Helena Goscilo, ed.

Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 220 pp. $165.00 (hb), ISBN 9780415528511.

Putin's image has been a key part of his political armory since he became Prime Minister in 1999. As President of the Russian Federation since 2000, Putin and his advisors have worked hard to portray him as the embodiment of Russian and political virtues. It is debatable how great an impact Putin's image has had on his popularity independently of other factors. Daniel Treisman has shown that the consistently high popularity ratings that Putin enjoyed as President were driven by economic growth as much as anything else. Take away the stellar performance of the Russian economy between 2000 and 2008, and Putin may well have been about as popular as Yeltsin had been: not very popular at all. Yet even if it is difficult to assess the impact of Putin's image on his opinion poll ratings some account still needs to be given of his image and image-making. Whatever else happens in Russian politics one of the enduring legacies of the Putin era will be the personalization of politics as spectacle (as opposed to the personalization of politics as patronalism; which is a Russian constant). Even the opposition is in on the act with the growing cult of Alexei Navalny. No Russian leader has had an image like Putin's. Soviet leadership cults were fairly predicatable. The Soviet leader was an abstracted version of the paternal Communist Party, omniscient and omnipresent. After Stalin there was very little sense of a personal connection to the leader. Even popular responses to the leader cult were devoid of any real sense of connection to the leader. Jokes about Soviet leaders – think of all those jokes about Brezhnev and his senility – were often anaemic. They portrayed awareness that the cult was a sham, that there was a “gap between word and deed” as Gorbachev put it, but they did not expose this sham with great animosity. There was a “that’s the way the world is” resignation to them that reinforced the distance between the public world of the cult and the “real” private world in which people lived and which had meaning for them.

Putin's cult is not like this at all. Putin is very “real.” The reality of Putin's cult does not depend on the schemes that his spin-doctors cook up, but on the way that they are translated through media and on the commercial, popular and oppositional use of them. These give Putin's cult layers and dimensions that are broader and deeper than previous leader cults. As Helena Goscilo notes in the introduction to her edited volume on Putin's image, the establishment of Putin as a brand and a celebrity is in tune with the times. The politics of ‘spectacle' really arrives in Russia in the 2000s with economic prosperity...
and the mass consumption and new media that this prosperity allowed to bloom.

The chapters in this book put the cult, the products and media that it creates and that create it, and their reception in context. Much of the analysis deals with positive – official and unofficial – representations of Putin. The lack of an extended analysis of negative representations of Putin is disappointing, although the subject comes up in most chapters. It probably reflects the fact that this volume was put together before the “meme wars” between pro- and anti-Putin forces went from being a cold to a hot war during the 2011–2012 electoral cycle. Still, despite the lack of a sustained analysis of oppositional representations of Putin the volume as a whole shows what the opposition is up against and the scale of the task before them as they try to dent Putin’s image and standing with the Russian public.

The volume starts with an essay by Goscilo on Putin as an objet d’art. Goscilo looks at the various visual representations of Putin, official, commercial and high art, and relates these to other representations of his image. The range of images that have been produced about Putin, Goscilo argues, reflect his political opacity, the absence of concrete ideological positions outside of “motherhood and apple-pie issues” such as Russia should once again be made great. This is probably correct and as Goscilo points out it means that the majority of images created about Putin are produced commercially or by sycophantic artists. It also blunts power of some of the critical images of Putin that Goscilo looks at—sometimes they reinforce, as much as satirize, the features of Putin that make him popular, such as his Russianness.

Julie Cassiday and Emily Johnson look at the Putin’s cult as a cult for a postmodern age. They note the differences between the Putin cult and earlier cults that we have already discussed, and also point out that there is an element of nostalgia about the Putin cult that makes it about more than him. In this reading the Putin cult is a fixed point in what is otherwise a shifting and formless political and socio-economic environment. Putin is something to hang on to and depend on, in other words, a notion that is reinforced by official portrayals of his steadfastness and decisiveness. Ultimately, however, and although some of the constructions of Putin mimic past cult elements, the technological and commercial environment mean that the Putin cult links to a new form of authoritarian politics; this is not a neo-Soviet cult, but a post-Soviet one.

Tatiana Mikhailova’s chapter softens this picture a little by discussing the way that Putin’s image is tempered by his association with animals. These, she argues, are used to show “caring” and even “feminine” aspects of the image of