

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Kees Boterbloem, ed., *Life in Stalin's Soviet Union* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2019)

Erica L. Fraser

Volume 90, automne 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094804ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0032>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fraser, E. (2022). Compte rendu de [Kees Boterbloem, ed., *Life in Stalin's Soviet Union* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 90, 333–335. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0032>

and maybe in a standalone conclusion. But none of this takes away from the contributions of this book that expertly links the history of concerns about timber scarcity with English dreams about the value of the Atlantic empire during the 17th century. Readers interested in both the Atlantic World, ideas of scarcity and cornucopianism, ecological imperialism, and forests in the English Atlantic will find this book very useful.

JIM CLIFFORD

University of Saskatchewan

Kees Boterbloem, ed., *Life in Stalin's Soviet Union* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2019)

SINCE AT LEAST the mid-1990s, historians have explored everyday life for people in the past, moving beyond political, social, and economic structures to ask questions about people's microhistorical patterns in work, consumption, family life, education, religion, and more that might help us understand these societies more fully. It has become particularly important work for historians of authoritarian regimes as we seek to complicate the top-down histories that used to dominate the field. Kees Boterbloem's new collection on daily life under the rule of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union (from about 1929 to 1953) brings together an all-star group of established historians in a comprehensive twelve essay volume. Each essay draws on the author's previous work, usually from the late 1990s or early 2000s, to provide a snapshot of a theme – including the peasantry, education, food, disability, and city planning. While the contributors' research, records, and the scope of coverage are impressive, and a volume focused on short, easily digestible essays is most welcome, this collection has some limitations that could prevent

it from fully satisfying either a general interest or an academic audience.

After an introduction to the volume as a whole, Boterbloem opens the collection with his own essay on peasant life during the state's violent drive to collectivize agriculture in the early 1930s. The eleven remaining essays are not grouped by theme or time period but explore their own short, contained topics. Heather DeHaan discusses urban architecture, housing, sanitation, and public health. David Shearer focuses on crime and "social dislocation" (71), showing how the bureaucracy created criminals from people just trying to live their lives (buying and selling illegal goods, for example). Golfo Alexopoulos' ensuing chapter pairs well with Shearer's in examining the setting of the Gulag prison camps. It is particularly well written and should serve as an accessible primer on the goals and experiences of the Gulag, especially for those unfamiliar with this history. Kenneth Slepian's contribution is one of the few to centre on the years of World War II instead of the 1930s. It too provides a strong synopsis for new readers, this time of Red Army soldiers' experiences during such a brutal war. Frances Bernstein's important chapter discusses disability, again providing a strong introduction to the topic for new readers and covering a range of topics including medicine, workplace accidents, war wounds, and mental illness. Larry Holmes writes on education and explains his source base of diaries and interviews particularly well; he uses students' voices to great effect. James Heinzen contributes an essay on ordinary people's interactions with the workers of the vast Soviet bureaucracy, including privacy, corruption, and endless paperwork. Gregory Freeze ends the collection with his essay on religion, a topic often shortchanged due to the erroneous assumption by historians that worship did

not survive the anti-religion campaigns of the 1920s.

Three chapters stand out: Amy Randall provides a comprehensive reflection on gender and sexuality, with an opening line sure to draw in student readers in particular: "Let us imagine a few social types in imperial Russia – a married Russian peasant woman, a gay soldier, and a Muslim urban Uzbek woman – and how their lives might have been transformed by the Russian Revolution." (139) Randall is also the only contributor to meaningfully engage with people outside the Slavic centre of the country, particularly Central Asian women. Karen Petrone's imaginative chapter on festivals draws on her 2000 book on the topic but packages it in a new way by zeroing in on 1937. She follows a group of university students through that year, noting when, why, and how they would have celebrated certain holidays and events, such as the famed poet Alexander Pushkin's centennial, as the Terror descended on the country. Elena Osokina, well known for her rigorous economic and social history research, digs through mountains of archival data to show the links between urban food consumption patterns, industrialization, rationing, and famine.

Altogether, the essays should prove useful to two main audiences: advanced undergraduate and graduate students, who will appreciate the accessible writing; and scholars outside Soviet history, who require a succinct summation of general research on Stalinism in the past twenty years. Canadian labour historians, for example, will find that this compact volume distills key themes for those teaching comparative labour classes or who are otherwise interested in how ordinary people lived their lives even as the promised workers' revolution went awry. Boterbloem's stated audience includes general readers, but the content and terminology are rather advanced.

However, several puzzling choices made in its aim, scope, and presentation limit the collection's usefulness. First, Boterbloem states in the introduction that the essays will not reflect scholarship on life in non-Slavic regions of the USSR, and they will not engage in "jargon." (10) Neither choice is well defended. "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians formed the great majority of the Soviet population under Stalin," he writes, "so their story is in some ways the story of the Soviet Union as a whole." (5) While the Slavic centre has long dominated Soviet history, correctives are now well established by excellent historians of Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Baltic republics, and Siberia. Perpetuating the myth of an all-Slavic USSR as recently as 2019 not only silences the Stalin-era suffering of borderlands populations but also erases the intersectionality of the labour movements that helped bring the revolution about in the first place. (Again, Randall's material on Muslim women provides an important exception).

Further, while accessible writing is welcome, Boterbloem's aversion to "jargon" prevents the contributors from engaging with the theoretical aspects of the history of everyday life, such as *Alltagsgeschichte*, microhistory, or *mentalités*. Without a more thorough consideration of this historiography, the collection lacks clear stakes. As Timothy Johnston noted in his 2011 book, *Being Soviet: Identity, Rumour, and Everyday Life under Stalin, 1939–1953*, the topic of life under Stalin has been left largely to description at the expense of theory (Johnston, xx), a frustrating feature of this collection as well. Without a conclusion, one is not sure what we have learned from this book as a whole: Is life under Stalin the story of everyday resistance, complacency, or something else? And of what sources? With few authors besides Holmes openly addressing or theorizing their source base,

we have no discussion of how the voices of the everyday are captured and preserved, such as through diary-writing, or how daily life sources under Stalin were so often mediated by the state and produced amid a culture of fear.

Finally, the authors appear to have been discouraged from including more than a handful of references – again, perhaps to appeal to general audiences. It is possible to explain archival and historiographical references to readers without omitting them almost entirely; in this age of rampant disinformation, I should think it crucial to show general readers in particular how historians do their work. Moreover, the few-footnotes rule was applied inconsistently: Some chapters include full references, but most

(by authors who I know have done detailed research on these topics) have few to none. This discrepancy reflects poorly on the authors, who presumably only followed instructions in minimizing their footnotes.

Despite these quibbles, *Life in Stalin's Soviet Union* is a very good collection that spotlights the foundational research historians of this topic have done over the past twenty years. It should help emerging scholars identify new questions, and students and non-specialist historians will come away from it with a solid grounding in how workers and other ordinary citizens navigated life and negotiated politicized boundaries during Stalin's tumultuous decades in power.

ERICA L. FRASER

Carleton University