

MOTHERLAND by Simon Roberts

with an introduction by Rosamund Bartlett

The result of photographer Simon Roberts' one year journey, *Motherland* is a bold visual statement about the nature of contemporary Russia, fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.



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Reviews

“*Motherland* is a remarkably sensitive, optimistic and empathic comment on Russian identity during a time of enormous change. Roberts’ work is significant because it returns to traditional documentary values, eschewing representations of Russia as a decaying country defined by alcoholism, drug abuse and violence. It is his connection with and understanding of his subjects that distinguish Roberts as a documentary photographer.

The filmmaker John Grierson described the term ‘documentary’ as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’. Increasingly, contemporary documentary photographers have exploited this ‘creative treatment’ to make dramatic spectacles from their subjects, losing sight both of the context in which the subject is recorded and the function of the photograph as a document.

Simon Roberts’ work reminds us of the importance of documentary in leaving a legacy of a particular time and place, and does so through eloquent and arresting photographs. Accompanying these with objective and informative captions, he invites us to reconsider a country previously presented as dissolute and ruined. It is rare to see work today that engages us so absolutely, and without judgement, without resorting to sentimentality.”

Greg Hobson, Curator of Photographs, National Museum Media

“*Motherland* is a beautifully resolved body of work and the pervading air of melancholy, so suited the subject. The editing together of landscapes and figure studies work powerfully together – and Simon’s eye for the special detail that lifts a picture above a record to become a kind of poetry is evident in every image.”

Martin Barnes, Curator of Photographs, Victoria and Albert Museum

“A remarkable photo-essay.”

Robert McCrum, Literary Editor, The Observer

“Simon Roberts wants to break down the stereotypes that own you...Simon Roberts wants to kill the preconceptions that exist in your comfy-know-it-all-media-fed-head. He wants to kill your ideas about ‘Russia’...erase your broken-down-commie-red-hammer & sickle story... and give you something new. He wants to take your Russian heroin trade, your arms traders, your vodka, your strippers, your eastern block whores...take away your peasant-poverty-places, your famine-your hunger-your cold...take away your frozen-tundra-notions and whack you right upside your preconceived-head. His journey through Russia is one of liberation, not exploitation...it is a journey to uncover truth and dignity, timelessness and respect...rather than magnify crime or inflate historical myth. It is a vision speaking of majesty, community and grace, not vice, guns and titillation. He would like to take the epic land that is ‘Russia’ and make it intimate...reel it in and soften it...let you see the beauty and hope, not the suffering and pain. Simon deals in optimism and humanity, not tragedy, corruption and misery...”

dR, American Suburb X

“*Motherland* exemplifies the magnificence of the traditional photo-essay, coupled with images made by a talented photographer who demonstrates a contemporary and original eye for detail. Fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the book contains 150 images with portray a positive and defiant Russia, against a backdrop of brutality. Whilst Roberts states that he did not set out with any specific political agenda, his images do convey what he discovered to be at the heart of Russian life- the sense of home, or *rodina*. We witness a father and son plunging into a lake following a sauna in Yekaterinburg, elderly people cruising on the Volga River, a pair of sturgeon poaches in Kamchata. Throughout this body of work, there is a deep, old-world connection to the land that reads as a pride in the “motherland,” despite the challenges of everyday life.

The images are uplifting despite the bleakness, which also pervades. Part of the reason for this might be the perceptive editing and pacing of the book. Arranged chronologically to mirror Roberts’ journey, there is a well-conceived balance between landscape and portrait. The photographs are accompanied by carefully measured text to contextualise them, providing the reader with enough insight to appreciate the story behind them photographs without overwhelming them. The sense of motherland, which Roberts explores is also present in the intermittent quotations from Russian thinkers, writers and travellers.

Motherland is an exemplary photo book that melds together objectivity, wonder and desire. Finally, it is a great example of a successful collaboration between publisher and photographer. I can imagine Chris Boot (publisher) and Simon Roberts sneakily opening the book themselves and feeling quite proud – and so they should.”

