

REVIEWS

Real Soviet Lives?

Comrades

Alan Bookbinder, Olivia Lichtenstein,
Richard Denton
BBC, £11.95

BBC-2's *Comrades* series has already been well-received; people seem fascinated and surprised by it, and comment that they have not had the opportunity to see anything like it before. The accompanying book, devoting a chapter to each of the 12 Soviet citizens featured, is a welcome complement. The three author/producers have explained their project as an attempt to show the day-to-day life of ordinary Soviet citizens without addressing overtly 'political' questions, an approach which seems to have ensured a generally good working relationship with the relevant Soviet authorities.

The book is well-illustrated but avoids falling into the coffee-table trap, and there are some particularly fine photographs of Samarkand and of Leningrad in winter.

Most of the book is written by Alan Bookbinder and Olivia Lichtenstein. Both write well, and seem primarily motivated by genuine interest in and respect for the Soviet Union, its history, and its citizens. Inevitably, they make political comments as they go along - more in the book than in the tv programmes (judging by the first three which I had seen at the time of writing). Most of the analyses which the authors do offer seem to come from their own knowledge rather than from opinions voiced by the subjects of the films.

Since there is not much space in the book for the political comments, they tend to appear rather cursory; but I doubt whether the overall result is a political weighting with which either the BBC or the producers' Soviet counterparts would be unhappy.

The people on whom the book focuses are geographically, ethnically, and socially highly diverse, with an even balance between the sexes - an Uzbek restorer of mosques, an Estonian fashion designer, a southern Russian collective farm family. However, one sometimes suspects that the opportunity to travel and film off the beaten track has rather got the better of the producers. There is very little sense of what an 'ordinary' urban industrial or clerical job is like in the Soviet Union. The only industrial workers, male or female, who are featured are a Caspian Sea factory

football team whose leisure activities are the main focus of attention. Some of the out-of-the-ordinary studies are certainly fascinating: hunters in Siberia, an internationally-renowned Moscow eye surgeon, and the unorthodox Leningrad jazz musician, Sergei Kuryokhin.

The first two programmes of the series seemed to succeed well in filming two fairly typical young Russians at the time of



their rites of passage into adult life. 21-year old Rita Tikhonova was seen completing her teacher training course in Moscow and starting her first job, and in *War and Peace* the camera followed 18-year old Valera Krylov into the first weeks of his military service.

Both films gave an impression of a basically rather conservative society, with a firm belief in the family, the importance of ritual and patriotic values, and with little evidence of large gaps between the values of older and younger generations. Military service was seen as a patriotic duty by both parents and son, although Valera Krylov also expressed the view that it would make a 'real man' of him. Throughout the book there are a number of occasions on which equally traditional views of gender roles are expressed by both men and women, and the book's treatment of questions of sex and gender is one of its most intriguing aspects. However, there is a certain discontinuity between the authors' paranthetical comments on high divorce rates and other social problems and the generally contented people whom they tend to choose as subjects.

Matters of international politics and even of attitudes to foreign countries intrude into *Comrades* only occasionally, and

few of the Soviet citizens portrayed are Communist party members. The authors themselves say in their introduction that the vast majority of Russians are indifferent to politics, and there is certainly no impression of a highly politicised society, if politicisation is equated with activism. However, it isn't easy to assess the evidence presented, given the stated preference for avoiding political investigation. The impression created by the Leningrad musicians is that their preference for a private existence is an implicit criticism of over-politicisation of public life in general, although they deny that music has anything to do with politics.

The strength of *Comrades*, both as a tv series and as a book, lies not in its political analysis but in its capacity to make its subjects' distant lives seem comprehensible and real. There is a palpable sense of shock and bereavement when the Leningrad film-director Dinara Asanova dies in the course of her time with the BBC crew, and one can also sense the feeling of loss of the Krylov parents when their son leaves home to go into the army. If you haven't been watching it, it is well worth trying to see the last few episodes.

Gerard Holden