

Andy Willimott: Living the Revolution. Urban Communes and Soviet Socialism 1917–1932, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. 224 pp. – ISBN 978-0-1987-2582-4.

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With this book, Andy Willimott enters the small circle of historians devoted to the communal movement in the early USSR. Communes were attempts made by “activists starting to rethink (...) their domestic habits and the way they conducted their everyday life” (p. 3) to implement “ideas of collectivism, equality, and the rational reorganization of living” (p. 1). The historiographical interest in such a marginal phenomenon lies in its capacity of holding up “a mirror to the larger story of how revolution, state, and society developed after 1917” (p. 11). The authors’s aim “is to shed more light on common and popular engagements with revolution”, to explore how communards “could read, interpret, and appropriate socialist ideology” and to see “what impact (...) these daily experiences (...) had upon the development of the Soviet state” (p. 14).

In order to do so, Willimott has chosen to study urban communes. This is a daring choice since the majority of authors rather focused on rural communes, e.g. the first voluntary *kolkhozy*, because sources about the latter are more numerous. Concerning urban communes, “there is no central [archival] holding on these groups”. Nevertheless, Andy Willimott “mined factory reports and institutional surveys, the local records of those institutes known to house (...) commune groups, (...) official protocols (...), media print sources (...) as well as the available diaries” of people who participated in communes. Even though “this is not an easy tale to tell” (p. 21), the author favours a narrative way of writing rather than a purely analytical one, thus referring to micro-history (p. 14).

However, the structure of the book is quite classical. A first chapter about “Revolutionary Beginnings” explores the roots of the communal movement. It is related to Russian pre-revolutionary forms of social organisation such as the *arteli* (cooperative workers’ teams) and *kruzhki* (radical students’ clubs) intertwined with the utopian vision of Chernyshevsky’s novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) and with the appeal of the 1871 Paris Commune. More than an effective filiation, Willimott sees in all this “a common point of reference” for activists of the 1920s, made out of “constructs” and “imagined virtues” of 19th century revolutionaries (p. 36). This is an important statement as Willimott rightly reminds us that Soviet communes cannot be described as anarchistic attempts while communards had a strong “belief in the statist-revolutionary project” (p. 6).

Those who tried to build “Socialism in one Dormitory” are the subject of the second chapter. The students’ communes are exemplified with the trajectory of a young working-class person from the provinces who became a student in the mid-1920s and set up a commune at the *Electro-Technical Institute* in Leningrad. This life story is clearly one of upward social mobility. Communal commitment was a way for young student activists to “put themselves forth as a new political-cultural enlightening force” even though they stood aside and “beyond

the party's centralized propaganda mechanisms" (p. 59). Hence, they would exert pressure on insufficiently proletarian elements or on "politically unsatisfactory persons" (p. 54). This aspect of social control is present in another collective which would for instance try to comply with the 'scientific organisation of labour' in everyday life.

The third chapter, entitled "Socialism in One Apartment" mainly deals with two Moscow youngsters' communes, one at the AMO factory barracks, the other at 6 Mokrinskii Lane, both in Moscow. Set up in the early 1920s, this type of communes expresses a rejection of the NEP with its reassessment of personal interest and greed. This period is also one of extensive discussion on moral issues, especially on the "new way of life" (*novyi byt*), which became the subject of numerous articles and brochures. Soviet society was trapped between "the dead weight of the past" (p. 83) and the fear "that things had gone too far" in sexual liberation (p. 95). For communards who claimed equality between the sexes, this had immediate consequences on gender roles. Women were "forced to accept a masculine vision of revolution" and "to display a revolutionary 'steeliness'" (p. 101) in order not to be perceived as conservative *baby* (derogatory word for women).

As the industrial proletariat was central to the Soviet conception of revolution, the setting up of "Socialism in One Factory" in the form of production communes is a key point. Being chiefly an effect of industrialisation, this phenomenon becomes the focus of the fourth chapter as it concentrates on the late 1920s and the Great Break. After describing an early period when young communard activists led the offensive without support, the author states that early 1930 witnessed "a virtuous circle of party ambition and activist inventiveness" (p. 122) explaining the flourishing of communes on the shop floor. They became an element of the highly strained climate in factories, where power, workers and *spetsy* (technical experts) were confronting one another.

In order to connect "Early Stalinism and the Urban Communes", the author extends the scope of his study to tackle the issue of rural communes. Praised during the collectivisation of agriculture, they stood gradually outside the main stream after Stalin issued a warning to those who had become "dizzy with success". In 1931, "*Pravda* published calls for a campaign against 'forced' or 'involuntary' urban communes and collectives" (p. 148). Wage levelling in factories was under criticism and former communards of Mokrinskii Lane would turn in favour of "piece rates and premiums" and finally come to the conclusion that the whole encompassing collective organisations were "nothing short of a 'Utopia'" (p. 153–4).

In a short conclusion, Willimott summarises his points. Although he recognises that 1927 was a turning point, he defends the idea that even during the Great Break, "sometimes taking revolutionary policy in a slightly different direction than was perhaps intended, [communards] displayed their own agency" (p. 167).

Willimott's overview of the communal movement is welcomed a century after the Russian revolution, but except for this last statement, it would remind an older reader of the outline of history about "Utopia in Life" published by Richard Stites in his 1989 book *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. The reviewer must even say that *Living the Revolution* falls below its predecessor.

