

Hardships and pleasures during the Soviet era. Life stories

nevertheless the female way of life has not been made any easier: its changes follow the 'traditional model of division between the male and the female'." The quote within the quotation is from Pierre Bourdieu. A footnote inserted after the word "post-socialism" reads: "The female way of life is being relieved of the socialist obligations to be a man-nish girl." (p. 170)

The remaining three sections are devoted, respectively, to "Competing Images of History", "Victims and Perpetrators", and "Everyday Life in Socialism". Space does not permit a separate presentation of the different items. Suffice it to say that these studies, and the volume as a whole, give highly readable and empathic accounts of the hard life of people in the eastern half of Europe under Communism as well as during the transition period and in the post-socialist societies. Last but not least, the contributions by the young scholars from the region bear witness to the fact that – at least when it comes to history and social sciences – one can speak of one coherent European intellectual space.

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- 1 Lennart Samuelson, "The history of Soviet incorporations" (Review of Elena Zubkova, *Pribaltika i Kreml, 1940–1943*, 2008), *Baltic Worlds*, vol. 1:1.
- 2 Samuelson, op. cit.

Estonian Life Stories
Edited and translated
by Tiina Kirss
Compiled by Rutt
Hinrikus

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MAIJA RUNCIS
Associate professor,
history, Södertörn Uni-
versity. Runcis's research
has focused primarily on
the Swedish welfare state
and Swedish social poli-
cies from the perspective
of minorities (e.g., the
sterilization of devi-
ants, forced removal of
children from the home,
educational programs for
immigrants). At present,
she is a member of the
research project "The
Family and the Powerful
State: On Family Politics
in an East European Per-
spective", in the context
of which she is writing on
family politics in Soviet
Latvia.

AT PRESENT, BOTH Estonians and Russians use history as a weapon, so, sad to say, I am suspicious of a history book published on commission by the government", a Russian student said in connection with the Estonian and Latvian governments' publication of a Russian-language history book in 2005; the year that Russia celebrated its 60-year commemoration of its victory over Nazi Germany.

The fact that history is still being used as a political weapon in the former Soviet Republics is exactly what has led the citizens of these countries to lose faith in official history-writing. During the entire Soviet era, history writing had more to do with ideology than with science. It is primarily against this background that the governments in the Baltic States have intervened to structurize history: the "true" history was finally to be told. For the purpose of showing "communism's crimes against humanity" the government archives began to publish selections of formerly classified documents from the communist party's and KGB's archives. The archives were often *gefundenes Fressen* for those who had a vested political interest in accusing individual authority figures and political opponents of participating in communism's "crimes against humanity". Partly in order to deal with this issue, historians' commissions were set up in the three Baltic States and given the task of investigating these crimes.

ANOTHER WAY OF DEALING with the citizens' deep-rooted distrust of public history-writing has been to let people relate their own history. After the fall of communism, the collection and preservation of biographies from the Soviet era have served to compensate for the deficiencies of public history-writing. Events that it had been forbidden to talk about could now be recorded for posterity. In Estonia, the first campaign was started as early as 1988, and produced more than 2000 life stories. This campaign has been followed by several others. The stories are kept in the collections of the Estonian Literary Museum.

The book under review is part of the Estonian collection of life stories that is published by the Literary Museum in Tartu. The life stories are selected from the series "One Hundred Lives of the Century". They are 25 in number and are written by people with very different lives, aged 35 to 92. The stories have footnotes that refer to a "Glossary" that provides broad background information to the concepts and events mentioned in the stories, e.g. the "Cultural Autonomy Law for Ethnic Minorities", "Deportations" or "Destruction battalions". The glossary contextualizes the stories, whose events are thus anchored in historical facts.

