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Robert Service. *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. xxxiii + 653 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-40347-5.

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Triumph, Tragedy, and the Burden of the Past: Russia's Legacy in the Twentieth Century

The fall of the Soviet Union, the opening of formerly closed archives, and closer cooperation between Western and Russian scholars have not only led to significant breakthroughs in research, but have spurred publication of new or updated narrative histories of Russia and the Soviet Union. A number of renowned historians, including John Thompson, Ronald Suny, and W.E. Mosse have recently published texts which seek to re-interpret Russian history in light of the still perplexing collapse of the seemingly immutable Soviet colossus. One of the most valuable additions to this growing body of literature is *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia* by Robert Service, a distinguished historian and author of a three-volume biography of Lenin.

Service's work is a comprehensive narrative of Russian history from 1900 to 1997. The lengthy and detailed text is the fruit of extensive research and thoughtful examination of the complex fate of Russia in the twentieth century. It is rich in facts, figures, and insightful anecdotes, all of which are interwoven into a lively, engaging and, at times, quite provocative narrative. His animated descriptions and analytical observations bring to life the personal figures in Russian and Soviet history, endowing them with the human qualities so often omitted in general histories and textbooks. The primary focus is the Soviet period, but as the title suggests, it is the intention of the author to present Soviet history as part of the larger continuum of Russian history, inextricably linked with the preceding tsarist system and the post-Communist order that has succeeded it. However, this is not a history of the entire Soviet Union. Service's main interest is the fate of Russia and the evolution of Russian politics, society, and national identity. Therefore he only deals tangentially with the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union, bringing them into the picture only when events there directly affected the entire Soviet Union, the Russian Republic, or ethnic Russians.

One of the most distinctive features of Service's work is his skillful synthesizing of traditional scholarship with recent and groundbreaking studies. The variety and range of secondary works cited by Service is impressive. Commendably, this is one of the first narrative histories to seriously consider and incorporate the work of Russian historians. Service makes frequent citations to the publications of Oleg Khlevniuk, Victor Danilov, Pavel Volobuev, Elena Osokina, and E.Yu. Zubkova, among others. The added insight and information thus gained provide convincing proof that cooperation between Western and Russian scholars can significantly augment our understanding of Soviet and Russian history. The text is also distinguished by a rich and varied resource base, which Service amply documents in his notes and in his bibliography.

Much more so than is typical for a broad historical survey, Service incorporates numerous primary sources, including materials from the Russian State Archive, the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History, the Special (*Osobyi*) Archive in Moscow, and the Smolensk Party Archives. Newly accessible documents bring fresh insight into the Civil War, internal party politics, and opposition to the Soviet regime. Additionally, throughout the text Service frequently draws from memoirs, documentary collections, and the Russian and Soviet press.

Service's interpretation of Soviet history is an intriguing synthesis of contending schools of thought. In his introduction he specifically cites as influential the

varying perspectives of the Russian Mensheviks Yuli Martov and Fedor Dan, the Russian nationalists Nikolai Berdyaev and Nikolai Ustryalov, Western proponents of modernizing theory E.H. Carr and Barrington Moore, and the totalitarian school of Rudolf Hilferding, Leonard Shapiro, and Merle Fainsod (pp. xxiii-xxiv). In addition, he draws much from the work of Leon Trotsky and Milovan Djilas concerning the formation of a privileged bureaucratic elite and the impact of this social phenomenon on the nature and evolution of the Soviet system.

Service seeks to modify totalitarian theory by examining the full dynamics of the state-society relationship in the Soviet Union. In his view, the Soviet state was totalitarian in its goals and intentions, but not in its actual functioning. The Soviet one-party state sought through repressive means to achieve complete control over state and society. But, Service postulates, it never achieved this goal due to a series of factors, including popular intransigence, the stubborn retention of traditional ways, and the political inexperience as well as ineptitude of Communist Party leadership. Soviet policies simply did not often produce the desired results. There were real limits on the capacity of the regime to compel obedience, and attempts to overcome these obstacles usually resulted in unintended, de-stabilizing consequences. Central party and state policies could be modified, ignored, "even emasculated" (p. 252).