Debra Klomp Ching, Photo-eye Booklist

“Roberts’s pictures are unmistakably Russian, almost to the point of cliché: women walking in fur hats across snowbound squares, Cossacks astride horses, two drunks smiling dumbly from a park bench. But out of the expected, something unusual emerges. There is a universal quality to these images: they end up more a portrait of humanity than of Russia. In fact, seen through Roberts’ eyes Russia is a place suffused with a peculiar, bright-eyed happiness – a sort of enthusiastic defiance. This is not what you’d expect from a portrait of modern Russia. An inspiring visual treat – and unexpectedly beautiful.”

Viv Groskop, The Observer

“This visual essay illustrating modern Russia, by photographer Simon Roberts, exposes the beautiful and often strange chaos left behind some 16 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union – an edifice that turned out to resemble ‘one gigantic Potemkin village’, as an introduction by Rosamund Bartlett puts it. The result of Roberts’ 13-month journey across Russia is an unvarnished collection of portraits of a proud people and a scarred landscape, littered with relics of a glorious past. The images revel in the sheer scale of the country, its many regions, races and religions no longer united by politics, but instead increasingly isolated by fading industry and simmering conflicts. Ultimately, however, the big picture the book conveys is one of honest optimism.”

*Jonathan Bell, Wallpaper**

“In the new documentary mode objectivity is almost invariably melded with desire. The photographs of Britain's Simon Roberts from his series *Motherland* are, paradoxically, both bleak and raw and yet almost distressingly pleasing to the eye.”

Gary Michael Dault, Critic, Toronto

“Simon Roberts’ passion for photography is like a seam running through his life; a constant presence, which has resurfaced time and time again, via magical moments and turning points. Now, with the forthcoming launch of his first book, *Motherland*, Roberts continues his journey through the medium.”

Miranda Gavin, Hotshoe Magazine

“Simon is a model of the smart contemporary concerned editorial photographer. That is, he combines the best of traditional photojournalism values - of respect for his subject and of communicating on important social issues through the photographic essay - with a contemporary and highly talented approach to image-making. He is a surprising young man, who took a year out of his successful professional career - making considerable sacrifices with his own life- to take the chance to enquire into one subject much more deeply than he would ever have the opportunity to do while working on regular assignments. The result is 150 wonderful photographs that work individually and as a series.”

Chris Boot, Publisher

“Because the photographs in *Motherland* depict a nation that is alien to most of us, you could almost begin to convince yourself that the scenes are, in fact, elaborately constructed film sets: two Soviet fighter jets, atop a kind of scaffolding, straddle a river in Magadan; a torpedoed American warship from World War II embeds itself in the ice of the Barents Sea; three white vans, set against white snow, make their way across the frozen Lena River.

The wider, ‘scene setting’ images have an air of suspension about them, rather like the split second before a film director calls ‘Action’, while the portraits – as formal and static in nature as they are – have a connection between both photographer and subject seen all too rarely these days. There are echoes of August Sander about these, portraying, as they do, the likes of a Cossack, a sanatorium receptionist or the staff at a branch of McDonald’s. It takes quite some commitment to capture not only the immensity and variety of a country like Russia, but also the reader’s imagination. Roberts succeeds on both counts.”

Ailsa McWhinnie, Outdoor Photography

“Simon Roberts finds beauty in the oddest places: an outdoor market set against bombed-out buildings in Grozny, a rusty old bread factory in Oryol, the departure lounge at St. Petersburg airport. Roberts spent a year travelling across Russia, from Siberia to Kaliningrad, through the northern Caucasus and along the Volga River. The pictures he took along the way have been collected into a superb book of photographic journalism.

Roberts’ pictures are intimate, they are technically accomplished, and they carry an extraordinary narrative charge. You immediately sense the stories behind the tramps and the wrestlers, the desolate hotel rooms, or the smiling waitress (earning some extra roubles to support her academic studies) at a café in Magadan. Such pictures ought to be mundane; Roberts makes them luminous. How he has managed to make every last photo memorable is debatable, but he has, and if there has been a better photographic exploration of Russia in recent years, I haven’t seen it.”

