

Living the Revolution: Urban Communes and Soviet Socialism, 1917–1932. By **Andy Willimott**. Oxford University Press. 2017. xv + 203pp. £60.00.

In the centennial year of the Russian Revolution of 1917 post-mortems continue to dismiss the radical possibilities of the revolution. Tired clichés about inevitable failure and collapse abound. Lenin is once again condemned as a German agent, and the romance and enthusiasms of the early revolutionary years are buried in insistent reminders that all that passion and purpose would inevitably lead to Stalinism and totalitarianism. In many anniversary accounts the revolution is exhumed only to be re-entombed in convictions that such utopian efforts only lead to the Gulag. Modernization, we are told, leads to a modernity that enslaves in new, more effective and less immediately apprehended ways. Russia is fated, doomed to authoritarianism because the alternative egalitarian and democratic dreams were impossible to realize in such a benighted country. The most generous emotional response of professional critics is regret that things did not work out or could not work out as Lenin and the Bolsheviks vainly hoped; the more common response is a full-throated condemnation of any attempt to move beyond capitalism, liberalism and individualism. Socialism is left on the trash heap of history.

Andy Willimott dares to recover the forgotten sense of hope and daring, of reimagining social possibilities, of young revolutionaries in the first decade and a half of the revolution, and wants to remind us of 'the

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/1468-229X.12652](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12652).

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inherent indeterminacies of revolution' (p. 23). For the communards, the usually young members of living or working communes, as well as for Willimott, 'the revolution was often participatory and expressive in nature' (p. 20). Rather than a top-down story of coercion and the crushing of possibilities, Willimott emphasizes the agency of activists who were able 'to feed back into official structures' and offer the regime 'a form of popular legitimacy'. His story shows 'how the state was forced, from time to time, to co-opt or codify ideas from below' – at least until the consolidation of Stalin's power (pp. 20–1). Those young men and women who formed urban communes saw themselves as the vanguard of the vanguard, creating new anti-bourgeois living and working arrangements. Private, individual, traditional, utopian were all seen negatively; collective, rational, scientific, efficient and orderly were positive.

Students organized communes in their dormitories, and through social activities ranging from cooking and cleaning and contributing money to the 'common pot' to intense study and discussion they improvised their own idea of socialism. Willimott tells this story through numerous examples, newspaper accounts and vivid excerpts from memoirs. When one young villager bought a pig into the communal room, the new addition to the collective wreaked havoc with its squealing. Old habits died hard, and the pig enthusiast was ridiculed as a holdover from a past that needed to be transformed. Tensions between the autonomous and the official, between the initiatives of the communards and the desires of authorities, shaped the experience of the urban communes but in more than one direction. The young advocates of the 'new life' were appalled by the renewal of market forces that came with the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921. Their struggle aimed to overcome the sloth of the Russian people (*Oblomovshchina*) associated with the hero of the nineteenth-century novel *Oblomov* as well as the superfluous

indolence of the aristocrat Evgenii Onegin of Pushkin's poem. More than the abstractions of Karl Marx, literary sources, most importantly Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *What Is To Be Done?*, were fundamental in shaping the mentality and ambitions of young urban communards. From the founders and followers of Marxism their most potent example was the Paris Commune of 1871.

The 'cultural revolution' in which the communards engaged was not only about political enlightenment and gender equality but also about far more mundane practices that emphasized sobriety, cleanliness and sanitation, such as brushing one's teeth and giving up alcohol. Collective living also meant dealing with sex. Experiments with unrestricted sex among commune members gradually gave way to new understandings of marriage as 'something old, something new, something borrowed, and something *red!*' (p. 97). The inevitable arrival of children and the equation of woman (the Russian *baba*) with backwardness created persistent tensions within the commune. The virtues of Bolshevik modernity – discipline, toughness, efficiency, rationality – tended to be coded masculine.

In 1929 the communards' energies were harnessed to the Soviet state and Communist Party's leap into an industrial future in the First Five Year Plan. The mobilization of the rank-and-file coincided for a time with the enthusiastic participation of those organized as egalitarian collectives within factories. But as the number of workers in communal organizations increased, communes appeared to many workers and bosses to be too volatile and unpredictable for the imperatives of rapid, supposedly planned, industrialization. Both the state and the communards desired maximum output. The question was how to achieve it. Stalin's speech of 23 June 1931 attacked equalization of wages, which had been a hallmark of the communes, and called for greater differentiation of skilled and

unskilled labour. The regime steadily shifted to a new policy of wage differentials, cost accounting, one-man management and greater centralization of decision-making within the party elite that undercut and ultimately eliminated the bottom-up self-organization and collective egalitarianism of the production communes. The communards were revolutionary enthusiasts and could not move against the revolutionary thrusts of Stalinism, but the revolution had come to mean something quite different from what it had earlier meant to them.

This book is beautifully produced. Chapter by chapter the story of the urban communes moves forward thematically and through time. Willimott is a gifted writer who knows how to mix analysis and explanation with salient details and anecdotes that illuminate the points he wants to make. He is at the same time neither a popularizer nor a simplifier but a historian dedicated to bringing back the texture of the revolutionary fervour of the first fifteen years of the Soviet experiment. Such attempts to find alternatives to 'bourgeois' lifestyles have been dismissed as utopian. The communards themselves rejected any notion of utopia, which was associated with the pre-Marxist socialist dreamers of the early nineteenth century. For them, and for Willimott, their efforts were genuine trials – in the several senses of that word – to create something new, something better, than Russians and other Soviet peoples had experienced. In our dystopic age the knowledge that in the past there were those who imagined other ways of living gives some hope that the present should not be mistaken for the future.

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