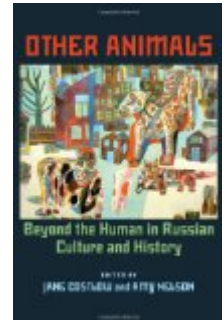


Jane T. Costlow, Amy Nelson, eds.. *Other Animals: Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. 336 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8229-6063-8.



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Historians of Russia are accustomed to concentrating more intently on pig iron than actual pigs, but the editors and contributors of *Other Animals: Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History* wish to remind readers that living animals have exerted a strong influence on Russian culture, and that the economic, cultural, and literary meaning of non-human actors makes them an excellent lens through which to view Russian history. Because the modern age brought with it a change that animals played in human affairs--from partners in everyday life to distant and abstracted sources of food--and because Russia greeted that same modern age at first with reticence and then enthusiasm, the study of animals as cultural artifacts, the editors suggest, can shed light on the contours of historical change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Building on the premise, stated explicitly in Arja Rosenholm's contribution to the book, that "animals have always been central to the process by which men and women form an image of themselves" (p. 180), the book explores Russian identity by ana-

lyzing the Russian conception of the human-animal relationship, and the way that this relationship changed during the twentieth century. More specifically, by analyzing representations of animals in influential works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, law, and science, the volume describes the impact on Russian self-definition made by the Soviet ideological program, as well as the existential confusion brought by the abandonment of that program. Taken as a unit, the volume presents a convincing argument about the importance of the non-human world in human consciousness, illustrating the damage done to the Russian national psyche first by the Soviet effort to impose a rationalistic interpretation of the world, and then by the sudden collapse of that effort, which left behind no coherent ideological replacement.

The volume's twelve articles are grouped chronologically into four sections, and taken together, the four sections build a narrative arc, in which old Russian ideas about animals (and by extension, the human condition) come into con-

flict with newer scientific and rationalistic ideas about proper human behavior and protective attitudes. As such, the book possesses more internal coherence than is sometimes the case for edited volumes, since its chapters describe, in turn, traditional Russian ideas, then the clash of the old with the new during the late tsarist and Soviet period, and then the disorienting post-Soviet aftermath.

Part 1, entitled “Traditional Worlds and Everyday Life,” sets the stage for subsequent developments by providing two examples of the integral role that animals played in traditional Russian life. In her essay “Woman’s Honor, or the Story with a Pig,” Olga Glagoleva demonstrates the symbolic importance of animals in daily life by describing the curious case of a pig used as an especially insulting weapon in a domestic dispute. The place of livestock in old Russian culture is developed further in Mikhail Alekseevsky’s essay “Treating the ‘Other Animals,’” which discusses the way that animals acted as vehicles for evil spirits in Russian village culture, requiring the services of witch doctors and folk veterinary science. Greatly enhancing the picture created by these two essays is the introductory comment by the editors, which sets them in a greater context and includes Fyodor Dostoevsky’s suggestion to love animals for they are sinless, whereas humans “fester the earth” with their appearance in the world (p. 1).

The heart of the book comes in part 2, “Contradictions of Imperial Russia,” which discusses literate and urban reappraisals of rural attitudes toward animals. After Ian Helfant’s analysis of the shifting debate over wolf hunting in the nineteenth century, a shift suggesting that Russians were beginning to question their culture’s demonization of wolves, “set[ting] the stage for other ways of thinking about the relationship between humans and the natural world” (p. 76), come the contributions of the volume’s editors. Jane Costlow argues that late nineteenth-century literary

encounters with bears do not convey apprehension about a dangerous forest creature, but rather serve to unsettle readers, making them “uncomfortable about human progress,” and pushing them to desire “the kind of contact that seems impossible within the context of modernity” (p. 94). Likewise, Amy Nelson’s analysis of animal protection legislation enacted under Nicholas II contends that the laws, although complex and contradictory, “indicated an emerging concern with the moral affront that [domesticated animal] abuse represented to the animals themselves” (p. 111). But for Nelson, the laws also worked on a symbolic, social level. Because the initiators of the law associated animal abuse with the recently emancipated peasantry, their effort to protect animals simultaneously sought to improve the moral caliber of the lower classes and reinforce the paternalistic authority of the aristocracy. Taken together, the three chapters that comprise part 2 suggest that Russian society was moving toward some kind of new understanding of the proper place of animals in human affairs, although the precise outline of that understanding will never be known.