According to Service, "the deep intimidation of the populace was a fundamental, abiding facet of Soviet rule. Yet administrative informality and disarray–and even gross disorder–as well as hyper-orderliness were basic features of life in the USSR throughout its existence" (p. xxv). The Communist totalitarian state failed to prevent the formation of local patronage networks, described as "nests" or "family circles" (p. 242), which often functioned independently of the center. Neither did the Party enjoy full unchallenged rule, but had its policy-making powers limited by other institutions such as the Army, the economic ministries, and the state bureaucracy (p. 346). The system was often in flux, with considerable internal dissension between elites, a situation hardly in keeping with standard images of the totalitarian state. This contradiction between the hegemonic aspirations of the state and the truly limited scope of its authority developed at the very beginning of Bolshevik rule and remained a decisive factor shaping internal and external policy lines over the next seven decades.

The author's exploration of Soviet totalitarianism also convincingly disproves the standard conception of Soviet people as submissive, slavish followers of Communist Party decrees, or demoralized victims of an oppressive totalitarian regime. He shows consistently how large numbers of Soviet citizens either opposed or passively resisted the desires and expectations of the state, sometimes through direct action such as strikes but more often through slack work habits, pilfering, or deliberate falsification of information and records. Never becoming fully indoctrinated, Soviet people retained their own memories and customs, and they had their own private ways of coping with the pressures of modernization and the near total ideologization of their lives.

Politics and political change are the primary focus for Service and constitute the major framework for his presentation of Russian history. He divides the text into four main parts, each of which are defined by major political events and transitions in Soviet history. The narrative begins in 1900, and traces, in two preliminary chapters, the Russian Revolution of 1905, World War I, and the fall of the Romanov dynasty in 1917. Part One covers the period from the February Revolution through the New Economic Policy (1921-1929) and the struggle for power within the Communist Party following the death of Lenin. The Stalinist period from the First Five-Year Plan through the end of World War II constitutes Part Two. Part Three takes the reader from 1945 to 1970, covering the onset of the Cold War, de-Stalinization, and the onset of Brezhnevian reactionism. The end of the Brezhnev era and the rise and fall of Gorbachev's reform program are the central focus of Part Four. Service concludes Part Four with two chapters that consider the "new" Russia of Boris Yeltsin, analyzing the problematic transition to democracy and a capitalist market through the beginning of 1997.

Despite a heavy emphasis on politics, Service's work is panoramic in scope. He moves away periodically from high politics to explore the complex relationship between state and society. Perplexing contradictions emerge: the mixture of highly respectable social ideals and horrific human tragedies, widespread public support and deep political alienation, thoroughly penetrating propaganda machinery and yet a blatant inability of the state to sustain itself without coercion and forced ideological monotheism. Postulating that popular acceptance of the regime and its seventy-four year existence did not simply stem from fear or from coercion, Service contends that the populace was won over through an elaborate system of privilege, rewards, and bonuses. Concrete accomplishments by the regime cemented popular support, including full employment, subsidized housing, food, clothing,

and health care; universal literacy and broad public access to education and culture; the defeat of Nazi Germany and its emergence as a military superpower; rapid industrialization, etc. (p. 549). Yet in the end, the costs of this system, and its inherent inefficiencies, produced deep political alienation and nationalist dissension, forces which found expression during the perestroika period as well as the means to dismantle the Soviet system.

Service includes in his treatment of each major stage in Russian history discussions of social, economic, and cultural developments. There are vivid descriptions of living and working conditions, social relations and social problems of workers, peasants, and intellectuals. The author also penetrates the privileged world of the Soviet administrative elite, which the author sees as the key social base and bastion for the Soviet system. He provides information on mass literacy and mobilization campaigns, the growth of mass cultural and leisure institutions, and the responses of worker and peasants to such initiatives on the part of the regime. But the coverage of non-political issues is variable. The chapters on the revolutionary period and Stalinism seem to have more social and cultural history than those on the post-Stalinist years, where attention is concentrated on the policies and political behavior of Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin.

