

The Good Book Guide

RUSSIA 1855-1991. FROM TSARS TO COMMISSARS by Peter Oxley. Oxford - Advanced History series, 2001. 304 pp. Index. £15.00 pbk.

My initial reaction to this text was very favourable. It is comprehensive for our specifications and, indeed, many others as charted in detail on pages 5 and 6. Use of less than full page width text columns gives wide margins and space for items such as 'Quotation', 'Note', 'Think about', 'Timeline', 'Facts and figures', 'Activity', and 'Biography'. Pictures, maps, diagrams and sources are liberally incorporated. The text is well broken by subheadings: no chapter is too daunting or indigestible for students and ready location of passages is enabled.

Teachers want class texts to be up to date, comprehensive and reliable, a role that Peter Oxley's books fills but, in addition, they choose texts that complement their individual teaching methods. Although this book was adopted by the department, we used a less-broken account in a topic text for the delivery of the important foundation narrative, preparatory to class analysis and debate. Oxley's admirable book was used, increasingly, only for occasional reference, especially the illuminating 'spotlight' case studies. Reviewers' preferences are necessarily singular and it can be assumed that *Russia 1855-1991. From Tsars to Commissars* will be a favoured text for many whose AS or A2 units fall within these 150 years.

Tom Wells

THE FASCIST EXPERIENCE IN ITALY by John Pollard. Routledge - Sources in History series, 1998. xiii + 158 pp. Index. £15.99 pbk.

This excellent book begins with the early stages of Italian Fascism, its emerging strands during Unification, before focusing primarily on the Mussolini period - the March on Rome; the consolidation of power; the Regime; its economic and social policies; foreign policy; and the impact of Second World War. The story is brought up to date with a section exploring the legacy of Italian Fascism. There is a really useful glossary and an excellent annotated guide to further reading, as well as a guide to good fiction and films that are about Fascism.

As is common with this series, the text introduces and links together a selection of sources on each of the topics considered. These sources are thus placed firmly in context and evaluated within the narrative of the text. The author effortlessly summarises the current state of historical debate about Mussolini and



Italian Fascism, and the sections on the pre-history of Fascism and its legacy are particularly good. The language is a little complex in places, so perhaps this is more of a teacher's book, or suitable for literate A2 students rather than AS. Teachers, probably, will make most use of this book for sources - the range and selection is superb - for constructing coursework or examination activities. This is an interesting summary of the main areas of debate about Italian Fascism and it is certainly worthy of a close inspection.

Alf Wilkinson

HITLER, CHAMBERLAIN AND APPEASEMENT by Frank McDonough. Cambridge - Perspectives in History series, 2002. iv + 92 pp. Index. £7.50 pbk.

Another short study of Appeasement - can an already bursting market find room? Yes, if the newcomer has something interesting to say. Alas, this volume, despite two good chapters disappoints.

The overall pattern is unexceptionable. Each of the six chapters is subdivided into digestible segments, concluding with a selection of brief documentary extracts and a series of questions. However, the documents are not very inspiring, and the questions mostly of the 'comprehension' variety.

The opening chapter considers, briefly, Anglo-German relations 1918-33. Then Hitler's foreign policy aims are assessed. The best parts of the book look at the motives for Appeasement and the historical debate about the policy's merits. Both chapters are wideranging, balanced and fair. But the heart of the study, considerations of Appeasement before and after Munich, gives heavily biased interpretations which ignore key factors. For example, the impression is given that serious rearmament only

began after Munich, whereas negotiating from growing strength had been Chamberlain's policy since becoming Prime Minister. Also, McDonough naively assumes that Russia would have honoured its obligations to Czechoslovakia in 1938 if France had done so. He ignores Poland's refusal in 1939 to have any agreement with Russia, which was a key factor in Chamberlain's unease about a British/French/Russian 'Grand Alliance' against Hitler.

Illustrations are reasonable, although one map has a shading error. Chamberlain and Appeasement will continue to attract discussion, but this volume will add little to the debate.

John Garland

THE POLITICS OF CRISIS: AN INTERPRETATION OF BRITISH POLITICS, 1931-1945 by Geoffrey K. Fry. Palgrave, 2001. x + 304 pp. Index. £47.50 hbk.

This book is trumpeted as 'a challenging and new interpretation' of the 1931-45 period, and yet nowhere is this interpretation specified. Admittedly, the author is more complimentary than is traditional about the National Government's social and economic policies, just as his critique of Chamberlain's Appeasement gives unusual weight to neglect of the Army. But none of its ideas is actually new. In addition, it is marred by occasional poor grammar and slapdash proof-reading, by over-long paragraphs (sometimes over two pages in length) and by some turgid prose that reminded me of Ramsay MacDonald's, as well as by a complicated reference system which will deter all but the most dedicated. Occasionally, as when detailing almost half a page of unemployment statistics, Fry would have done better - even at the risk of his book appearing more like a textbook than a monograph - to present information in tabular form.

Yet, in parts, it is brilliantly written. There are lively portraits of individuals (see, for instance, that of Montagu Norman), the judgements are often pungent and provocative (for example, on American anti-imperialist cant), and there are some well-chosen quotations. Fry gives a particularly fine account of Churchill's wartime administration and of the factors that produced Labour's victory in 1945. In short, the book is a paradox. Adventurous students with an existing knowledge of the period will find this a rewarding and nuanced, if occasionally annoying and needlessly difficult, account.

Robert Pearce