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Molotov's Magic Lantern: A Journey in Russian History

Rachel Polonsky

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Rachel Polonsky : Molotov's Magic Lantern: A Journey in Russian History before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Molotov's Magic Lantern: A Journey in Russian History:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Romanov LaneBy Hamilton Beck Rachel Polonsky had the good fortune to arrive in Russia at the right time and place. The place was an apartment in Romanov Lane in central Moscow, not far from the Kremlin, and the time was during the first years of this century – or to be more precise,

before the apartment above hers was sold and underwent a complete remodeling that left nothing behind from its one-time owner, Vyacheslav Molotov. Not even his magic lantern and his books. When Polonsky moved in, though, part of Molotov's private library was still stored there, and the Texas banker who rented the apartment from Molotov's heirs allowed her free access to look through it. And what she found there, along with what she found out about the building itself, provided the twin inspirations for this book. When she opened the books from Molotov's collection, she – like the recent investigator of Hitler's library – discovered strands of the former owner's hair. Her initial focus, naturally, was on what books were in the collection, whether their owner had read them or not (many uncut pages), and if he had, what underlining and marginalia did he leave behind? At the same time, she studied the plaques honoring the dignitaries who had once lived in the buildings on her street, then went and talked with the current residents. In the nearby Lenin State Library she consulted books by and about them, including the last tsarist-era telephone book, which listed, for example, all the titles and memberships of Count Sergei Sheremetyev, whose remodeled palace is also located on the Romanov Lane. Her excursions in Moscow take her to a storied banya (steam bath), where elegant young women could be seen conspicuously reading the latest best-seller, a new Russian translation of Spengler's *Decline of the West*. In this one chapter, she provides perhaps a little more history than one cares to know, if you are not already a fan of the institution of the banya and its rituals. She details not only what people read there, but what they eat and drink; what Pushkin said about the banya; where the oldest one in Moscow is located, how Georgian ones differ from their Russian counterparts, what classes of people go there, what kind of folk work there, and the proper use of a loofah. She talks about banya poetry and Chekov's story set in one – not to mention the architecture and furnishings. Others might think that suffering intense heat and being beaten with birch twigs is perhaps not the most enjoyable way to spend your time, especially when the chief payoff seems to be your feeling of relief when the ordeal is over. But this is an unfashionable opinion, not to be expressed in polite Moscow society. After the banya, what could the next chapter be about except the dacha? Here in a district outside Moscow, she rescues the Balandins, a family of distinguished scientists who first prospered, then suffered under Stalin, from undeserved obscurity. She also resurrects Academician Olga Lepeshinskaya, a biologist and follower of the infamous Lysenko. Because she made the right political decisions, the career of this "Old Bolshevichka" was untroubled. She was so "shrewish, mean and untrusting... that she would poke through the garbage to check that her servant had not stolen any leftovers for her animals" (page 128). That's the kind of person who was able to not only survive but prosper in those times. Polonsky does not confine herself to Moscow and environs. She ventures into the hinterlands, going west to Novgorod (World War II buffs are treated to a rare glimpse of what the city looked like in 1944, after the Nazis had been pushed out); south to the region around the Sea of Azov; north to the Arctic (during the war, Molotov tried to claim Spitzbergen for the USSR, after the Soviets had occupied a few miles of northernmost Norway); and finally out to the far east, to Lake Baikal and beyond. It's a shame she did not go to St. Petersburg. The motto to chapter seven, taken from Dostoevsky's "Winter Notes on Summer Impressions," could serve as a motto for the entire work: "After all, an entire nation consists only of certain isolated incidents, does it not?" Polonsky's book is a meandering stroll through Russian history and across the Russian landscape, following no definite path, heading in no particular direction. We are just meant to enjoy the journey for its own sake. The result is not as radical as *Tristram Shandy* but it has something of the same flavor. When she says near the end that she is tempted to "digress and delay," (page 343), the reader is tempted to cry out, "What else have we been doing all this time?" It is only when we arrive at a destination that we find out what the goal was. When she goes to Staraya Russa on Lake Ilmen, where Dostoevsky wrote much of "The Demons," my best guess is that she wanted to visit what was once the author's house, since converted to a museum. But it turned out to be closed for renovation. When she travels to Irkutsk, her destination may have been the house of Maria Volkonskaya, the princess who heroically followed her husband, a Decembrist conspirator, into exile. Or was it the sanatorium that advertises itself as being able to cure the exhaustion one incurs in reaching the sanatorium itself? (Chekov said that every traveler arrives in Irkutsk exhausted.) The effect of concealing the destination is that we seem to be drifting on a wide river, stopping here and there, chatting with this person and that. This has its attraction. The downside is that we do not share any sense of achievement at having completed an arduous task. One does not get the feeling that she has climbed a mountain so much as that she has wandered almost accidentally onto its peak. This is for the most part an outstanding book, but it could have been even better. We are treated to so many descriptions of buildings, paintings, and photographs that a few pictures of them would have been welcome. Or does this run counter to the publishing philosophy of Farrar, Straus and Giroux? At least they allowed two maps, one of Moscow and one of Russia, though these are no more than adequate at best. The one of Moscow is spread over two pages, but since almost everything of interest is right in the center, that part is bisected, so you end up bending back the cover to make sure you haven't missed anything in the fold. (Another reviewer on this site felt the need to supplement the maps by consulting Google Earth.) Historical quibbles: Stalin may well have asked Marshalls Zhukov and Konev (page 17) who would take Berlin, the Soviets or the Western Allies? But in fact this question had already been decided at Yalta. Any competition for territory among the Allies would have been self-injurious, and so it was agreed that Berlin would be left to the Red Army. The only race was between the Zhukov and Konev themselves, and when Stalin posed his question, all three of them understood perfectly well what he really meant. Final quibble: Admiral Pavel Nakhimov (1802-1855)

