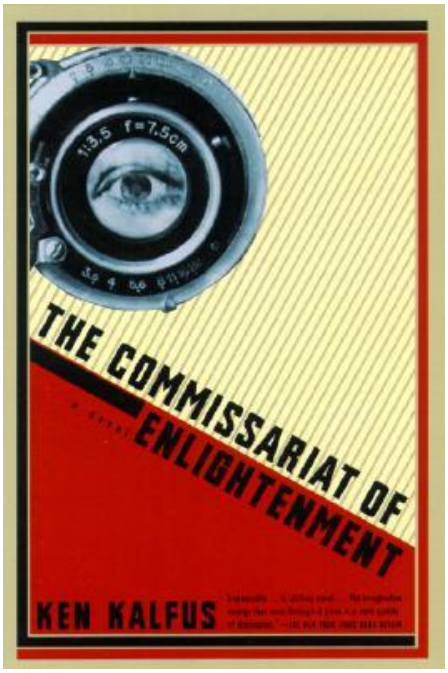

The Commissariat of Enlightenment

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Russia, 1910. Leo Tolstoy lies dying in Astapovo, a remote railway station. Members of the press from around the world have descended upon this sleepy hamlet to record his passing for a public suddenly ravenous for celebrity news. They have been joined by a film company whose cinematographer, Nikolai Gribshin, is capturing the extraordinary scene and learning how to wield his camera as a political tool. At this historic moment he comes across two men -- the scientist, Professor Vorobev, and the revolutionist, Joseph Stalin -- who have radical, mysterious plans for the future. Soon they will accompany him on a long, cold march through an era of brutality and absurdity. *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* is a mesmerizing novel of ideas that brilliantly links the tragedy and comedy of the Russian Revolution with the global empire of images that occupies our imaginations today.

The Commissariat of Enlightenment Details

Date	:	Published February 3rd 2004 by Ecco (first published 2003)
ISBN	:	9780060501396
Author	:	Ken Kalfus
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Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Russia, Literary Fiction, Literature

From Reader Review The Commissariat of Enlightenment for online ebook

Jennifer Sciolino-Moore says

I really tried with this one. After a month of stops and starts though, I had to put it down. The narrative was disjointed, and even 150 pages in, the story was no closer to being told than on page one. I haven't rated it because I didn't read the whole thing, and maybe there is someone out there who "gets" it. That person isn't me. Blech.

Peter says

A deeply intriguing fictional account of the evolution of Soviet Russia, the art of cinema and the nature of propoganda. While telling the story of an accidental encounter between a budding filmmaker and the leadership of the Bolshevik cabal, Kalfus takes the reader on a slightly slant contemplation of the nature of history, the true nature and role of art and the power of images as opposed to 'fact'.

James says

Tolstoy's demise in 1910 presents a career-launching opportunity for a young cinematographer who's beginning to understand the power of film to change or create political reality. He links this death with that of Lenin - by imagining that three men attended both: an embalmer, a filmmaker and Stalin. The film maker's knowledge comes in handy as Russia moves unsteadily from post revolution chaos toward the bureaucratic nightmare of the Soviet state.

Stalin promises that "the camera does not lie", but in a beautifully constructed scene, Kalfus demonstrates the opposite. Tolstoy has refused to see his wife. Gribshin knows that the public will demand a deathbed reconciliation between the great artist and the woman who bore his 13 children. So he films the countess entering the house where her husband is dying. There's a blackout. Then she leaves, her face contorted with sorrow. European, cinema audiences will be sophisticated enough to understand the blackout's implication: she has said her final farewell. In fact, she entered the house, turned on her heel and walked out again. Celebrity, propaganda, the mass media - it's all here in 1910.

The Commissariat of Enlightenment is one of the most powerful as the agency responsible for propaganda. The cinematographer's fate merges with that of Comrade Astapov, director of a massive Red agitprop campaign. People who choose to resist the commissariat include a church congregation that refuses to give up its faith, an experimental theater director, and a resilient young woman who makes an abstract, pornographic film in the name of sexual education for women. Kalfus recreates unforgettably the embalmer and scientist Vladimir Vorobev (who mummified Lenin), Joseph Stalin and Countess Tolstoy who anchor the plethora of plot developments.

