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Portraits of a Century At Lumiere Brothers

By Joel Lewin

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Children are a frequent subject in the exhibit, which mixes never seen before shots alongside Soviet classics. **Vladimir Filonov**

Hundreds of faces line the walls of the Brothers Lumiere Center of Photography as part of its latest exhibit, "We. People of the Country," smiling, laughing, joyful, proud, "a portrait of a century," the organizers say, from a Russian century that was far often more cruel than kind.

Most of the 300 portraits come from the times of Soviet rule with a few exceptions, such as a shot from 1900 of a barge hauler on the Volga River. The selection is a mix of shots never seen before and iconic shots from Soviet greats such as Mark Markov-Grinberg, many of them from the covers of Soviet periodicals like Ogonek and Rabotnitsa.

"We particularly like positive photography," said Natalya Ponomareva, the curator of the exhibit. "This exhibition is for the individual, it's not about politics. We're not trying to say whether the Soviet Union was good or bad."

Many of the shots show children, or workers caught in proud poses, such as in Yakov Khalip's famed shot "Thirst" from 1958, which shows a worker quenching his thirst, water cascading down his chest.

Boris Yaroslavtsev's jocularly titled "Bombardment Again!" from 1942 shows a group of children peering out of a hole in a wall, their expressions mixed with both fear and curiosity.

Recent visitors were enthused by the shots, boosted by the optimism that beams out of the portraits and that organizers say they tried to express with their choices.

"It's a wonderfully expressive exhibition. The portraits really grab you. It's so full of life," said one visitor, Ira Korenchenko, 25.

"Older people will see themselves and their parents here, while younger people will learn about their parents and their country," Ponomareva said.

Anyone looking for introspection or an examination of the ideology behind the photo style or the varied times when the pictures were taken will not find it here.

"I said that this exhibition isn't about politics, but maybe it is slightly political. You see, what really matters for me is that I'd like people to be a bit kinder to each other," Ponomareva said.

The photos tell of one story of "a white-toothed, smiling, clear-eyed, hardworking, family loving and respectful of the elderly, happy country," Kommersant critic Kira Dolinina wrote.

The fact that we know that the reality was somewhat different does not destroy the illusion, she added. It is simply a family album where only the happy and joyful photos have been pasted in. "And we love it for exactly that."

"We. People of the Country" runs through Sept. 16. Brothers Lumiere Center of Photography. 3 Bolotnaya Naberezhnaya. Metro Kropotkinskaya. Tel. (495) 228-98-78. www.lumiere.ru

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