commanded the Russian fleet at the battle of Sinope, where he annihilated the Ottoman fleet during the Crimean War. As an admiral, he does not belong on a list of "three great generals of Russian imperial history" (page 113). It's a bit like calling the three great generals of British history Marlborough, Wellington – and Nelson. All in all, this is history of a good kind – a series of human dramas. These are the people who once lived in this apartment or dacha or city, Polonsky tells us, and this is what they did. Or, since we are talking about Russia, perhaps it is better to say: and this is what happened to them. There will not be many people who, after finishing this book, will be able to say, "Well, nothing I didn't already know." 20 of 21 people found the following review helpful. a great idea, but poorly executed

By H. Evans I bought this book as a consequence of all of the hype created by Orlando Figes' negative anonymous review of it. This must have been a gift to Ms Polonsky in terms of publicity. Unfortunately, my impression of the book so far is that it is disappointing. Take the first chapter for example. It starts with an excellent idea; namely, using a building (or a few neighbouring buildings) in Moscow which housed several well known figures in Russian history (Molotov, Zhukov, the spy Reilly, Frunze, Shostakovich to name but a few) as a springboard to describe Russian/Soviet and local Muscovite history. However, the idea is poorly executed. The book adopts what can only be described as a scattergun approach to describing the history of the building and its inhabitants. The narrative lacks structure. The book is weighed down by lengthy and disruptive literary allusions. The prose is pretentious: why is a rental block of flats described as a "maison a loyer?" What is a "tableau of allegorical pathos?". The writing style gets in the way of the content: and the content is not properly structured in any event. In amongst the problems with this book there are some very interesting episodes and observations; it is a shame they are so well buried. This book could have been fantastic; but it needed more time, more thought, more rigour and better editing.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Missed

By John the Reader How can any true "history and travel buff" fail to enjoy a book traveling into and through the history of Russia? Easily if it is as so turgid as this one, full of very extensive quotations from those Russian 'famous' writers with their tortured, free-flow of supposedly intellectual heights, never achieved or exceeded it is claimed by their champions, by non-Russian authors. I have never been convinced that they had that much to say in the first place and after manfully struggling through Polonsky's work, remain deaf and unconvinced. The premise, reflected in the title, is fascinating. Polonsky has access to Molotov's library, complete with all the furnishings, books and an antique projector. Apparently able to overcome any revulsion at the man's murderous crimes against his fellow Russians, the author is allowed to wander through the parts of his life a library reveals, reads his notations and browse through his slides. When I think what Jan Morris or even Bill Bryson could have done with such material my disappointment in this book grows heavier with regret at such a lost opportunity.

When Rachel Polonsky went to live in Moscow, she found an apartment block in Romanov Street, once a residence of the Soviet elite. One of those ghostly neighbours was Stalin's henchman Vyacheslav Molotov. In his former apartment, Rachel Polonsky discovered his library and an old magic lantern. Molotov - ruthless apparatchik, participant in the collectivizations and the Great Purge - was also an ardent bibliophile. Molotov's library and his magic lantern became the prisms through which Rachel Polonsky renewed her vision of Russia. She visited cities and landscapes associated with the books in the library - Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Akhmatova and many less well-known figures. Some were sent to the Gulag by the man who collected their books.

Praise for "Molotov's Magic Lantern" "Cogently descriptive, empathic, plucky, and acerbic, Polonsky begins with a tour of Moscow's grim landmarks of the Stalin era, then ventures out into the countryside, excavating the tragic and heroic stories of writers and scientists who suffered banishment and worse, many the victims of Molotov's industrious murderousness . . . Polonsky is so steeped in Russian history and literature that everywhere she goes, her inner magic lantern projects the past onto the present, the imagined onto the real, and what we see is an illuminated land of immense brutality and beauty, suffering and spirit." -Donna Seaman, "Booklist"

"The result is an eccentric work, daring in conception, peculiar in construction, that incorporates all Polonsky's teeming scholarly knowledge of Russia and the Russian people . . . In the course of her travels, Polonsky visits monasteries, dachas, sanatoriums and bath houses. H

About the Author Rachel is a very well-respected academic and journalist who has written for Prospect, Guardian, TLS and Spectator among others. She now lives in Cambridge with her family.