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# Life in Stalin's Soviet Union

Edited by Kees Boterbloem

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 247 pp. £20.69 (pbk), £63 (hbk).

This collection of articles focuses on everyday life in the Soviet Union during the rule of Joseph Stalin (1929–1953), a fascinating and growing field of research. The authors are experts of Russian history based in the United States and the book is aimed at a wider audience which explains the emphasis on concision and readability. Each chapter centres on a different area of Soviet experience: rural life, food and famine, urban life, disability, gender, religion, education, criminality, imprisonment, and the army. The Soviet Union was a multinational state that comprised fifteen different republics, but, as the editor explains in his introduction, the book describes mostly the experience of the three Eastern Slavic people groups (Belorussian, Russian, and Ukrainian) as they formed the bulk of the population (5).

The book sets off with Kees Boterbloem's detailed description of everyday life in Soviet collective farms under the misleading chapter title "The End of Russian Peasants under Stalin". The problems of the rural population provide a good starting point to understand issues that follow such as the difficulties to feed the population (Elena A. Osokina), to urbanize it (Heather D. DeHaan), to educate it (Larry E. Holmes), to care for the disabled (Frances Bernstein), and to emancipate women (Amy Randall). Crime and punishment are discussed in chapters on graft and corruption (James Heinzen), criminality in general (David Shearer), and the gruesome experience of prison camps (Golfo Alexopoulos). Karen Petrone introduces the readers to celebrations that formed part of the life of Soviet students and Gregory L. Freeze describes the development of religious life focusing on Christian Orthodox churches.

The German War of Annihilation against the Soviet Union (1941–1945) was conducted during Stalin's rule and was a significant aspect of life in this period. Kenneth Slepian's chapter discusses military life during and after the war, although all chapters allude to this pivotal event. In her chapter on gender and sexuality, Randall discusses rape committed by Soviet soldiers during World War II, omitting that this was a punishable offence that was sometimes prosecuted. She presents rape as an expression of "Soviet and masculine dominance over women" (154). Rape was a troubling issue on all sides of this brutal war, including from the Western Allies. Crucially, Soviet women were not only raped by the German invaders, millions were killed or exploited as forced laborers by the Nazis. Surprisingly, all this is absent in her chapter. These omissions illustrate the main challenge of a book like this one - a meticulous use of sources and the thorough mention of key facts is occasionally sacrificed in favour of readability.

The tiny number of references in most chapters is a recurring problem, as is the choice of some sources. Whereas Osokina's chapter quotes from primary sources from Russian archives and secondary sources in different languages, other chapters lack this academic stringency. Readers would have benefited from more information framing the use of fictional sources by the authors of this book. It is not surprising that Boterbloem quotes from a novel about village life to illustrate his chapter on agriculture (21, 23), but it would serve readers well to know that this novel by Fyodor Abramov emerged as part of the prominent, post-Stalinist literary movement "Village Prose" (*derevenskaya proza*), which was influenced by Russian nationalism in its portrayal of rural life (see: Yitzhak Brudny. *Reinventing Russia. Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991*. Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 50–65).

Alexopoulos's chapter on the gulag prison camp system is disappointing considering the enormous amounts of sources available nowadays. Possibly resulting from her questionable choice of sources, Alexopoulos contradicts even her own claims regarding the purpose of the camps which she describes as profitable economic enterprises or sites of rapid destruction of human life and overlooks their historical continuity and their penological purpose.

Bypassing archival sources, Alexopoulos relies excessively on the controversial writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn and his outdated work from the 1970s. She cites Solzhenitsyn's literary portrayal of former camp inmate Naftaly Frenkel – including a quote stemming from the writer's imagination – to claim that the camps aimed at exploiting the inmates to the maximum within three months (89). Yet other facts she mentions contradict this. Relying on Solzhenitsyn's imaginings of Frenkel is nonetheless negligent and problematic, because Frenkel is just a marginal and obscure figure whom Solzhenitsyn inflates into an important one. His representation of Frenkel in *Gulag Archipelago* belongs to one of the Russian writer's most obviously anti-Semitic ramblings (see: Elisa Kriza. *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: Cold War Icon, Gulag Author, Russian Nationalist?* Ibidem Press, 2014, pp. 205–208). Readers would have benefited from a more coherent argumentation and a more academic choice of sources, such as Steven A. Barnes's *Death and Redemption. The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

Despite these issues, the book as a whole creates a broad picture of the complexities of life in the USSR under Stalin that awakens its readers' curiosity for this singular period of 20th century history. The book ends with a commendable list of books for further reading.

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