Among the most outstanding sections of the text, in terms of clarity, scope, and analytical depth, are those dealing with Stalinism and with the period after 1985. Service offers insight into Stalin, his personality, motives and extensive influence on the Soviet system, but also examines the social fabric to explore why and how Soviet people accepted Stalinist policies. The author follows Volkogonov, Medvedev, Conquest and others in emphasizing Stalin's own personal role in defining and carrying out the excessive and costly policies of rapid modernization and the bloody rampages of the Great Terror. He argues that the Terror was driven by Stalin's ruthless ambition for absolute political control, his paranoia over emerging social opposition and resentment, his desire for scapegoats, and his need for cheap prison labor (pp. 210-211). But Service also depicts the internal forces that drove the Terror, in particular the significant social support that existed within Soviet society for its harsh system of justice. He emphasizes the devastating impact of Stalinism on the arts, on culture, and on science, but also recognizes the real achievements in literacy, education, culture, economic development, and military security, which helped to cement popular support for the Soviet regime.

The author also deals at length with the question of Stalinism's origins, particularly its linkage to Lenin and Bolshevism, which he clearly affirms. He notes that Bolshevism was predisposed to a "high degree of state economic dominance, administrative arbitrariness, ideological intolerance, and political violence" (p. 123) and that already in 1918 "the movement towards a centralized, ideocratic dictatorship of a single party had been started"(p. 99). Yet Service also draws clear distinction between Lenin and Stalin as leaders and as human beings, arguing that Lenin would not have countenanced the Great Terror. Stalinism, as he explains, became a distinct phenomenon that "drastically rearranged and reinforced the compound of the Soviet order," altered national and cultural policies, and "crudified politics and hypercentralized administrative institutions" (p. 169).

The presentation of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods offers a concise but comprehensive narrative of events. Service depicts the conditions which led the energetic Mikhail Gorbachev to attempt a far-reaching program of reform and offers a clear and convincing analysis of what went wrong with perestroika. Service comes out on the side of those who view Gorbachev as a reluctant revolutionary, one who began his reforms to preserve the one-party, one-ideology state bequeathed to him by his Bolshevik predecessors, but without a clearly defined strategy or a realistic sense of what the consequences of his policies would be. "Although he radicalized his proposals, he did this always more slowly than the pace of the deepening crisis over the economy, the republics, the administration and the personnel of the Soviet order" (p. 486). Gorbachev, in the words of Service, was Russia's "holy fool," attempting to change the system without realizing that these changes were undermining precisely what he sought to preserve (p. 466).

Unfortunately, Service only feebly attempts to resolve the contradictions he notes in Gorbachev. He offers only superficial insight into why Gorbachev appointed such reactionaries as Pavlov and Yanaev, and why he ignored warnings of a coup from top-level sources; the author attributes such behavior to tiredness and arrogance, an explanation which needs deeper elaboration than what the text offers. Yeltsin, in Service's view, has fared little better than Gorbachev, conducting policies which have reproduced elements of violence, centralized control, and arbitrary administration found in the preceding decades. Service worries that Russia has not yet either fully "decommunized" itself, nor has it developed a clear national identity. But he concludes his text with cautious optimism that Russia may yet surprise people, as it has done

throughout the twentieth century, and be able to utilize its abundant resources to build a civic society defined and regulated by concrete laws and accepted political values (p. 553).

The book is accessible to the general reader, though its size may be daunting to the non-specialist. It certainly will make an excellent resource for those studying and teaching Russian and Soviet history. I found it one of the more readable narrative histories, one that held my attention and even had me eagerly anticipating the author's next point or topic. Service's insightful commentary and anecdotal flourishes keep the text from becoming a monotonous series of facts and figures. In addition, students, researchers, teachers, and general readers can benefit from the text's extensive documentation of sources and detailed bibliography.

Although Service does not discuss the potential of this work as a textbook, it certainly can be used as such, though it is probably best suited for advanced or graduate student courses rather than for an undergraduate survey. Regrettably, the text lacks pedagogical aides. Students with little background in Russian history, Russian revolutionary radicalism, Marxism, or European socialism may get lost or confused, for the author begins in 1900 and provides only minimal explanation of trends prior to this period. There are few visual sources: five black and white maps at the beginning and six black and white reproductions of Russian and Soviet political cartoons dispersed throughout the text. Also problematic for beginning students is the text's loose internal organization. There are no thematic subdivisions or subtitles within chapters to signal where the narrative is going, nor is there a recognizable pattern in the presentation of different themes. Service tends to jump randomly from politics to economics to culture, or from the top leadership to groups within society without any warning to the reader, and each chapter is different in the mixture of themes presented.

