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Book Review

Antony Hoyte-West [1,*]

[1] University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0003-4410-6520.
* İletişim: antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com

Brouwers, Arnout. *Rodina: Tussen lethargie en revolutie. Amsterdam*: Atlas Contact. 2018. 350 pp.

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Rodina: tussen lethargie en revolutie ["Rodina: between lethargy and revolution"] is the first book by journalist Arnout Brouwers, who was previously the Russia correspondent for *De Volkskrant* – a leading Dutch newspaper. As noted by Amelink[1] (2018), there are numerous initiatives related to the Russian language, culture and society in the Netherlands, and this level of interest is reflected in the growing number of Dutch-language works of literary non-fiction, documentaries and online resources concerning Russia and the post-Soviet space. Aimed primarily at a popular readership, *Rodina* is a work of non-fiction that draws upon the author's experiences during his posting in Moscow between 2006 and 2013, providing an overview of some of his travels around Russia and its neighbours. Brouwers notes in the foreword that his aim in the book is to provide a different picture of Russia to the one commonly projected in the West – a worthy objective, and one that is pursued in a novel and interesting manner.

As speakers of Russian will observe, the book's title is commonly translated into English as "motherland" – a complex concept that brings to mind not only the contemporary and Soviet aspects of belonging and identity, but also the older Slavonic notions of family and kinship. Brouwers' work succeeds in portraying the multiple meanings associated with the term, as the book uses a microcosm of human stories to describe the wider socio-political development of Russia. By foregrounding the lives of individuals and families from different socioeconomic backgrounds (including several chapters about the family of the author's wife,

[1] Maartje Amelink, "'Realiteitshonger' in Nederlandse literaire non-fictie over Rusland," *Vooys*. 36(3), 2018: 17-27.

Julia), the book manages to offer an alternative and more relatable portrayal of the country and its people for a Western audience. However, while reminding the reader of this shared humanity, it is important to note that the author does not shy away from the societal and political challenges faced by the country, in particular modern Russia's grapples with its Soviet legacy, but also looks ahead to the future.

The volume is structured in 72 vignette-like chapters, each focusing typically on a different social or cultural phenomenon encountered by the author during his travels. With stories from Vorkuta to Makhachkala, and from Karelia to Siberia, it covers the length and breadth of Russia, although certain chapters deal with the author's experiences elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, such as Georgia and Belarus. The thematic scope is also worthy of note in terms of the wide diversity of topics and subjects covered, which is one of the book's main strengths in maintaining the reader's interest. These range from a visit to the oldest Soviet nuclear icebreaker, to reflections on the Moscow-Minsk night train, as well as snippets of conversations with nightclub owners, modern Cossacks and managers of moribund factories. The brevity of the chapters means that weighty issues are merely hinted at rather than discussed in detail, while insights into complex topics are touched upon through the stories of the people encountered by the author, who include migrant workers, political activists and the last resident of a deserted rural village. At times, more information and greater contextualisation would certainly have been welcomed, but nonetheless, a general overview is provided and the reader's curiosity is duly piqued.

Regarding the work's chronology, there are few events (save, for example, the chapter detailing the author's experiences during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war) that pinpoint certain chapters to a fixed time period. Although this helps give the book a sense of timelessness, on occasion it can be a little confusing, given that – save for the occasional juxtapositioning of two or more interconnected narratives – the chapters generally appear to be somewhat randomly arranged in terms of time, topic and geography. In this regard, closer editorial attention may have given the work greater internal cohesion. Furthermore, it would also have been beneficial to include photographs of the people and places described in the text.

That said, in focussing on the personal stories of the Russians themselves and relating them to the macro level through a series of accessible and engaging vignettes, Brouwers's book makes an excellent contribution to the growing Dutch-language literature on the topic. Ultimately, he succeeds in his stated aim of offering an alternative perspective on Russia and its people, and provides an insightful snapshot of the wider social, cultural, and political changes that took

place in the country during the early years of this century. It is hoped that translations into English, Turkish and other languages will follow, as this book deserves to be enjoyed by a wider audience.