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Comics are an ubiquitous part of contemporary popular culture in the United States. Marvel conquered Hollywood with its interconnected universe. Despite not achieving similar critical and commercial success, Marvel’s rival DC is also a cinematic force. Both publishers and innumerable independent studios are producing comic books that tell a diverse and dizzying array of stories that are epic and often challenging and deeply relevant. The industry in the US is a fully mature one built over a century of evolution. Though not a uniquely US form of art, American artists and writers made and continue to make monumental contributions to a genre and art form too often derided as juvenile. The success of comics in the US makes it among the most exported forms of popular culture and sparked efforts to emulate the industry globally.

In Resurrection: Comics in Post-Soviet Russia, Jose Alaniz traces the efforts of artists, writers, editors, store owners, and enthusiasts to create a Russian comics industry and community. His narrative proceeds chronologically, beginning with the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and proceeding up to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Relying on his own time in the country and extensive interviews of people involved in every step from the creation to the publication and sale to consumption of comics, Alaniz crafts an interesting story about how and why certain types of art and stories break through to broad audiences.

For nearly the entire Cold War, there was no domestic comics industry in the USSR. Belief that the genre was inherently Western and juvenile limited official support and led artists and writers to turn to other art forms more likely to find an audience. The first Soviet comic studio, KOM, would only form in 1988 and would barely outlive its country, folding in 1993 (p. 1). Alaniz’s narrative picks up in this period, and he details the difficulties in creating a domestic industry in the face of Russia’s economic struggles in the 1990s and the inability to penetrate a market suddenly flush with imports from the West. Mexican telenovelas, Stephen King novels, and established comics...
brands took much of the available consumer attention and (limited) discretionary income.

Alaniz shows that the result of this initial failure to launch was that comics remained very much a niche interest into the early 2000s, with conventions such as KomMissia playing a defining role in shaping perception and consumption of comics in the nation. The rise of ComicCon as a transmedia event along with Marvel’s rise in Hollywood helped bring new interest in the genre and helped drive fresh investment to creating a domestic equivalent to the American studios. Alaniz then traces the rise of Bubble, which comes closest to emulating the success of Marvel or DC, and the upswing of a vibrant indie comic scene throughout the country. Here, he succeeds in his goal to “cast a wide net” and provide “as varied and rich a portrait as possible” of contemporary comics in Russia (p. 188).

Resurrection is at its best when examining the types of stories popular in Russian comics. Much like their American equivalents, Russian books often reflect the fears and aspirations of everyday citizens. An early post-Soviet story, “Through Blood and Suffering” (1992), depicts a cyberpunk hellscape where the youth are gang members or vampires who prey upon their elders. Alaniz notes that the setting “all too readily maps onto the post-Soviet chaos of the 1990s,” with a failed government, lack of economic opportunity, and surging criminal organizations (p. 10). Similarly, part of Bubble’s success stemmed from the “bland pseudo-religious nationalism” that pervaded its early series in the 2010s (p. 76). Among its major characters are a Georgian War veteran with magic tattoos and a demon helper who purges evil from Russia’s streets, and a time-traveling Orthodox believer who revisits important events in Russian history. Alaniz deftly shows how these stories, and Bubble’s other lines, fit into an effort to reconstruct Russian masculinity in the wake of decades of geopolitical and military failure. The increased “militarism, homophobia, and misogyny” in both the comics and Russian films like the ultranationalist Brat (Brother, 1997) and Brat-2 (Brother 2, 2000) dovetailed with Putin’s efforts to remake Russian self-image (p. 133).

Countervailing themes are also explored in Resurrection. In particular, Alaniz highlights the work of Lena Uzhinova, whose work examines a wide variety of topics generally seen as taboo. In I Am an Elephant (2017), she looked at the life of the disabled in Russia, a population Alaniz notes Russian society “continues to infantilize” (p. 173). In My Sex, Uzhinova uses a coming-of-age story to highlight “banal promiscuity and rape culture” pervasive in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia (p. 199). However, her books lack the audience of mainstream Russian publishers and were “very negatively received” by the average Russian comic book consumer (p. 201).

Further exploring the reasons for Bubble’s mainstream success and the visceral, negative reaction to critical works like Uzhinova’s would strengthen Alaniz’s contention that comics matter in modern Russian society. Alaniz does note that Bubble’s founder, Artyom Gabrelyanov, is the son of Aram Gabrelyanov, a Russian media mogul, and references that Bubble’s start-up fund was vastly richer than other attempts (p. 71). However, ties between Artyom’s and Aram’s media empires and their relationship with the Russian state are largely unexplored. Given Alaniz’s description of Bubble’s early slate of comics neatly buttressing Putin’s project to remake Russian national identity, more examination of personal relationships would be interesting. Similarly, tying independent comics, such as those of Uzhinova, more directly to other dissent movements in Russia would further highlight a role that comics could play in Russian society.

While Resurrection is a follow-up to Alaniz’s Komiks: Comic Art in Russia (2009), it is not necessary to have read Komiks to understand and enjoy the narrative in Resurrection. Alaniz does an excellent job of providing context to the reader and
often provides pages and panels from comics under discussion as useful and interesting visual reinforcement. The book is an excellent one for those interested in contemporary Russia, the history of comic books and their place in society, or media studies. It provides an intimate look into a growing community and is a unique contribution to the field.

Alaniz's work is a love letter to comics broadly and the Russian form of the art specifically. His deep regard for his subjects shines throughout the book. The idea that comics matter underpins everything in *Resurrection*. It is a narrative of how an industry went from a “traumatizing age” in the 1990s to come into its own as a “national comics industry and culture” (pp. 15, xii). While the industry remains a small one in Russia and the book shows a “chasm … between mainstream and geek culture” (p. 211), Alaniz’s core contention that the industry is one worthy of attention is correct. Hopefully the third volume he alludes to in his preface will be a triumphant portrait of a vibrant and varied industry capable of challenging contemporary norms in Russia.

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