Jonathan Wright, Geographical Magazine

“In 2005 Simon Roberts completed a year-long journey through Russia, giving rise to his photographic essay *Motherland*. This empathic and captivating collection of photographs, which combines intimate portraits and expansive landscapes, coalesces into a picture of post-Soviet Russia that is more complex and optimistic than clichéd portrayals of poverty in the wake of communism. Offering equal measures of beauty and disorder, pride and melancholy, the images speak to feelings of belonging and a common spirit amidst evident diversity. Coming through centrally in *Motherland* is the importance of place and the native landscape to the Russians. Roberts’s photograph of taxis on the frozen Lena River encapsulates the sheer enormity of the country and the austere grandeur of the land. It also embodies the sense of a nation moving into a new and unfamiliar era, even as it reflects the artist’s own journey.”

Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago

“In *Motherland* the large format captured the vastness, simplicity and complexity, hope, struggle and heart of the Russian territories, peoples and cultures. It would have been easy for this talented young Briton to take exceptional yet expected shots, however, even when he takes a picture of the ubiquitous Brutalist Soviet apartment blocks he captures something different; a serene acknowledgment of deterioration without sentimentality or apology. Each and every photo created connection between this viewer and the subject because the Roberts has engaged the land and its inhabitants over the course of a 365 days, 75,000 kilometers and 11 time zones.”

Editorial, Nova Clutch

“Simon Roberts’ wonderful project *Motherland* explores the identity of contemporary Russia 15 years after the fall of the Soviet Union. Spending an entire year traversing the landscape, Roberts strove to stay away from the stereotypical connotations of Russian poverty and depression, focusing instead on a palpable national optimism for the future. The result is a body of work that is both spontaneous and thoughtful, one that finds its beauty in the cracks of history.”

Ben Alper, The Exposure Project

“The break-up of the Soviet Union is reflexively seen as a political and economic revolution, the defeat of communism and the ultimate triumph of the free market. For the photographer Simon Roberts, though, the unprecedented convulsion allowed him the freedom to travel the length and breadth of Russia, taking pictures in more than 200 locations. What emerges are not the popular clichés of oligarchs in limousines barreling past their downtrodden compatriots and covering them in clouds of dust. Instead, Roberts find reasons to be cheerful. His portraits capture a diverse range of characters in a variety of landscapes, all sharing an emotional bond of the motherland.”

Peter Chapman, The Independent, Arts Review

“Roberts’ portraits are reminiscent of August Sander’s quest to document his fellow Germans in ‘Man of the Twentieth Century’, and provide a visual catalyst to the debate about contemporary Russian identity at a time of rapid change. His photographs present a wealth of humanity in the most dire of circumstances – a delightful book.”

Laura Nobel, London Independent Photography

“The work [*Motherland*] makes a refreshing change from much of the pessimistic documentary we have seen from the former Soviet Union. Roberts’ images record the diversity of the country and its people, who through their shared national pride, attachment to place and modest self-esteem make clear that, although for many life remains hard, the Motherland is not the miserable place some would have us believe.”

AG Magazine, The International Journal of Photographic Art Practice

“The world’s biggest country is celebrated by the young British photographer Simon Roberts, who has produced a formidable visual travelogue across Russia. *Motherland*, as the finished work is entitled, is both a book and exhibition. Roberts procured an amazing degree of access to a country that still harbours a large amount of official suspicion of Western photographers. He captures the naked truth of life in the farthest-flung reaches of this wonderful country, and allows his subjects to speak for themselves.

Simon Calder, Travel Editor, The Independent on Saturday

“The first book, by Simon Roberts, is a trip around Russia called *Motherland*. It’s a loving look at the country, in a geographically chronological pictorial journey that Roberts took. His photographs, of the landscapes, architecture and people, are truly beautiful studies of vastness — from the idyllic countryside of the Asian far east to the young metropolitan, European west. If Roberts’s Russia were an enormous party, he’d be working the room, sashaying from pretty young train conductors to Eminem-shirt-wearing high schoolers to ruins in Chechnya. From a Westerner’s perspective (think Stephen Shore’s road trip work), Roberts captures Russia with profundity and a blithe sense of humor — the necessary ingredients to such an enormous bowl of punch.”

Editor, Tokion Magazine

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Please contact Chris Boot Ltd, email: chris@chrisboot.com,
tel: 011 44 20 7639 2908