



# When Pigs Could Fly and Bears Could Dance: A History of the Soviet Circus

*Miriam Neirick*

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For more than seven decades the circuses enjoyed tremendous popularity in the Soviet Union. How did the circus—an institution that dethroned figures of authority and refused any orderly narrative structure—become such a cultural mainstay in a state known for blunt and didactic messages? Miriam Neirick argues that the variety, flexibility, and indeterminacy of the modern circus accounted for its appeal not only to diverse viewers but also to the Soviet state. In a society where government-legitimizing myths underwent periodic revision, the circus proved a supple medium of communication.

Between 1919 and 1991, it variously displayed the triumph of the Bolshevik revolution, the beauty of the new Soviet man and woman, the vulnerability of the enemy during World War II, the prosperity of the postwar Soviet household, and the Soviet mission of international peace—all while entertaining the public with the acrobats, elephants, and clowns. With its unique ability to meet and reconcile the demands of both state and society, the Soviet circus became the unlikely darling of Soviet culture and an entertainment whose usefulness and popularity stemmed from its ambiguity.



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