The oldest storyteller is a woman and teacher, Hilja Lill, born in 1905. Her story covers several decades, and includes many dramatic events and private sorrows. Following her life story is like reading an exciting novel. It starts with a happy childhood – a childhood that comes to an abrupt end when both of her parents are murdered by unknown persons when she is 11 years of age – and continues with passionate love and

sudden, violent death, when her spouse is shot dead by the Red Army in July 1941. But the story also contains a few "confessions", for example, that it was "easier to breathe" under Nazi-German occupation than under Soviet rule. The Red Army's entry into Tallinn is described as a pure slaughter of humans and animals, the destruction of houses and farms – indeed, pretty much everything that got in the army's way.

IN THE SPRING OF 1945, Hilja Lill was apprehended and interrogated by the NKVD (the Soviet Secret Police). She was accused of having hidden Estonian resistance fighters. Her story, printed in the book, includes the full names of the men who worked at the NKVD's headquarters in Viljandi (where Hilja was apprehended). She was arrested and taken to the infamous prison Patarei, where she was again interrogated. Her story also provides the full names of her fellow prisoners.

Given the ways in which history, archives and documents have been used for bringing accusations against individuals, one might question the wisdom of publishing full names, without any attempt to provide protective secrecy. Hilja was sentenced to 10 years of penal servitude in Siberia on anti-Soviet conspiracy charges. Her life story ends, more or less, with her release and return to Estonia in 1957. It is as if, once everyday life took over, there is nothing else to tell, even though Hilja lived for another 40 years after her release. She died on July 4, 1997.

ELMAR-RAIMUND RUBEN'S LIFE story is also full of wartime drama. As a trained service man, Elmar-Raimund was recruited into the Red Army, where he remained for the entire war. He gives detailed accounts of each battle and troop movement and describes his own "heroic deeds" with a certain pride and joy. The same joy can be sensed in the story's continuation after the war. Elmar-Raimund was demoted because of "nationalism", but remained, nonetheless, in military service for another 14 years. I cannot help wondering whether the mention of this demotion, included in a life story told in 1996, was meant to legitimize his long Red Army service. In spite of his heroism during the war and in the army, he was denied a military career because his superiors had classed him as an Estonian and "nationalist"

Continued. Life stories

rather than as a Soviet citizen. One must keep in mind that the life stories are recounted in an entirely different context than the ones in which the events took place, which makes the source-critical reader constantly suspect the intention underlying the story. Life stories may be exciting reading, but they must not be interpreted as giving the “truth” as, for instance, a historian would define it. An analysis of these stories does, however, allow us to examine the positions from which the narrative is created and the positions to which it gives rise.

In the introduction to the book, Tiina Kirss emphasizes the problematic relation between history and life stories: “Undoubtedly a life story is a narrative about the past, but history is not the sum of life stories, of remembered ‘great lives’.” The purpose of publishing the book’s twenty-five life stories is to reflect the history that has previously not been told, namely the years of occupation 1940–1941, then 1941–1944 under Nazism and 1944–1991 under Communist rule. The purpose is not to use the narratives as complements to “scientific” history, but rather as texts and memories of particular historical events. In any case, this is not the kind of book one reads from beginning to end – one can safely skip those life-stories that are not of interest to one’s own research objectives, while others may be very rewarding. Personally, I have benefited greatly from taking part in the women’s life stories about everyday hardships and pleasures during the Soviet era.

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Michail Kasianov
Bez Putina:
Politicheskiye dialogi s
Yevgenyem
Kiselyovym

[Without Putin: Political
Dialogues with Yevgeny
Kiselyov] Moscow:
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320 pages

The legacy of shock therapy. Russian liberalism in the political wilderness

MICHAEL KASIANOV WAS Vladimir Putin’s first prime minister, serving between 2000 and 2004. In Russia, he was generally viewed as a compromise head of government, appointed by the former president Boris Yeltsin’s family to supervise the new leader, Vladimir Putin. According to this popular belief, Kasianov’s main mission was to guarantee the interests of the oligarchic groups that emerged during Yeltsin’s reign. In 2004, when Putin became a powerful political leader, Kasianov and his government were finally dismissed. Putin appointed his own men to the most important positions in the Russian administration. Shortly thereafter, to the surprise of many, Kasianov placed himself in opposition to Putin, making an abortive attempt to challenge Putin’s presidential candidate Dmitry Medvedev during the 2008 presidential elections. In fact, he never even gained permission to register as a presidential candidate.

