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Engineers of the Soul: In the Footsteps of Stalin's Writers

Frank Westerman

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A brilliant fusion of travel writing and Soviet history which reads like Bruce Chatwin. **Engineers of the Soul** is the riveting story of two journeys -- one literal, one imaginary -- through contemporary Russia and through Soviet-era literature.

Travelling through present and past, Frank Westerman draws the reader into the wild euphoria of the Russian Revolution, as art and reality are bent to radically new purposes. Writers of renown, described by Stalin as 'engineers of the soul', were encouraged to sing the praises of canal and dam construction under titles such as Energy, The Hydraulic Power Station and Onward, Time! But their enthusiasm -- spontaneous and idealistic at first -- soon becomes an obligatory song of praise. And as these colossal waterworks lead to slavery and destruction, Soviet writers labour on in the service of a deluded totalitarian society.

Combining investigative journalism with literary history, Westerman examines both the landscape of 'Oriental despotism' and the books -- and lives -- of writers caught in the wheels of the system. 'It is easy to die a hero's death,' wrote Konstantin Paustovsky, 'but it is difficult to live a hero's life.' Engineers of the Soul sweeps the reader along to the dramatic dénouement: the final confrontation between writers and engineers that signalled the end of the Soviet empire.

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