The free flowing discourse makes the text highly readable, but may hinder a student's capacity to categorize and retain the given information. Service's focus does expand beyond politics, as discussed above, but if used as a text, instructors would need to supplement with materials that dealt more thoroughly with social, economic, cultural, and nationalist issues. Service does trace nationalist tensions over the seven decades of Soviet rule and deals with nationalism as one of the factors that helped bring down the Soviet Union. He devotes several pages to the formation of the federal system and the disagreements between Lenin and Stalin over this structure. But on the whole the coverage of nationalism and the non-Russian republics is limited and would require supplementation. Foreign policy is also covered far less thoroughly than domestic politics and internal issues. Treatment of the international context is minimal, except in the chapters on World War II and on the Khrushchev and Gorbachev eras.

Certain points of criticism are in order. It may have been more useful for scholars had the author given the original source for many of his facts and anecdotes. He often cites only the secondary work, including his own, but does not give information on what the original source was. In his brief introductory survey on historiography, Service curiously omitted any direct discussion or reference to revisionist scholarship and debates of the eighties and nineties, though his analytical approach certainly seems to draw from the efforts of revisionist scholars to modify totalitarian theory and focus more on society and social consciousness.

Service is less than successful in his attempt to introduce a new conceptual device for analyzing the dynamics of Soviet history. Throughout the text, he employs the imagery of a chemical "compound" to conceptualize the Soviet state with its constituent elements of political centralism, dictatorship, lawlessness, and state ownership (p. xxv). But this concept of the "compound" offers little original insight into the nature or dynamics of the Soviet system; it simply represents yet another euphemism or descriptive term for the Soviet party-state. Omitting this image from the narrative and substituting "system" or "order" instead of compound would seemingly make little difference in Service's analysis of Soviet history and politics.

Moreover, the attempt of the author to depict Soviet history solely through the prism of Russia is problematic and even artificial. It seems that what is most needed now are works that help us to avoid the traditional Russo-centric approach to Soviet history by reinvestigating the relationship between the center and the non-Russian nationalities. Certainly it is difficult to adequately explain the dissolution of the Soviet Union without having traced more thoroughly than does Service nationalist issues, tensions, and aspirations. Readers may desire more analysis and less narration of facts within the text. Service provides clear and thoughtful interpretations of the overall movement of Russian and Soviet history, but he presents the analysis primarily in his introduction and afterword, rather than in the context of

the narrative. One may question whether Service adequately deals with the contradictions he so richly depicts. He does not fully explain why the state failed to achieve its totalitarian goals or why it produced such chaos and instability despite its centralizing nature. Nor does he concretely resolve for the reader the seeming contradiction between the resistant, anti-regime behavior he describes and the continued widespread social support for the Soviet state and its goals.

However, given the purpose of the book–the narration of Russian history–and its ambitious scope, one should not fault Service too much for the lack of analytical depth. To achieve the broad coverage of events found in this text, sacrifices had to be made, and no one period can be as fully analyzed as its particular specialists or students may desire. Service's purpose is to synthesize, crafting new and old facts into a narrative that is logical and lucid, and this goal is laudably achieved. Of course, one can certainly dispute Service's presentation of specific events and issues such as the October Revolution, the origins of Stalinism, the role of personality in Soviet history, and the fall of the Soviet Union. But this is precisely what makes this book such a valuable addition to current scholarship. It can serve as a catalyst for debate and discussion in classrooms, at conferences, and in our own individual minds.

Overall, the strengths of the book are many, and in the opinion of this reviewer, significantly outweigh the problems that have been noted. I would recommend Service's *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia* to anyone as an excellent reference tool for the study of Russian and Soviet history. It contains a wealth of factual and anecdotal material, updated research findings, and thought-provoking interpretations. For specialists and non-specialists alike, it provides an enjoyable and informative journey through the traumas, triumphs, and tragedies of twentieth-century Russia.

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