

*Other Animals: Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History*. Edited by Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. 336 pp. \$65.00 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-0-82294-388-4.

The goal of *Other Animals* is to collect essays examining the role that non-humans have played in Russian history and culture. The book does not claim to address an exhaustive range of subjects, nor – given the vastness of its theme – could it do so. The collection does manage to cover as wide a period as possible within the constraints of a single volume, and is subdivided into four chronological sections, spanning the eighteenth century through the post-Soviet period. Each section is preceded by a brief introduction written by the editors, Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson.

Many of the entries in *Other Animals* are as exemplary as they are informative. The first essay, a truncated version of which recently appeared in *Russian Life*, is Olga E. Glagoleva's "Woman's Honor, or the Story with a Pig," an account of a strange legal battle centered around the noblewoman Ul'iana Psishcheva, whose good name was besmirched after her husband's cousin threw a piglet at her through an open window.<sup>1</sup> Glagoleva does an admirable job constructing a narrative about people "who have left no trace in Russian history" (p. 22), one that can only have been built on extensive archival research. Her accompanying analysis of the role of the pig in Russian culture is exhaustive and fascinating. Glagoleva's account of Derzhavin's near-mortal injury by a wild boar is particularly interesting, and is an example of how she links, via the pig, those who have been all but forgotten by history to major historical and literary figures.

Mikhail Alekseevsky's essay on Russian ethnoveterinary practice and folk medicine describes a hierarchy of animal illness: in Russian rural communities, the animals of the highest economic importance to humans have the most named diseases. His descriptions of these illnesses and their cures – with many terms and phrases given in Russian – is contrasted with the knowledge of trained veterinarians, who were held in deep suspicion by Russian villagers. Of particular interest is the section on the mysterious affliction *nogot'* (literally, "finger-/toenail," a term that can refer a variety of animal illnesses, including cramps, hoof disease, and walleye) and the remedies and spells that are used to combat it.

The most thematically unified section of the book is part II, called "Contradictions of Imperial Russia." Essays by Ian M. Helfant, Costlow, and Nelson explore, respectively, changing Russian attitudes toward wolves, bears, and animal welfare. In some respects, Nelson's history of animal anti-cruelty movements in imperial Russia is a more general analysis of the problems considered by Helfant and Costlow, both of whom consider the changing perceptions of the apex predators of the Russian wilderness.

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1. Olga Glagoleva, "A Woman's Honor (or, When Pigs Fly): Eighteenth-Century Life in the Russian Provinces," *Russian Life* (March/April 2012), pp. 42–48.

Probably the most moving entry in the collection is Ann Kleimola's essay on the animal trainer Vladimir Durov (1863-1934), who obtained astonishing results from animals (such as Chushka "the waltzing pig") through a system that was based on kindness, food rewards, and building on the animals' own instincts and personality. Durov's affection for his animals comes through to a large degree, and the two lines that he writes following the death of "Baby" the Elephant in Moscow during the Civil War are deeply affecting.

Kleimola's essay is featured in the section devoted to animals in the Soviet context. This section also includes an essay by Andy Bruno about the "making Soviet" of the reindeer, an animal deeply embedded in the culture of the peoples inhabiting the Kola Peninsula, as well as an entry by Arja Rosenholm on the horse as an image of masculinity in Russian and Soviet literature. The former is a fine microcosm of the leveling of traditional, non-Slavic cultures under Soviet rule. The latter provides a very detailed account of the horse image in Russian literature, from Pushkin to the bard Vladimir Vysotsky, for whom the horse is a particularly potent image.

Also of note is José Alaniz's essay on Petr Aleshkovskii's *Zhizneopisanie khor'ka* (*Life of Ferret*, 1994), a work of ironic hagiography in which the boundaries between humans and animals are blurred. Alaniz places the work both in the context of modern Russian literature – he notes the literary scandals of Vladimir Sorokin and the "zoophrenic" performance art of Oleg Kulik (an artist examined in detail by Gesine Drews-Sylla in a separate essay in this section) – and in that of the medieval saint's life. Most of Aleshkovskii's human characters, not least his ferret-like protagonist, are defined by their animal traits, while his animals have human attributes. All of the essays in the post-Soviet section – the third being Darya Kabanova's analysis of Tatiana Tol'staia's *Kys'* (*The Slynx*, 2000) – depict a high degree of human-animal hybridization, whether metaphorical or literal.

The sole truly problematic entry in the collection is Katherine Lahti's "The Animal Mayakovsky," an exploration of the famous poet's personal relationship with animals and the ways in which this relationship is reflected in his poetry. Much of the essay is very informative and necessary: her account of how Maiakovsky came to adopt his dog Shen provides a biographical underpinning for the essay, and the tracking of animal motifs in the poet's public and private art is thorough. However, the essay contains a discordant element of defensiveness regarding the exclusion of a love for animals from the "Mayakovsky myth": "[m]ost readers tend to think of [Maiakovsky] as a futurist poet, glorifying machines, putting his hope in scientific inventions, and taking other antinatural, certainly antianimal, positions. [. . .] The problem is that biographical facts about Mayakovsky, such as the fact that he loved animals, are not taken into consideration if they contradict the infamous 'myth of Mayakovsky' [. . .]" (pp. 139-140). Regarding the posthumous "mass production" of Maiakovsky in the Soviet Union (what Pasternak called the poet's "second death"), this criticism is valid, but the implication that all students of Maiakovsky's work up to now have swallowed this myth is too pro-

nounced. Numerous critics of the poet, going all the way back to Jakobson, have addressed the fact that Maiakovsky's poetry is built on mutually contradictory stances. There is room in our view of Maiakovsky for *both* the futurist poet who celebrates technology (but also fears the loss of the flesh in the process of mechanization) *and* the poet who identifies with animals. Furthermore, Lahti does not address the role that Maiakovsky – whose poems celebrating technology are far too numerous to name here – played in constructing himself as a poet of machines. One of numerous examples is the section in his autobiography *Ia sam (I Myself, 1922)*, in which the seven-year-old Maiakovsky is thrilled at seeing a rivet factory lit up by electricity, an experience that causes him to lose interest in nature, which he labels “an insufficiently up-do-date thing” (*neusovershenstvovannaia veshch'*). Instead, Lahti implies that the poet's biography and work were distorted only post-humously. Other mistakes and missteps (such as the truncation of the soft sign in the command – from *150,000,000 – Baraban, / baraban'!*, which results in a mistranslation) overshadow the fine work that Lahti has done in assembling a variety of materials on this topic.

In the section giving the biographies of the contributors, it is mentioned that Amy Nelson's current book project is “Space Dogs: An Unnatural History” (p. 307). Given the subject matter of this collection, it is a shame that room was not found for an excerpt from Nelson's project, particularly since Laika is certainly the most famous non-human Russian in world history, to say nothing of her less famous colleagues Strelka, Belka, and numerous others. It is understandable that Nelson, perhaps having written her chapter on animal anticruelty legislation specifically for this collection, did not want to write two entries. However, there are other researchers – Asif Siddiqi comes to mind – who have written on this topic and could have made a meaningful contribution.

Overall, *Other Animals* is a necessary initial contribution to the study of non-humans in the Russian context. Researchers who wish to investigate the problem of animals in Russian culture will find much in this collection that is useful, and instructors both of undergraduate- and graduate-level classes should find individual chapters relevant to a range of topics in history and literature.

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