

# H-Net Reviews

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**Nick Holdsworth.** *Moscow, The Beautiful and the Damned: Life in Russia in Transition.* London: Andre Deutsch, 2000. xxiv + 262 pp. Â£9.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-233-99679-0.



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I approached this book with some trepidation. A journalistic account of the transition seen from Moscow is arguably the last thing that we need given the widely held view that Moscow is not Russia. But although Holdsworth's book does not rise to the heights attained by some western correspondents writing about late Soviet society it is a valuable and revealing discussion of Russia at the end of a decade of transition. And it succeeds because, paradoxically, Holdsworth argues that if we care to look closely enough Moscow is, to some extent, Russia: it may concentrate more than half the mobile phones in the country but it also concentrates many of the worst aspects of the transition too. This is a view with which I have some sympathy. As any good anthropologist knows a well structured study of a microcosm can be as revealing as a frenetic tour around the larger unit.

In this sense Moscow is like any capital city. Look at its central parts, see it only a certain times of the day and you see only some of its faces. Take the wrong turn, or in Holdsworth's case travel the wrong metro lines, do so early in the morning when those who service the city are beginning to travel, happen upon the areas that they have left, visit the rotting suburban industrial plants and many new faces of the city appear. Most visitors do not

do this – except by accident. And certainly, most western advisors do not do this. What Joseph Stiglitz has written of IMF missions in general no doubt also applies to Russia, 'these economists frequently lack extensive experience in the country; they are more likely to have first-hand knowledge of its five-star hotels than of the villages that dot its countryside ...' or we should add the less welcoming parts of its capital city. Of course, in the case of Moscow they have their Potemkin villages in the form of 'before' and 'after' transitions to which they are driven by their charming hosts but this is hardly getting to grips with the texture of everyday life – something which even visiting academic specialists can find hard to do.

As Russia shifts from the more structured and regulated inequality of the old regime to the more 'quasi-market' driven inequality of today the restructuring of social and spatial differentiation is still taking place. But even when Russia's lumpen bourgeoisie lives alongside its lumpen underclass the observant do not necessarily need to penetrate the strengthened apartment doors to see the evidence of change. A colleague was recently shown the window test by a native Muscovite. Take any block of flats and then look for evidence of double glazing, marking out the social geography of the beneficiaries of change by floor. Judge the social character of the block

by the amount of double glazing and then the overall proportion of the beneficiaries of social change by comparing a representative sample of blocks.

It is things like that Holdsworth, who made his working visit to Russia in 1991 and who has lived there since 1995, sees. He is a free lance journalist focusing on education. This interest gives him his angle. After visiting reunion of the class of 1979 at School no. 279 in Prospekt mira (and therefore one of the better Soviet era schools) he was prompted to try to explore the divergent paths of some of those he met. Now turning forty, these contacts tell him how they grew up under the Soviet regime and experienced the transition and by combining these accounts with those of others he has met he explores the different faces of the transition in Moscow.

The resulting picture is structured around 1991, 1993 and 1998 and there is some repetition in the accounts of his respondents, especially in respect of 1991. But although what he writes is short on hard data he does succeed in illuminating many of the elements submerged in accounts informed by what should more properly be called the 'Washington-European Union-Moscow' consensus on the transition. In particular, he well brings out the impact of 1998 on many ordinary Russians – something which the transition boosters have glossed over on the basis of the mistaken view that that a crash cannot really hurt in a society which is so near the bottom anyway.

Holdsworth's interviews with his reunion class required some finesse because the transition has created something of a schizophrenic attitude in the minds of many Russians. At one point he recalls the sharp hostility that some Russians displayed in the early 1990s to western visitors photographing social deprivation. Today this is less likely to happen as people's sense of dignity has been stripped away. Now the capacity to take almost voyeuristic pictures of poverty is limited only by the sensitivity of the photographer. Instead people prefer not to think about their situation and try to move the conversation on to other things - a natural enough human reaction but one that is badly misunderstood if it is patronisingly seen simply as resilience in the face of adversity.

Here there is much of interest in Holdsworth's interviews. He quotes Yelena Bonner's comments in the 1991 August coup, 'it is our country and we will not give it up to a group of bandits. Everything this coup committee has issued is written for cattle. Today all Muscovites must show their dignity and not sell themselves

for a piece of sausage'. (p. 10) This is a view unwittingly echoed nearly a decade on by two of his 'losers', 'no stability, no economic security is worth going back to what we had before. Nothing material could compensate for what we have today'. It is therefore easy from comments like this for transitologists to draw the self-satisfied conclusion that, however great the problems, people recognise that it is better to be 'starving and partially free' than 'well fed and unfree' and therefore we should not worry too much. Moreover it is clear that if, in the short run, the choice is between Putin and Zyuganov then for many Russians this is more akin to choosing between 'starving and being partially free' and 'starving and unfree' since there is no hope that this type of opposition can offer a real alternative way to prosperity.

But this is not enough and the western theorists and advisers who take comfort from such expressions reflect enormous condescension when they implicitly argue that people should take a realistic view of their poverty as the necessary price to be paid for their delivery from political unfreedom. This cynical view, which I find to be disturbingly commonly expressed by economists, was not what motivated people to change the Soviet system. The aspiration they had then for the good life, both materially and spiritually, remains a valid one because it is one that motivates us all and it ill becomes the well heeled from the west to diminish the crushing burden that the transition has created for ordinary Russians. Looking back on 1991, one of Holdsworth's subjects tells him that 'it was a time of illusions and expectations'. That the hopes of that time have been allowed to become 'illusions' and that the expectations have not been realised is not a testament to a new realism but a measure of the failure of the transition.

