

Review

Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities by Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly

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thinker whose ideas and experience are relevant in the wider arena of humanistic studies, including trauma and Holocaust studies, and, in their own idiosyncratic way, relevant to the concerns of poststructuralist theorists whose ideas emerged concurrently with hers, albeit at a considerable geographical, intellectual, and moral distance. The volume will be of use to a wide array of scholars and others concerned with major intellectual currents of our times.

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Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities. Ed. by MARK BASSIN and CATRIONA KELLY. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012. v+370 pp. £60. ISBN 978-1-107-01117-5.

The major achievement of *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, an edited collection dedicated to the social institutions, attitudes, and practices that shaped collective identity in the former Soviet state, is to complicate our understanding of how national identities are formed. Emerging against a backdrop of studies that have focused on the macro-management of memory in post-Socialist communities, this volume is a welcome reappraisal of the relationship between state and subject, which foregrounds the role of Soviet citizens in shaping, understanding, and articulating the institutions, beliefs, and practices that framed their existence. The volume challenges the facile 'nostalgia' paradigm, which has come to function as a substitute for critical engagement with the ways post-Soviet communities engage with their pasts, providing instead a collection of 'snapshots' of post-Soviet reality, which reveal the various and at times contradictory roles that memory plays in shaping national identity. The result is a disconcertingly complex picture of shifting affinities and embedded identities, which, while defying easy synthesis, doubtless renders more faithfully than many studies of nation-building and historical revisionism the messy reality of national identity in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.

The introductory articles by Ronald Grigor Suny and Nancy Condee provide a theoretical foundation for the methodological thrust of the volume as a whole. Addressing the significance of emotion or 'affect' for national identification, Condee asserts the need to move beyond the limits of constructivist analyses of 'imagined communities', to examine what being 'Soviet' actually meant to the people who identified as such, and to explore the genuine affections and affiliations that emerged around the 'constructed' idea of nationhood. This preoccupation links a number of the most engaging contributions to the volume. Albert Baiburin's article (Part II, Chapter 5, 'Institutions of National Identity'), for example, offers fascinating insights into the ways in which the institution of the Soviet passport and its rituals of presentation informed citizens' sense of national identity and their perceptions of themselves as subjects of the Soviet regime. An article by Andrew Jenks (Part III, Chapter 7, 'Myths of National Identity') explores the implications of the Gagarin cult for ordinary Soviet citizens, arguing that it increased collective self-worth and promoted a sense of interconnectedness between citizens, the

state, and celebrity. The role of the experience of deficit in creating a discursive community bounded by a 'special, almost cryptic knowledge inaccessible to those who did not share various food practices of the time' (p. 284) is the subject of a compelling article by Anna Kushkova (Part v, Chapter 14, 'Languages of National Identity'). In the concluding part of the volume, Alexander Panchenko (Part vi, Chapter 16, 'Creeds of National Identity') explores the resilience of vernacular religious practices in the face of official efforts to undermine religious life in the Soviet state, and the role played by 'religious consumption' in forming the official perception of religious identities and real social networks.

There is much to commend in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*. The collection showcases some strikingly original research, by Russian anthropologists and ethnographers in particular, that will doubtless invigorate the at times stale debate on nation-building and memory politics in post-Socialist Eastern Europe. It is also gratifying to note the presence of regional case studies (Elista, Perm', and Novgorod, for example), the cultural specificities of which are explicitly recognized rather than whitewashed in an attempt to cast the local as microcosm of the national. The decision to structure the volume thematically rather than chronologically is effective inasmuch as it draws out connections between the ideologies and institutions explored in the case studies. This approach nevertheless produces some problems of focus. A number of the articles appear artificially 'stretched' into the post-Soviet era, and their reflections on changes to attitudes and behaviour patterns after 1991 sometimes serve as a coda to more substantial engagement with the Soviet period (Michael Gorham's and Catriona Kelly's articles are exceptions in this regard). The volume also privileges the Russian experience, and, while the editors reasonably justify their selection as an attempt to avoid 'a potted history of what happened to different republics under Soviet power' (p. 9), one occasionally wonders how translatable the volume's arguments are into the more peripheral territories of the former Soviet state (Moldova or the Baltic Republics, for example). In a volume already so broad in historical scope, territorial span, and disciplinary focus, however, this is perhaps an unreasonable criticism. Bringing into dialogue some of the most engaging and innovative new research on the construction of social identity in the Soviet and post-Soviet states, this volume is an impressive achievement and valuable contribution to the field.

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