This was a delightful surprise to read. From the opening scenes at Leo Tolstoy's deathbed (and the surrounding media circus) to the rise of Stalin, Kalfus's blends carefully researched history, subtle social commentary and imaginative storytelling. While the book required patience to read, it paid for that patience

with a fascinating historical narrative of early twentieth-century Russia.

Luis Fernandez says

"El teatro ha muerto. Es una institución anticuada y burguesa...La cultura tiene que servir a las masas...Es una negligencia permitir que un drama teatral sea representado cada noche ,.., sujeto a caprichos de los actores y directores individuales, cuando se puede realizar una película perfecta que será perfecta cada vez que se proyecte." Ken Kalfus
El parpadeo eterno fue la primera novela de Ken Kalfus, y fue destacada por el New York Times como uno de los libros notables del 2003, y para mi como escritor de este blog marca el reinicio del mismo después de un periodo donde la lectura de ficción paso a segundo termino, y los libros especializados en economía se volvieron mis libros de buró.

Ken Kalfus nos cuenta la historia de tres personajes Gribshin, Vorobev y Stalin antes y después de la muerte de León Tolstoy. Es como el suceso que conmociono a la sociedad rusa, que el gran intelectual huyera de casa para morir en paz, logro juntar a la prensa internacional entre los que se encontraban los cineastas que en ese entonces servías como testigos de la realidad, los nacientes revolucionarios, y hasta los científicos en busca de fama y del apoyo de los allegados del escritor de Guerra y paz.

http://bucherlibrosbooks.blogspot.mx/...

Charles Cohen says

Ken Kalfus wrote the best book so far about 9/11 - A Disorder Peculiar to the Country. If not for this being his book, I never would have read CoE. But I'm glad I did, because now I understand that Russian Futurists were nuts, and the Soviet socialist dream is nightmarish from 30,000 feet and 20 years away, but it's even more terrifying when it turns a man inside out, and convinces him that "historical science" shouldn't be too overburdened with facts. Reminds me that America is not so terrible, drone strikes and pervasive surveillance of its own citizens notwithstanding.

Tom says

This book is certainly well-written, entertaining and thought-provoking -- an insightful meditation on abuses of art for ideology -- but in the end, I thought it suffered a bit from the problem of many overtly "political" novels -- the message is more memorable than the characters.

The Great Dan Marino says

Really a novel of ideas rather than character, and maybe it becomes a bit didactic for all that but it's done artfully enough that it avoids the baseness of most didactic fiction. First half looks like a coherent narrative, but then it becomes more fractured and abstract and structurally you can see how this mirrors the Bolsheviks, story of the Central Committee, etc. Also if you look at that semidevolvement into abstraction it echoes what

Tolstoy does in W&P. (First half of this book is about Tolstoy on deathbed.) All this does make the novel lack a bit of movement and tension too often. Also a couple of grammatical tics bothered the copyeditor in me. All this more than made up for by dude's precise vocab, tastefully poetic sensibility. Really elegant and functional and beautiful writing. Conceptually and imagistically and metaphorically rich stuff in this book. Plus he does bring the tension/gut stuff in a few set pieces. Kalfus a hard puncher for sure.

Evan says

At times funny, at times grim, Kalfus's novel about the birth of propaganda in the Soviet state has great moments, particularly in the third section. I found the final chapters particularly well down, especially when Kalfus abandons conventional sentence structure to describe Lenin's stroke.

The beginning is a bit uneven, as the novel tries to find the protagonist. Considering most of the novel is about Grishbin/Astapov, the fact that it opens with 3 men on a train who seem to have equal importance is a bit misleading. I realize that Astapov's relationship to those three men is crucial. Also, I feel Stalin and Lenin are not fully developed, nor is the true complexity of Stalin's rise to power given a clear account. Still, the novel does not try to be a recounting of the revolution or the introduction of the worst murderer of the 20th century -- it's all about the role of the image and the death of the word. In that case, Kalfus has done some good things.