The first problem concerns sources. As said before, Soviet media shed little light on urban communes. So Willimott relies extensively on the same publications as Stites, namely German journalist Klaus Mehnert's account, Pogodin's play *Daring*, a number of Soviet brochures about one successful collective or about youth communes (such as Naishtat's, which is wrongly spelt "Kaishtat" all along Willimott's book). With regard to archival material, Willimott claims to have found files about a students' commune in two institutes, this is indeed a valuable discovery. But the date when documents were written is only mentioned once: Willimott specifies that a quoted statement was made "some forty years on" (p. 168). So, instead of documents produced by actual communards, it seems we are rather confronted with memories of past events.

This leaves the reader with the impression that the analysis is based on public statements of the late 1920s–1930s and on Brezhnev-era memoirs, e.g. on material which was meant to comply with the public's requisites. This is not to claim that the Soviet "totalitarian" regime would have controlled every printed article or every alumni recollection. Nevertheless, the demand for public consensus was increasing and this determined what it was possible to say on various subjects, including communes.

For instance, Willimott notes a change in the late 1920s with the rise of "a more militant ideological discourse, coming off the back of the 1927 war scare" (p. 164). Yet, even though the book's title encompasses 1917–1932, the majority of the sources used in this work (even those that describe earlier communes) were issued in 1927 and later, indeed when the relative ideological pluralism of the NEP was already under criticism. Once again, this does not mean that this kind of documents is mere lies. They simply require a cautious analysis which must be aware of power relations inside Soviet institutions and inside society as a whole.

Except gender conflicts which are carefully analysed concerning *byt* communes, this questioning about power relations is lacking. The effect of reality given by quoting testimonies at large (which, by the way, is closer to storytelling than to micro-history), gives an a-critical outlook on things. The internal structure of communes and their procedures of decision making, which are central questions to evaluate the level of democracy, are only occasionally tackled (pp. 73, 137, 144). When communards exert pressure to implement "personal reeducation" (p. 77) on their teachers (p. 75) and on their fellow students (p. 54), and seek "greater support from the local authorities" (p. 70), one might think that a group is trying to seize control of an institute, particularly as the initiators are described as rapidly improving their social status.¹ Unfortunately this is not the author's concern, he only notes that the communal movement had "a significant growth at the end of the 1920s – *coinciding* with a reinvigorated interest in collectivism" (p. 54; our emphasis). The reader would expect at least a hypothesis to explain this fact, instead of considering this a mere coincidence.

The same can be said of the way the discussion about the way of life is presented in the next chapter. Of course the struggle against *Oblomovshchina* and hooliganism is important (p. 87–8), but it would have been worth to compare the opinion of various Soviet leaders and

¹ For a similar process in a Kharkov institute, see Eric Aunoble: Prôner l'émancipation, instituer la domination : sur l'expérience d'une commune de jeunes en Ukraine soviétique dans les années Vingt. In: *Dissidences* (2013), 6, <https://revuesshs.u-bourgogne.fr/dissidences/document.php?id=2749>.

intellectuals and to show who won the dispute over defining a socialist way of life and who was found guilty of having let “things [go] too far” (p. 95). The absence of Aleksandra Kollontai is all the more astonishing since she became the scapegoat for sexual disorder with the so-called “glass of water theory”.

The absence of Trotsky is puzzling too, not only because he wrote an important essay about *Problems of Everyday Life* (including communes), but also as a sign of a rather apolitical approach to the topic. For instance, writing about student communards who mobilised in 1927 against a Zinovievite teacher, Willimott notes that the Leningrad leader “fell from power after 1926” (p. 75), but he does not say a word about the struggle that was being waged on the 10th anniversary of October to crush the United Left Opposition led by Zinoviev and Trotsky. Nor does he explain why egalitarianism, having been mainstream until 1931, ends up being understood as “Trotsky-ist levelling mania” or “pure Trotsky” (pp. 154, 159).

The issue of wage levelling is tackled only at the end of the book (p. 147), although it is of crucial importance to understand production communes. The origin of the latter is once again told as if it were the result of some activists’ spontaneous effort which eventually met the support of “local officials [who] were becoming more receptive to shop-floor activism” (p. 111). To convince the reader of the reality of some shop-floor activism in favour of communes, the author should have explained what different forms of team labour organisation were available in Soviet factories. But Willimott presents them vaguely only as means to end communes in 1931 (p. 150).

Here, the author also misses two important points. As he mentions confrontations between young workers and older ones (p. 120–1), he does not take into account new forms of team work as a way to crush the resistance of old workers against increasing productivity. But when he describes the campaign against wage levelling from 1931, he states incorrectly that communes “did not become agents of resistance”. On the contrary, there is archival evidence of communes being condemned by the Party leadership because they represented a nexus of collective egalitarianism against the factory management who would then promote piece rates and individual premiums.²

Andy Willimott is right in thinking that communes mirrored the main social, ideological and political trends of the early Soviet regime. Unfortunately, his analysis is undermined by the fact that many statements he has found in the press and in memoirs are taken for granted. In doing so, his analysis involuntarily echoes that of Soviet officialdom, which ignored communes at the beginning of the NEP, found them pioneering from 1927, presented them as a vanguard during the Great Break, before excommunicating them as leftists from 1931. The English-speaking reader will learn more about the real agency of communards in the late 1920s by reading *Mahogany* by Boris Pilnyak, a name one would look for in vain in *Living the Revolution*.

2 For instance see: Account for the Kharkov Party Committee, 25.09.1931, Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Kharkivskoyi Oblasti (DAKhO), fond P69, opys’ 1, sprava 44, lyst 40; Protocol of the Plenum of the KhPZ Factory Party Committee, 13.5.1931, DAKhO, P86/1/3, 458 (quoted in Eric Aunoble: Les ouvriers et le pouvoir à Kharkov de 1920 à 1933, à travers les archives régionales. In: *Cahiers du Mouvement ouvrier (CERMTRI)* [2001], 14, p. 24–25).