



**Cosmos and materiality in early modern Prague by Suzanna Ivanič
(review)**

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Cosmos and Materiality in Early Modern Prague by Suzanna
Ivanič (review)

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figures and events, in point of fact it has been a convenient semi-vegetarian way of dealing with the complexities of life in northern climes where much of the population has very little disposable income. Even more dire are the actual famines, crop failures due to weather events that recurred at irregular intervals, and politically induced famines, particularly in the Stalin era. Smith synthesizes the latest research, including on collectivization famines in Kazakhstan and Ukraine, placing them into context with other twentieth-century famines and laying blame where it belongs.

Indeed, chapter seven of the monograph is entitled ‘Hunger and Plenty: The Soviet Experience’, and in this one relatively short chapter Smith characterizes changes to cuisine in the modern era, including the rise of ‘conserves’ and other processed foods, attempts to create Soviet and communal solutions to daily dining problems via ‘social nutrition’ or *obshchepit*, and shifting tastes that embraced internationalization, with Ukrainian, Georgian, Central Asian and Siberian dishes, among others, seeming now to be part of Russian cuisine, and nominal ‘foreign’ entries into Moscow restaurant culture in particular by such friends of Socialism as India, Bulgaria and the Czech lands. Here — as throughout the book — the scholar’s erudition is on display, as she crafts clear and detailed descriptions of sometimes horrifying occurrences without any drama. It is obvious that she loves her topic, the country and its peoples, and she portrays the history evenly and without judgment.

Because the book is so comprehensive, I would recommend it as a textbook not only for courses on food and cuisine but on Russian history more generally. Smith has achieved a real feat in making the history of Russia palatable for a broad swathe of readers.

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Ivanič, Suzanna. *Cosmos and Materiality in Early Modern Prague*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2021. xii + 244 pp. Illustrations. Notes on orthography and pronunciation. Chronology. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. £75.00.

RELIGIOUS studies of seventeenth-century Prague can, too often, treat the city’s rich and changing religious culture as homogenic, in which individuals took up the spiritual directives of their leaders as a matter of course. Ivanič’s meticulous and absorbing study of the personal possessions of a range of Prague’s Burghers across the century confronts, complicates and ultimately dismantles this narrative.

The introduction of *Cosmos* sets out how Ivanič will approach the analysis of objects for her study, building on the work of, among others, David Morgan

and Dick Houtman and Bridgit Meyer. Her anthropologically-informed approach allows the book to ‘examine how objects and the material record can cast light on everyday religion’, with an understanding that ‘[r]eligion itself can no longer be seen merely as consisting of texts and ideas, but is instead a cultural force pervading and emanating from the material landscape’ (p. 11).

In the first chapter Ivanič introduces seventeenth-century Prague. She deftly presents a picture of the city as it thrived as host to the court of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1562–1612). Ivanič gives detailed information about the city’s population and topography (religious and otherwise), to describe what she terms Prague’s ‘cosmos of beliefs’ (p. 43), which allowed its residents to navigate their relationships with God via physical, tangible objects. The chapter would serve well as an introduction to seventeenth-century Prague generally for interested audiences, and also does well to set up some of Ivanič’s key arguments.

The book then moves into its first section, titled ‘A Shared Cosmos’, the first chapter of which focuses on natural matter in the belongings of Prague Burghers. Here Ivanič shows that strict categories of ‘religious’ or ‘secular’ are misplaced when considering various objects. Instead, we must consider that animal teeth and paws, gemstones, or the special clay *Terra sigillata* need to be understood as possessing, as Rudolf II’s physician Anselmus Boetius de Boodt (1550–1632) put it, ‘a certain reflection of the gleam of divinity’ (p. 56), which could allow humans to navigate their cosmos. The second chapter of the first section then examines the way goods were exchanged among kinship groups in Prague to show how gifts, such as wedding rings, baptismal spoons and bibles, established and embellished relationships. The section ends in a third chapter which analyses how together these objects created a personal and ever-changing cosmos. Here, Ivanič builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s studies of the object-human relationship to show how both artisans and collectors created a vernacular of items which spanned confessions and shaped how people acted in their homes. It is a particularly incisive section and brings to mind the work of Deleuze and Guattari on productive desire, which I would be excited to see Ivanič incorporate into her work in the future.

The second section on ‘Cosmos and Confessions’ applies these concepts in its first chapter to an analysis of the belongings of the clockmaker Kúndrat Šteffenaúr in 1635. We see that Šteffenaúr’s collection of objects seems to reflect a cross-confessional understanding of the world that is specific to Prague and presented its early seventeenth-century inhabitants with options above all else. This section is especially compelling, and I would be interested to see what Ivanič might make of conceptions of imaginary pilgrimage in regards to Šteffenaúr’s ownership of the *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae* (pp. 149–50) — a description of the sacred topography of the bible. The next chapter considers the ‘fracturing of universal Christianity’ (p. 153), and how shifts in belief are

reflected in possessions. Here we are given a particularly interesting analysis of the (relatively late) adoption of the rosary in Prague over the century. The final chapter in this section considers what scholars have termed the *pietas Bohemica*, or specifically, Czech baroque expressions of Catholic faith. Ivanič's findings here corroborate those of Marc Forster and show that the cultural process of the Counter-Reformation was more about elaborating on established religious understandings rather than eliminating them in favour of a foreign Catholic tradition.

Ivanič's conclusion makes the persuasive argument that interpretation of possessions reveals that Prague's seventeenth-century inhabitants acted 'not as Catholics or Protestants, but as citizens of Prague' (pp. 205–06). So detailed is Cosmos's analysis and so descriptive its prose that it should become a staple text on early-modern Prague's religious culture. One hopes that it will also bring about an end to lazy generalizations and inspire scholars of the Counter-Reformation who do not ordinarily look at the Czech lands to learn more about this unique urban culture.

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Herzberg, Julia; Renner, Andreas and Schierle, Ingrid (eds). *The Russian Cold: Histories of Ice, Frost, and Snow*. The Environment in History: International Perspectives, 22. Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2021. vii + 261 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Tables. Notes. Bibliographies. Index. \$145.00; £107.00.

JULIA HERZBERG continues to make important interventions in the field by focusing on the history of the environment and its influence over Russian and Soviet history. This new volume, edited alongside Andreas Renner and Ingrid Schierle, follows an earlier volume by Herzberg, Christian Kehrt and Franziska Torma — *Ice and Snow in the Cold War: Histories of Extreme Climatic Environments* (New York and Oxford, 2018). The two volumes significantly overlap in their focus on the twentieth century, though the earlier encompassed a broader geography while the current volume centres on the Soviet Union in eight of its eleven chapters. *The Russian Cold* also contains three chapters that look back into the pre-revolutionary era — two by Herzberg on the eighteenth century and one on views of Siberia in the late imperial press by Nataliia Rodigina. The earlier chapters are an important addition here, as the themes raised demonstrate that scientific and popular conceptions of the influence of the cold have a long history, of which the Soviet iterations reflected historical developments rather than modern innovations.