Maduck831 says

[Toltsoy’s final days] “Given the widespread reverence for the Count, the circus tent was itself an incongruous manifestation; this moment early in the twentieth century was rife with incongruity.” (19) “The conflict between his reason and his appetites had already bloomed into a legend that would cling to his figure, embarrassing his family as well as his followers.” (29) [Vladimir Chertkov] “You couldn’t teach these people to read and expect to “elevate” them; you had to make new people, a far more complicated task.” (33) “This is not life,” he had declared to his students in an urgently convened assembly. “It is the gray shadow of life ,gray figures passing soundlessly across a grey landscape. And in this fantasy world men have discovered an opiate that they value more than actual life, that they confuse with real life.” (51) [cinema: a man going over Niagara Falls in a barrel] “By that time so much would have happened to her, to her family, and to her country that he only observable response would be a slow, rueful shake of her head.” (93) “Grisbhin had come to understand that deceit was ingrained in cinematographic reporting, as it was in every kind of storytelling. You were presented with a set of facts, sometimes laboriously uncovered and often imperfectly known, and it was your task to order them in a way that imparted meaning. No story was possible without some sense to be manufactured from it.” (96) “You were meant to remain in Siberia until you received further instructions!” / “It was cold.” (111) “Life came at her raw, unseasoned by meaning. Entirely focused on the moment, Yelena told herself no stories” (148) “Having opened a door, you entered another world whose glory was expressed not by radiance but through the conjuration of darkness. The mystery was in the unseen. If you stumbled here, even that was at the hand of God.” (155) “Astapov said, “Man carries his own corruption with him in every stride. Only an idea can remain intact and unsullied. That’s why the Revolution will be victorious – because it’s an idea above compromise.” (160) “The printed word had cleaved mankind in two, one part canting toward animality.” (172) “Life’s struggle was not to control events, but the way in which they were remembered. Yet…He felt himself diminished by her amnesia.” (180) “These complaints were echoed in the chambers of the Kremlin, where Astapov, soliciting

equipment and funds, argued back that it was only through the Commissariat of Equipment that the people would be motivated to produce the food they needed to be fed. And until then, he maintained, the proper image coupled with the proper narrative would make them swear that they had been fed." (205) "Meaning? We're drowning in an overabundance of meaning!" Levin saw the alarmed look on Astapov's face but went on unable to help himself. "Comrade Astapov, every day we're buffered by thousands of messages in the papers, in our eyes, coming at us on waves of radio-electronmagnetism! "It's a cacophony of experience!" Our play dramatizes the individual's predicament, with so many experiences to choose from. Each member of the audience will have the opportunity to discover unintentional meanings within the rearranged sentences." (214) "Or ironic. Or satirical in some way. What if the audience chooses a counterrevolutionary meaning? Don't you see, you've lost control of the story. This is the opposite of a story. What you have here can mean anything! The audience might laugh!" (214) "You'll merely suggest his presence, and perhaps not even his physical presence. Comrade Stalin, Ilich's closet confidant, was and remains a moral force behind the Revolution, and your role is meant to convey the idea of his participation in the crucial Moscow events." (218) "In a people's democracy, political power would not derive from God. It had to be authorized by celebrity. Leaders would have to be more than known: their characters would have to be forged by narrative." (225) "The "cine-eye" drilled a hole into reality. It "enlarged" the truth." (235) "Everything, in its essential aspects, is just as before; I think I am. Get to work." (246) [check YouTube videos of Lenin] "After all, not everything on the iconostasis had been easily read. A little strain, artfully introduced, further closed the difference between the moving images on a cinema screen and the icon screen's stationary ones." (257) [YouTube footage of the opening of the tomb of Egyptian pharaoh Tut-ankh-amen?] "Embedded within his tissues like a tumor, the memory would eventually prove fatal to him, as it would prove fatal to Vorobev, Krupskaya, Koyevnikov, and the two nurses." (282) [Tolstoy by A.N. Wilson] [Tragedy of Tolstoy by Alexandra Tolstoya] [Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception by Yuri Tsivian] [The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1886-1939 edited by Richard Taylor…] [The Icon and the Axe by James H. Billington] [Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime by Richard Pipe] [The Russian Revolution, 1899-1919] [Lenin Lives!: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia by Nina Tumarkin] [Lenin's Embalmers by Samuel Hutchinson and Ilya Zbarsky]

Jen says

I enjoyed this novel of the Russian Revolution, though it was a bit slow to start. It is a novel of the power of the cinematic vision to fool a people and society in general and of the use of symbols to achieve an end. In this case, the use of propaganda is used to help bring to power the Bolsheviks under Lenin, and then to the ensure the pre-eminence of Stalin. Didn't know some of the murkier bits about Tolstoy, so that was fascinating, and the idea that Lenin may have been embalmed before he was actually dead was quite confronting.