Holdsworth does offer some data on the scale of poverty and inequality. Ordinary Russians have seen the value of their incomes collapse, the value of their personal savings destroyed and the value of social benefits reduced to a pittance while at the top they had to watch the few seize control of state assets and manipulate the system to their own advantage. He quotes data on income distribution in 1997 suggesting that 10% of the population had a monthly income of more than \$400, 20% between \$300-400 and 60% between \$50 and \$300. Savings according to 1996 data were even more concentrated with half held by the top 2% of the population, 72% by the top 5% and 97% by the top 30%. The 1998 crash worsened the situation of most ordinary Russians pulling down the level of real incomes and destroying savings. Those in the dollar economy, provided any

banks in which they held some money did not go under, did best though Holdsworth reminds us of the February 1999 incident when a retired general held up Sberbank to try to get his \$20,000 back. But most Russians saw the crisis simply in terms of a further slide in the value of their wages or unemployment. For Moscow he quotes data suggesting that in the immediate aftermath of the crisis one quarter were laid off, one half of salaries cut, one third did not get paid and one quarter lost their savings. Since several of these things happened to the same people individuals could find themselves crushed from a number of directions at once.

Holdsworth is sensitive to the more obvious aspects of this. Here the general reader will find evidence of the demographic crisis. On the one hand we see the pressurised, and possibly sexually poorly performing new Russian businessmen, despite their acquisition of 'younger women with longer legs, firmer breasts and smaller brains' (p. 155) as well as new businesswomen, some of whom seem to demonstrate marginally greater loyalty to their earlier partners. But on the other there is the bottom of society and the binge drinking that led to Russians consuming 4 billion litres of vodka, 3 million litres of beer and 1 billion litres of wine in 1998 with the corresponding catastrophic relationship to male life expectancy. But the real value of Holdsworth accounts lies more in the telling phrases and points that emerge in his interviews and comments. Discussing the apparent and growing public indifference to the indignity of death on the streets, for example, he offers the powerful aside that 'public indifference always masks private grief'. (p. 75)

Here, it seems to me he gets at a central aspect of the transition. The insensitivity to this contrast between the public persona and the inner world is perhaps something which later generations will marvel at in the same that today we are astonished at insensitivity of many contemporary observers, politicians and commentators to the stresses and strains of the lives of those under pressure in the past in Britain and America. For the failure of the transition is not to be measured simply in terms of the contrast between the wealth of the few and the plight of the many but also in the way that it has moulded and conditioned and restricted the inner life of the spirit - in the different forms of 'private grief' masked by apparent 'public indifference'. Holdsworth brings this out well. Even at the top it finds expression in the feeling of loss of those who have adapted to the transition but in the process experienced a degree of 'deskilling' as they have shifted from say, research in medicine, to selling pharmaceutical products. But it is no less there to be teased out in

terms of the poverty of expectations of the less successful whose hopes were raised by 1991 only to be dashed by subsequent events.

Books like Holdsworth's work if they stimulate a degree of engagement with the reader. Like many journalists he is fascinated by the issues like the 'mafia' and no doubt his publisher encouraged this interest to help sell the book. But I appreciated his level headed account which points out that there are more likely to be around 350 'mafia' groups in Russia with a dozen or so major ones compared to the several thousands that are often spoken about. Similarly he makes it clear that most people and even many businesses have little contact with the most criminal parts. The concept of the mafia is elastic. The need for a protective krysha (roof) often revolves as much around coping with state collapse through the use of connections and payments to officials to ease one's way, or payments to state forces - nominally moonlighting - but now effectively semi-privatised.

On the other hand I was rather less persuaded by his interpretation of some of his other interviews. The book draws to a close, for example, with his account of the ups and downs in the recent life of Vladimir Kiriakin, the son of Soviet general, himself a former Airforce Colonel who played a key role in the Minuteman ICBM system, and who is now seeking to emigrate to Prague to set up in a small hotel. Kiriakin reveals that 'deep inside I was always a dissident'. There is, of course, a sense in which 'deep inside' we are all dissidents in the society in which we live and it is highly convenient to reveal this inner dissent if the society that we are helping to run collapses. Russia today is full of such changelings who stood by while real dissidents were persecuted, who perhaps even persecuted them themselves or, as in Kiriakin's case, literally had their finger on the nuclear button. Here Holdsworth could have shown a bit more scepticism to his sources. But even in his interview with Kiriakin what he records prompted me to think through some of my views on Soviet ideology.

And this is the test of the value of a book like *Moscow The Beautiful and the Damned*. It is not only the selective views of top down transitology that have squeezed out informed accounts of the underside of the transition. Journalists have little interest in reporting these today if, as one BBC journalist told me, they encounter editors who do not want more 'grey and depressing stories' from Russia. Holdsworth has lifted this curtain a little and if he helps to fill out the real character of the transition his book will have served a useful purpose. Certainly it is a

good one to read before the next trip to Moscow.

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