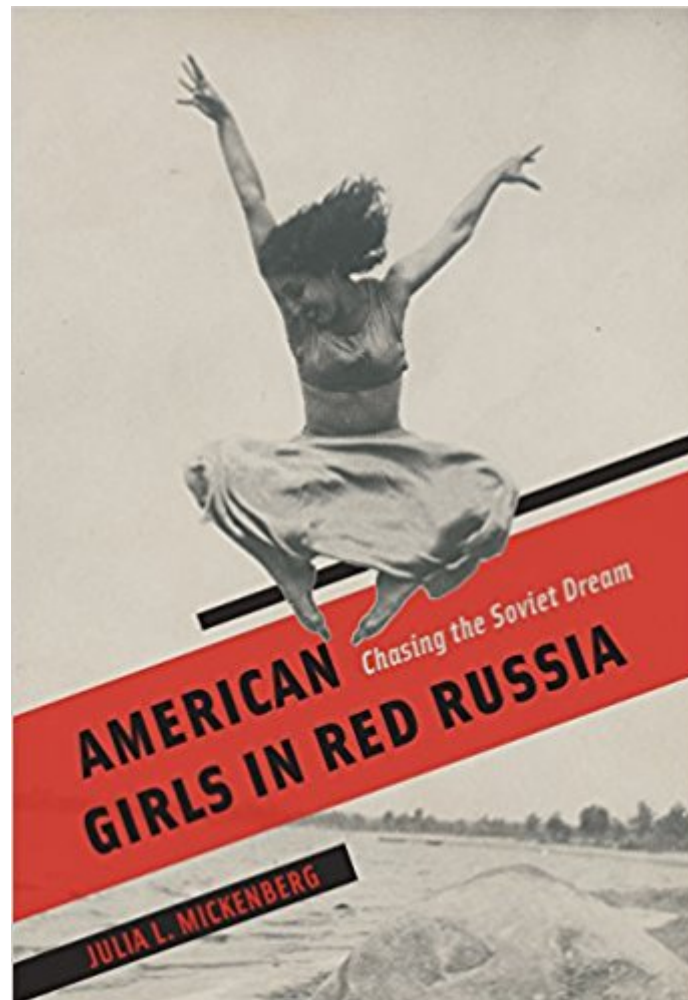




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American Girls In Red Russia: Chasing The Soviet Dream



Synopsis

If you were an independent, adventurous, liberated American woman in the 1920s or 1930s where might you have sought escape from the constraints and compromises of bourgeois living? Paris and the Left Bank quickly come to mind. But would you have ever thought of Russia and the wilds of Siberia? This choice was not as unusual as it seems now. As Julia L. Mickenberg uncovers in *American Girls in Red Russia*, there is a forgotten counterpoint to the story of the Lost Generation: beginning in the late nineteenth century, Russian revolutionary ideology attracted many women, including suffragists, reformers, educators, journalists, and artists, as well as curious travelers. Some were famous, like Isadora Duncan or Lillian Hellman; some were committed radicals, though more were just intrigued by the “Soviet experiment.” But all came to Russia in search of social arrangements that would be more equitable, just, and satisfying. And most in the end were disillusioned, some by the mundane realities, others by horrifying truths. Mickenberg reveals the complex motives that drew American women to Russia as they sought models for a revolutionary new era in which women would be not merely independent of men, but also equal builders of a new society. Soviet women, after all, earned the right to vote in 1917, and they also had abortion rights, property rights, the right to divorce, maternity benefits, and state-supported childcare. Even women from Soviet national minorities—many recently unveiled—became public figures, as African American and Jewish women noted. Yet as Mickenberg’s collective biography shows, Russia turned out to be as much a grim commune as a utopia of freedom, replete with economic, social, and sexual inequities. *American Girls in Red Russia* recounts the experiences of women who saved starving children from the Russian famine, worked on rural communes in Siberia, wrote for Moscow or New York newspapers, or performed on Soviet stages. Mickenberg finally tells these forgotten stories, full of hope and grave disappointments.

Book Information

Hardcover: 432 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press (April 25, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 022625612X

ISBN-13: 978-0226256122

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.3 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #187,489 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #144 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Russia #477 in Books > History > Asia > Russia #899 in Books > History > World > Women in History

Customer Reviews

“Here, in taut, fascinating prose filled with quotes from writings of all sorts from the era, Mickenberg limns the many intrepid women who finagled their way into Russia, starting in the late nineteenth century, to help with everything that needed to be done, and that was a lot. . . . Though success stories are here, so is much disillusionment, as the reality failed to meet the promise.” (Booklist)

“Mickenberg tells more than the story of specific women who traveled to Russia looking for a new way to live; she tells the universal story of how people struggle to live by their own values and ideals when those clash with the larger society. American Girls in Red Russia is equally inspiring and disheartening, and it is a reminder of the lengths one can and should go to stand by one’s beliefs, while also reminding us that one can never quite go far enough.” (Jessa Crispin, author of *The Dead Ladies Project: Exiles, Expats, and Ex-Countries*)

“In this enthralling account, Mickenberg reveals the magnetic attraction of the new Soviet Union to American women seeking to reinvent working and family lives in the twenties. But American Girls in Red Russia also exposes the painful paradox of imagining freedom in a repressive culture. This is an illuminating achievement whose lessons speak to the utopian aspirations of men and women everywhere.” (Alice Kessler-Harris, author of *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman*)

“American Girls in Red Russia combines incredible research and inspired writing in a compelling account of the American women who traveled to, lived in, and sometimes believed in the Soviet Union during its first decades. Mickenberg deftly combines political and cultural history to reveal a fascinating generation of radical women who chased the Soviet dream. She transports the reader into the lives of both famous and forgotten women who followed their curiosity and convictions to a brave new world. Sometimes they found fulfillment; more often, disappointment. Their stories enrich our understanding of early feminism at home and in the USSR while revealing the possibilities and limitations of living revolutionary lives.” (Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, coauthor of *These United States: A Nation in the Making, 1890 to the Present*)

Julia L. Mickenberg is associate professor of American studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is author of *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* and coeditor of *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature*. A A

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