Josie says

I'm trying to read this but failing deeply. Like, it's got some sort of riddle in it (possibly related to the presence of characters named Lenin and Stalin!!?) but I have no idea what is going on.

Anyway, gave up.

Leah says

The camera lies...

It is 1910 and a packed train makes its way into Astapov, a little village suddenly famous because Tolstoy is there, in the process of dying. Aboard the train are two men: Professor Vladimir Vorobev, a scientist who has developed a new method of embalming that can make corpses look strangely alive; and Nikolai Gribshin, a young film-maker attached to Pathé News. In a little cottage close by, Lenin is holed up, using a pseudonym, and doing his best to manipulate events to inspire his long-awaited revolution. And there's another man in the neighbourhood, known as the Caucasian – Stalin – who is intrigued by the new art of film-making, seeing its potential for truth-telling and, more importantly, for truth-creation...

This was Ken Kalfus' first novel, published in 2003, although he had previously published collections of short stories. Kalfus lived in Moscow for some years in the 1990s and a lot of his work is about the USSR in one way or another. I've loved everything of his that I've read, so it came as no surprise that I thoroughly enjoyed this one too.

The book is in two parts, subtitled *Pre-* and *Post-*. Gribshin emerges quickly as the main character, and the major theme of the book is about the development of propaganda techniques under Stalin, specifically using film. More widely, it's about facts, presentation of facts, distortion of truth using facts, myth-making. Given our current obsession with “fake news”, it feels even more timely today than I suspect it would have done when originally published.

> *Comrade Astapov had gone soft, unsteeled by the violence and death he had witnessed. Recent events had demanded the loss of life on an imponderable scale. Whether the number of Russian dead concluded in five zeros or six was hotly debated in the domestic and foreign press, but the zeros were merely a human invention, a Babylonian bookkeeping trick. The deaths were made tangible only when you stopped counting them: Velimir Krikalev, the looter summarily executed at the outside wall of a foundry in Tsaritsyn; Sonya Khlebnikova, the red-haired girl who perished unfed in some unheated barracks in Kaluga; Anton Gribshin, who froze to death the previous winter on the Arbat while searching for bread.*

The first part, *Pre-*, deals with the death of Tolstoy, though the great man is something of a bit player in his own demise. Instead, we see the media vultures circling, all wanting to get an angle on the story and to tell it in the way that suits their agenda. Meantime, Tolstoy's family and literary agent are engaged in a battle to gain control of his literary legacy. Spurred on by hints from the Caucasian, Gribshin begins to recognise the power of the camera to present a story that may contain no direct lies, but which nevertheless presents a false narrative. As always with Kalfus, there's a lot of humour – the scenes between Lenin and Stalin are particularly enjoyable, with Lenin spouting Marxist theory every time he speaks while Stalin the thug is more attracted to direct, violent action. But there's also a lot of real insight into both the way humans behave and the history and politics of the period.

The second part, *Post-*, jumps forward to after the Revolution when the new USSR was in the process of being created. Gribshin is now working in the new Commissariat of Enlightenment – the State's propaganda machine, where he is is responsible for making films showing events as the leaders want them to be interpreted. Kalfus shows us the reality of life at this period: the widespread starvation as the peasants withhold food from the cities; the ongoing civil war and its attendant atrocities; the State's attempt to weaken the peasantry through the destruction of religion. Finally, this section takes us to another death-bed, this time

Lenin's, where all Gribshin's learned propaganda skills are merged with Vorobev's embalming skills to complete the creation of the cult of Lenin, a quasi-religion in its own right, complete with its own rituals and iconography.

