of editorial skill and translator acumen. It is a clear marriage of pleasure and academic rigor as practiced by an estimable group of scholars and translators. It builds upon and complements the significant series of articles on early Soviet and post-Soviet science fiction organized by Howell and Sibelan Forrester (*Slavic Review*, Summer 2013). The eighteen stories included in *Red Star Tales* (by sixteen authors) are rendered in new and extremely readable translations. The short biographies of the authors (as well as of the translators—one of the volume's many thoughtful touches) demonstrate the temporal, ideological, and aesthetic diversity of the book's scope. *Red Star Tales* excels in offering a comprehensive and wide-ranging approach to Russian science fiction (which also makes its primary failing in diversity all the more surprising: just one of the eighteen stories was written by a woman). This book's century (1892–1992) witnessed a mind-boggling array of political and technological upheavals. The story of these changes is palpably conveyed by these "red star tales."

Arranged chronologically (with one perplexing exception), these works of science fiction show the mobility and universality of the genre. Its enduring popularity and utility encompass a variety of forms and purposes, many of which are showcased here. These works are fueled by spectacular variations of intention—from Fedorov's belief in salvation through technological progress; to Platonov's disquieting perversions of the language of propaganda and idealism; to Truskinovskaia's skewering of late Soviet consumer and domestic life. *Red Star Tales* does an admirable job of representing both canonical writers and forgotten gems. It achieves a degree of coherence and structure that make it an extremely worthwhile tool in the classroom. And it does so without losing sight of the pleasure and thrill of writing that lays claim to be "the story of a hypothesis" (Kazantev's 1946 "Explosion") or includes chapters titled "The heads entertain themselves" and "The laboratory's new inmates" (Beliaev's 1926 *Professor Dowell's Head*). One of the book's great finds is "the other Fedorov"—the practically unknown Nikolai Fedorov, who, in 1906, presciently speculated about "One Evening in 2217": "The sparks from the light in the glass flickered and died. The mournful bell rang three forlorn, soft peals. The pneumatic landed noisily on the corner of Liteyny Prospect, and in two minutes motley throngs of passengers poured down its stairs and up out of street elevators, crowding into the self-mobile" (86).

This is not a book without some oddities. Its emphasis on comprehensiveness and explicit preference for presenting lesser-known authors and works prioritizes variety, arguably at times to the detriment of quality or significance. A slight loosening of these restrictions might have re-

sulted in the inclusion of some notable missing figures, such as Aleksei Tolstoy, Liudmila Petrushevskaia, Viktor Pelevin, or Tatiana Tolstaya and more seminal works by Yefremov or the Strugatsky Brothers. There is also a calculated sacrifice in giving only excerpts of several of the works. But these are all understandable concessions required for such an ambitious undertaking. And in the end they are relatively small quibbles when placed against the impressive accomplishment of *Red Star Tales*, a singularly enjoyable and scholarly book that should serve as a gateway to Russian science fiction for readers of every stripe.

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