

Motherland by Simon Roberts

Review by Ian Mitchell

Simon Roberts decided he would take a year off from a life of frantic photojournalism to slowly travel around Russia with his wife; taking pictures of people and places, with the idea of "getting under the skin" of the country. The resulting book, *Motherland*, contains nearly a hundred photographs, and shows parts of Russia which few visiting photographers have reached.



The book also contains a short introduction, written by an Oxford Russian expert, Rosamund Bartlett, who attempts to explain the title. The problem is that the pictures and the introduction do not correspond. Ms Bartlett's essay is old hat, full of tired clichés like: "The whole edifice of the USSR proved to be one gigantic Potemkin village." Well, bless my soul! In support of such banalities, she quotes every student's reading list, from Turgenev and Mussorgsky, to Berdyaev and Solzhenitsyn. This type of introduction does a great disservice to Mr. Roberts' excellent collection of photographs.

Roberts is interested in the New Russia, rather than the old one, and avoids the airless, condescending world of the Introduction. There is so much to say about this fascinating, dynamic, problematical country, especially about the evolving relationship between its 21st century's global world-view and the more provincial world-view.

Every photographer could have made a different selection of images, but few will be able to travel quite as extensively as Mr. Roberts did. I found his pictures of Sakhalin and the Far East particularly interesting. Most extraordinary of all is his picture of the open-cast diamond mine

at Mirny. (As is his description of how he managed to photograph in this still closed city.) It makes the Big Hole at Kimberly in South Africa look like a large well.

Roberts focuses on the sense of optimism which he detects in Russia today. He says in his introductory note, "Motherland is meant as a visual statement about contemporary Russia, fifteen years after the fall of the Soviet Union. I wanted to counter some of the photographic representations of Russia that focus on collapse and deterioration – with their emphasis on the consequences of Russia's turbulent past as opposed to the possibilities of its future – without sidestepping the realities of Russian daily life. As my year there progressed, I came to understand that Russians see beauty where an outsider might only see decaying apartment blocks or featureless landscapes. And while acknowledging their country's deficiencies, Russians nevertheless believe their native land to be a remarkable and exceptional place. They convey an optimism about it that I soon came to share – an optimism borne of more than just patriotism."

The interesting thing is that much of the most negative commentary about Russia

comes from patronizing, unreconstructed ex-Cold War think-tankers who want Russia to stay in its box as the perennial bad boy of international diplomacy. For them, an up-beat, semi-honest, future-orientated Russia, which has traded theories about Chekhov and Diaghilev for kottedgi and banking IPOs, means the end of their world of professional pessimism. Their jobs depend on a jaundiced view. I believe that this is why there is so much negative comment on Russia today in the mainstream Western media. Mr. Roberts may or may not have gotten under the skin of this country, but his approach will certainly get up the noses of many outside it.

If I have a complaint about this book, it is that I would have liked even more information than is printed in the short paragraphs accompanying the pictures. I also wonder how many pictures Mr. Roberts took which are not printed here? I am sure thousands. Could he not produce them, with the relevant expanded commentary, as a sort of retrospective blog? That way the sort of Russians he took pictures of might be able to see themselves up in lights, so to speak, or pixels at least. I'm sure they'd appreciate that. ■



Motherland is published by Chris Boot at £25. For more information go to: www.motherlandbook.com Order your copy on Amazon or direct from Simon: mail@simoncroberts.com