> *According to secret reports from the Commissariat's foreign agents, the movies had reached every burb and hamlet of America. This transformation of the civilized world had taken place in a single historic instant. Despite its rejection of Byzantium, the West was creating an image-ruled empire of its own, a shimmering, electrified web of pictures, unarticulated meaning, and passionate association forged between unrelated ideas. This was how to do it: either starve the masses of meaning or expose them to so much that the sum of it would be unintelligible. Wireless cinema loomed. A man's psyche would be continually massaged, pummelled and manipulated so that he would be unable to complete a thought without making reference to some image manufactured for his persuasion. Exhausted, his mind would hunger for thoughtlessness. Political power and commercial gain would follow.*

If that all makes it sound like heavyweight politics, then I've done it a disservice. The actual Russian stuff is secondary to the examination of the art of propaganda and myth-making, and the story is told with a great mix of light and shade – the underlying darkness leavened by occasional humour and some mild but deliciously macabre horror around the death-bed and embalming scenes. The final chapter (which I won't detail) showcases all Kalfus' sparkling originality in storytelling, finding a unique way to show the reader how propaganda continued to be used to re-create the foundational myths to suit the requirements of different leaders of the USSR and beyond, as the twentieth century advanced.

I recommend it to anyone who has been fascinated by the recent corruption of truth by all sides in contemporary events on both sides of the Atlantic, or by the intervention of Russian propaganda in Western affairs. But more than that, I highly recommend it to anyone who enjoys an excellent story, excellently told.

www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com

Daniel Kukwa says

The second half of this novel becomes more and more an abstract, halluciogenic exercise in Communist insanity...but it's never less than compelling. Terrifying and tragic, with large dollops of black humour mixed with violence -- in other words, Russian history & literature in a nutshell. A surprisingly satisfying random pick at the bookstore once again yields dividends.

Marvin says

Publishers Weekly picked this as one of the best books of 2003. I can see why some would see it as a work of genius, but it didn't really connect for me. The main character is a very early Russian filmmaker who sees the propaganda potential of film & is recruited by Stalin for the Russian Communists' propaganda machine (the Commissariat of Enlightenment). There are really only 4 long scenes in the book: the death of Tolstoy in 1910; an incident in 1917 amid the brutal struggle between the Red & White armies when the filmmaker meets his comeuppance at a monastery; the filming in 1919 of a reenactment of a key revolutionary battle; and Lenin's death in 1924. The theme throughout is the preservation of a particular version of a hero's vision,

with explicit references to Christ & Christianity. The first section seemed particularly slow to me, but there are some ingenious bits, including a final stream-of-consciousness chapter narrated by the embalmed Lenin, who reflects from his tomb on developments in the Soviet Union from his death until Gorbachev's rule & the fall of Communism.

Erin says

Ken Kalfus's The Commissariat of Enlightenment has some brilliant passages of startling and beautiful descriptions. The observations about the role of cinema and the visual in modern life are made more striking by the obvious reliance in the text on the written word. In one scene describing the interior of a movie theater Kalfus so captures the intimacy and community of the theater experience that I had to wonder whether this was a book made to be a movie. And yet, it's not the sort of book that wants to be a movie and has been written imagining its later adaptation (think here The Da Vinci Code), but rather creates such vivid scenes that are plotted in such a way to create an affinity between the text and the visual. I wouldn't want to see this as a film, as I loved the third person limited narration of Gribshin/Astapov and the often subtle, but nevertheless disruptive shift in narrative voice (almost as though the narrative camera had panned elsewhere). I will admit that the shifts in narrative voice at times left me frustrated and disoriented (however intentional such an experience might have been).

The novel opens with Tolstoy's death and ends with Lenin's. My favourite scenes came in the last pages as Lenin narrates posthumously the comings and goings and rapid shifts in time and power. I thought to recommend this book to my colleague who studies "time and narrative," because the novel's meditations on the beginning and end of political and social eras as tied to technology is fascinating, and utterly appropriate for our time. I should read more about Russian history. I say this without any intention or plan to act accordingly, but whenever I read bits and pieces of the story I am reminded of how fascinating a history it must be. Good thing N. knows the history well, as questions about Gorbachev and Stalin always come up at quiz night, and I never know. Alas, having read this book won't help, as the history was focused on how propaganda participated in the Revolution, and not, so much at all, on the politics of the Revolution itself. So there you go.