The book then goes on in part 3 to describe the Soviet conception of the role of the animal, and the picture that emerges is as instrumental and exclusionary as one would expect. Nelson notes at the end of her essay the complete lack of animal protection laws during the Soviet period, segueing nicely into part 3. Andy Bruno discusses the creation of the “Soviet” reindeer, invested with economic and propaganda value but no religious or environmental significance. Katherine Lahti demonstrates how lasting the influence of utilitarian Soviet priorities has been by showing that even non-Soviet scholars have followed the Soviet lead by de-emphasizing, if not disregarding completely, Vladimir Mayakovsky’s personal identification with animals. Likewise, Ann Kleimola claims, in reference to animal behavior research, that “the national ethos promoted by Stalin also meant that the country was entering a long period

during which animal training ... was a frivolous pursuit of the bourgeoisie" (p. 175). Arja Rosenholm describes the collapse of the horse and horsemanship as Russian symbols of power and masculinity as a result of Soviet gender policies and industrialization, and a resultant "men in crisis discourse" in late Soviet cultural phenomena. In sum, part 3 of the book, entitled "Real and Symbolic Animals in the Soviet Project," strongly reinforces the impression that the Soviet ideologues consciously and aggressively privileged culture and human potential over animal instinct and natural biological constraints.

It is in the final section of the book that the consequences of failed Soviet policies and attitudes become clear, and when the theme of cultural confusion, as expressed in art and literature, fully emerges. In part 4, entitled "Boundary Work: Late-Soviet and Post-Soviet 'Humanimals'," José Alaniz examines Petr Aleshkovsky's *Life of Ferret* (1994), while Daria Kabanova looks closely at Tatiana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* (2000), and both come to similar conclusions about the disorientation and disillusionment expressed in these two works. For Alaniz, the presence of so many dead animals in *Life of Ferret* points "to the ever-increasing marginalization of nature in general and animals in particular in post-Soviet life," despite the fact that animals are "one of the last sites of dwindling authenticity" in an ever-more consumerist Russia (p. 218). Similarly, for Kabanova, Tolstaya's ominous presentation of the "slynx," a creature neither human nor animal and operating in a dystopian, polluted, post-Soviet setting, provides at best "a quiet place to reflect on what it means to be human and what it means to be Russian," and at worst suggests "a dead end for Russian national history" (p. 233).

This sense of loss and disorientation is made most explicit in the book's last chapter, Gesine Drews-Sylla's treatment of Oleg Kulik's performance art piece *Pavlov's Dog*, wherein the artist presented himself as a human dog, naked, feral,

and the victim of a bizarre scientific experiment. Playing upon Ivan Pavlov's theory of animal behaviorism, Mikhail Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog* (1925), and the failure of the Soviet project, Kulik placed himself in a laboratory environment, performed tests on himself, and published a manifesto that valorized animal instincts, called upon "man to recognize animals as his alter ego," and suggested the pursuit of democracy via the "laws of the jungle" (p. 239). For Kulik, rationalism as a guiding ideology had failed, and his response was to give into the physiological pleasures promised by materialistic culture and lower himself to brutal but simple radical primitivism. Given the state of Russian affairs in 1996, the year of Kulik's project, the impression of an "atmosphere of helplessness and confusion" made upon observers seems all too comprehensible, even if Kulik was operating partially on the level of grotesque satire.

The volume as a whole, then, leads the reader to some very sobering conclusions. Viewing Russian society through the prism of animals allows the authors, and the reader, to see Russian society, and especially the intelligentsia, from an outside perspective—that is, to listen in as Russians talk to themselves about themselves. The focus of *Other Animals* on literature, and especially on the literary manifestations of Russia's post-Soviet predicament, makes the book especially valuable for historians and other scholars who might not stay abreast of Russia's belletristic developments. With discussions of post-Soviet Russia increasingly expected in survey courses on Russian and European history, *Other Animals* provides scholars of Russia with concrete and compelling illustrations of the enormous void left when Soviet authoritarianism collapsed.

Environmental historians who are not experts in Russian studies will find the volume valuable for three reasons, even if many of the chapters deal with environmental studies only in an indirect way. First of all, Russian environmental

history is a field that remains somewhat understudied, especially when compared with the environmental history of the United States, despite Russia's tremendous environmental significance; this book will provide those who teach world environmental history courses with a fuller understanding of Russian views about the non-human world. Second, the book takes a different approach than most works of environmental history do, concentrating on literary and artistic works rather than political and economic conflicts. Finally, *Other Animals* provides a prime example of the importance of environmental issues for what might be called the psychic health of a people. The overall picture that emerges from the volume suggests that the Soviet experience served to distance the Russian people, or at least the Russian intelligentsia, from a connection with nature, resulting in a deep sense of loss and disorientation. The stark quality of the Russian case makes for an especially vivid example of the dangers of technocratic utopianism—a project once conspicuously championed by the Soviet Union and one that still occupies a crucial, although sometimes unarticulated, position in the modern era.

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