

Smith, Alison K. *Cabbage and Caviar: A History of Food in Russia*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2021. Glossary. References. Bibliography. Acknowledgements. Photo Acknowledgements. Index. 352 pp. \$39.00 (cloth) ISBN 978-1-789-143-645.

*Cabbage and Caviar: A History of Food in Russia* by Alison K. Smith provides a profound and high-quality exploration of Russian food and its historical significance. The book's argument is nuanced and complex, and the writing captivating, making the reading experience satisfying. *Cabbage and Caviar* conveys a simple yet powerful message: food plays a central role in our understanding of Russian history. Smith's research, descriptions, and storytelling showcase how food is not merely sustenance; it is a cultural, historical, and societal artifact that carries the weight of generations. From the iconic borscht to delicate *blini*, from the opulence of caviar to the humble *pirozhki*, each dish becomes a portal into Russia's past and the lives of its people. The book's varied sources include texts, archaeological records, interviews, family budgets, cookbooks, maps, drawings, postcards, photographs, menus, recipes, etc.

In the opening pages of the introduction, "Let Us Begin with Soup," the author guides readers through three distinct yet interconnected histories of Russian food. These histories encompass the writings of Vladimir Burnashev, August von Haxthausen's commentary, and the observations extracted from the travelogs and accounts of foreign workers. As one delves into these early narratives, a pattern unfolds—and endures throughout all the chapters—portraying the Russian table as in a constant state of flux, oscillating between "abundance and luxury" (17) on one hand and "poverty and dearth" (15) on the other.

Smith lays the groundwork by considering a fundamental question: what defines Russian cuisine? In inventive fashion, she uses the famed Leninka canteen as a metaphorical time machine, whisking her readers through time to uncover some of Russia's most iconic dishes (32-34). These culinary staples take on versatile roles, occasionally occupying the periphery and at other times assuming a central role in shaping the historical, cultural, and political fabric of Russia. Here, Smith's work stands out for enabling readers and critics to approach the material from a multitude of perspectives. In the context of this review, I focus on bread, a quintessential element in Russian cuisine. This humble staple can serve as a lens through which to comprehend the ebb and flow of empires, the ramifications of global trade, and the resilience of people who have endured countless challenges.

Bread in Russia's history, as Smith observes, was not merely a staple food but a powerful and transformative agent. Socially and culturally, it held profound significance, symbolizing hospitality and serving as the cornerstone of sustenance, transcending societal and economic boundaries (52). Weddings were accompanied by ornate *karavai* bread, exemplifying bread's religious and cultural importance (60). Bread was versatile and adaptable, as shown by the widespread consumption of *kvas*, a low-alcohol beverage crafted from stale rye bread (66). In

various historical contexts, bread took on dual roles, both as a choice and as a means of punishment and deprivation. During periods like Great Lent, some voluntarily adhered to strict fasting, consuming only bread and water, or even abstaining from all other food. This demonstrated bread as a conscious choice for spiritual discipline and self-control (123). However, in the harsh confines of the Gulag system, bread and potatoes dominated the meager diet, subjecting inmates to grueling conditions that often led to widespread vitamin deficiency illnesses (251). In early twentieth century Russia, bread shortages and discontent reached a critical juncture. This culminated in a pivotal moment when female workers in Petrograd staged a walkout on International Women's Day in 1917 to protest issues related to bread distribution. Their actions sparked a general strike, a soldier revolt, and demands for radical governmental changes, eventually leading to the collapse of the tsarist state (231-233).

The significance of bread was often accompanied by the haunting specter of hunger and famine. In this context, Smith recounts some of the most harrowing episodes in the country's past. Over the centuries, famine was attributed to various factors, from divine retribution for perceived sins to inadequate transportation systems and crop failures, often forcing desperate migrations in search of sustenance. While the nineteenth century saw some relief efforts, the twentieth century bore witness to devastating Soviet-era famines, notably in the 1930s, resulting in millions of deaths due to collectivization, especially in the Kazakh steppe (246).

This compressed overview harks back to Smith's remark that the history of food in Russia is one of "abundance, of dearth, of variety, of simplicity, of continuities, but perhaps above all of change" (31). By delving into various facets of Russian history and its food, such as the social, cultural, and economic significance of vodka, the profound impacts of serfdom during Imperial Russia, or the consequences of collectivization in the Soviet era, one can uncover analogous patterns of societal transformations and resilience. Bread serves as just one illustrative example of this phenomenon.

The epilogue, symbolically titled "Russia Again," concludes on a personal note as Smith offers readers a glimpse into her personal travels across Russia, all viewed through the lens of food. This shift in narrative style, though it may evoke recollections of earlier travelers, ultimately emerges as a distinct and emotionally evocative way to bring her profound and multifaceted exploration of Russia to a close.

*Cabbage and Caviar* is a reminder that a nation's food heritage not only mirrors its cultural traditions but also embodies the intricate interplay of historical, economic, agricultural, political, and social dynamics. While occasional excursions into broader historical and political contexts overshadow the central focus on food, the narrative maintains a commendable balance. In my opinion, the exploration of the Soviet era, particularly the "Soviet experience," would have been even more enlightening if it had placed greater emphasis on the Cold War and the space race. Furthermore, expanding on the global connections of Russian cuisine and its influences on international gastronomy could add a new layer of

understanding. This magnum opus by Alison K. Smith should be an important addition to any library's collection. It will provide a valuable resource for folklorists, history enthusiasts, cultural explorers, and anyone with an appetite for knowledge.

Ruzhica Samokovlija Baruh  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Canada  
rsamokovlija@mun.ca