

Reviews

Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko (eds), *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (London: Anthem Press, 2009), 307 pp.

If there is one thing that one can claim about collections of articles/chapters by a variety of scholars on a theme, it is that, much like the girl in the nursery rhyme with the curl on her forehead, when they are good they are very, very good and when they are bad they are horrid. This volume with its stellar list of contributors belongs very firmly to the first category. It joins a number of recent works which explore the notion of happiness, refracting the topic through the prisms of daily life, culture and ideology. The striking title captures the underlying contradiction of the Soviet situation, the search for the utopian goal of communism with a concomitant commitment to stability which only too often resulted in stasis and stagnation. In their introduction the editors describe the aim of the book as being ‘to investigate the various social and artistic practices through which the idea of happiness in Soviet culture is manifested and to analyse the formative influences to this key notion on social sensitivities, identity, and society’s sense of meanings and values’ (xvi). Each of the chapters addresses the concept of the Russian term *schast'e* and, although there are variations of approach, a rough consensus emerges.

The book is divided into three parts, reflecting the theoretical, the actual and the role of topos in considering the theme of Utopia. The first, entitled Utopics, covers four areas where the notion of happiness was a core principle. Catriona Kelly interrogates the notion of a ‘joyful Soviet childhood’ which she identifies as ‘a legitimating sacred value’ (9), while Evgeny Dobrenko discusses the esoteric topic of epic poems of *kolkhoz* happiness. Helena Goscilo’s ‘Luxuriating in Lack: Plenitude and Consuming Happiness in Soviet Paintings and Posters, 1930s – 1953’ brilliantly dissects the tension between the painterly abundance of iconic Stalinist canvases by Plastov and Gerasimov and the ‘austerity and haplessness’ of contemporary posters. Gian Piero Pinetto in ‘Tasty and Healthy: Happiness in One Book’ further develops the theme of nutritional happiness by examining the culinary and presentational advice given in the standard Soviet cookbook, *The Book about Tasty and Healthy Food*, in a telling illustration of the validity of

Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The linking of actual and representational satiety with evaluations of happiness is convincingly executed.

In the second part, *Realities*, Marina Balina reprises the theme of childhood happiness through an examination of Soviet children's literature of the twenties. Emma Widdis explores the pleasures of textiles in the machine age in a chapter which associates the sensory pleasure of making something, of engaging in *rukodelie*, with the larger notion of happiness. Susan Reid's chapter unpacks Soviet notions of domesticity in the Khrushchev years following huge increases in the construction of residential blocks of flats. She reveals the contradictions implicit in the move away from collective living towards the establishment of small domestic cells, more often associated with the capitalist norm. The final chapter in this part, 'When we were happy: Remembering Soviet holidays' by Albert Baiburin and Alexandra Piir, locates its study of happiness in the public holidays which formed one of the essential rites of the Soviet state. Curiously these events of communal celebration were later remembered more in terms of the family dinner which followed than for the political significance of the occasion.

The third part, *Locations*, turns its attention to architecture, literature and cinema. Katerina Clark likens the project of rebuilding Moscow in the 1930s to the construction of a locus for a potential Utopia, noting that most of the architectural plans were not actually constructed, while Phillip Ross Bullock provides a reading of Platonov's *Happy Moscow* through an intertextual analysis with Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*. Julian Graffy takes films released in 1956 to interrogate changing attitudes to what constitutes happiness in society. In his view the new sensibility of the Thaw modifies but does not undermine cinematic presentations of happiness of earlier decades. The final chapter by well-known Russian film critic Maya Turovskaya compares and contrasts the German magazine *BIZ* with the Soviet *Ogonek* in a chapter which seems to have less to do with happiness than with social engineering.

The most prevalent theme throughout is the tension between ideological premises and their realization. Reid indicates this clearly in her chapter where better living standards were seen as part of the promise of communism, one of the selling points of socialism, and that consumption and housing were sites for 'peaceful competition' and the Soviet failure to progress in this area. Even modest progress in this area brought challenges. Woman and machine became

woman and vacuum cleaner, a move away from the communal towards ‘rampant consumerism and commodity fetishism’ (153).

The level of this book is so high that it would be churlish to find failings, but its impact would have been increased by having coloured illustrations instead of the standard black and white. Helena Goscilo’s most sensuous evocation of the colours and tonings of the posters and paintings would have been greatly enhanced by illustrations which captured some of the force of her argument. The same could be said for the illustrations of magazine covers in Emma Widdis’ article on clothing (126–7) and the stills from films in Graffy’s chapter. Jesse Savage is credited as the translator of two of the articles written originally in Russian (Dobrenko and Turovskaya). These on the whole read well, but occasionally the meaning remains opaque or the turn of phrase awkward (249). In my view Dobrenko’s chapter is overly long and Turovskaya’s, although it does as the editors claim, provide a useful source of comparative and contrastive material is marginally concerned with the theme of the book. Variant spellings of the critic Kracauer (193) should not have passed the proof-reading phase. But these are all minor details and this collection is to be highly recommended as an insightful and well-research addition to studies of the former Soviet state, failed Utopia that it was.

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Paul Dukes, Graeme P. Herd and Jarmo Kotilaine, *Stuarts and Romanovs: The Rise and Fall of a Special Relationship* (Dundee: Dundee University Press, 2009), xiii + 262 pp.

The premise of the ‘special relationship’ examined in this study derives from the historical coincidence that Mikhail Romanov ascended the Muscovite throne (1613) within a decade of the ‘union of the crowns’ (1603) that brought James Stuart (James VI of Scotland) to the English throne. To base on this any kind of parallel history of the two dynasties would be a dubious project indeed and one that (whatever its title might suggest) forms no part of the intention of this scholarly monograph. Rather, its authors are concerned with the whole range of British–Russian relations throughout the seventeenth century, including contacts