Despite the author’s former high-ranking position, the book would probably have been of limited interests if it had only consisted of conventional memoirs. Kasianov represents the rather typical Russian bureaucrat, mundane and uninspiring – although he has always given the impression of being a cautious and skilful courtier and politician, qualities of use to him in a successful career. Kasianov has never emerged as a controversial or passionate oppositional politician who appealed to the broad masses. What makes this book special is that it is written in the form of interviews with Yevgeny Kiselyov. Kiselyov was a leading Russian political journalist during the Yeltsin era, the “face” of the Russian TV channel NTV that was, in turn, controlled by one of the oligarchs, Vladimir Gusinsky. However, Kiselyov is much more than a famous journalist. His influence on the political processes of the 1990s and, later, his uncompromising critique of Putin have made him into one of the symbols of Russian liberalism. Not surprisingly, after Putin’s succession as president, Kiselyov lost his job and disappeared from Russian TV. He currently works as an anchor for several popular political programs on Ukrainian TV.

KASIANOV’S MEMORIES of the 1990s constitute the most informative part of the book. The reader becomes familiar with aspects of this dramatic period in Russian political history that were previously unknown. Kasianov informs us, for the first time, of how German chancellor Helmut Kohl and French president Jacques Chirac helped Yeltsin survive politically when, just before the 1996 presidential elections, he needed money to pay wages and pensions in his economically ruined country. At this point, Yeltsin’s rating was as low as 2 percent. The loans to Yeltsin’s government, which came to about 5 billion dollars, were a decisive factor in Yeltsin’s electoral victory. Kasianov, then deputy finance minister, was involved in negotiating these loans and was, subsequently, greatly favored by Yeltsin.

Kasianov also gives us a good deal of information about the Russian financial crisis and default of 1998

that ended Yeltsin’s political career. According to Kasianov, the announcement of a default was, in fact, unnecessary. The government could have either paid or restructured its debts. The default was a deliberate political decision, made by a small number of high-positioned Russian government officials. Who were these persons and why did they reach this decision? These questions are never explicitly answered.

KASIANOV IS RESERVED in discussing his time as prime minister under president Putin. Here, Kiselyov’s text and questions are far more interesting and provocative. Kiselyov’s background in the Russian security services in the 1980s (he then taught Persian at the KGB’s higher school) has given him considerable insights into how the Russian political kitchen has functioned after 2000, during Putin’s reign. He thus poses questions based on a multitude of rumors, speculations, and different versions of important political events. Because Russian politics depend more heavily on the activities of influential individuals at the center of power than on the functions of independent institutions, this information is of considerable value. Kasianov definitely rejects the rumor that he owed his appointment as Putin’s prime minister to the influence of the Yeltsin family. Nevertheless, Kasianov’s own version, that his advancement was entirely due to his professional qualities, is not entirely convincing. The book includes pictures taken at Kasianov’s private parties, pictures which show, among the guests, several Yeltsin oligarchs – such as Roman Abramovich, Alexander Mamut – and, not least, Yeltsin’s daughter Tatyana Yumasheva.

Kasianov’s description of how Putin concentrated power into his own hands in the early 2000s is quite credible, but does not add much that is new to the picture. The exception is his account of the events surrounding the 2003 Yukos affair. Kasianov contends that some months before the arrest of the Yukos owner Michail Khodorkovsky, the latter, with the support of leading oligarchs, had presented Putin with a plan meant to legalize the outcome of the Russian privatization of the 1990s. This was to be institutionalized in the form of a special law. In exchange, the most prominent oligarchs were to make one-time payments into a special state-owned fund to finance public expenditures on