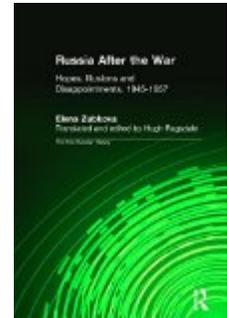




Elena Zubkova. *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957.* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998. x + 239 pp. \$91.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7656-0227-5.



Reviewed by Andrew Day

Published on H-Russia (June, 2000)

Scholarly communities tend to move in packs from topic to topic and era to era, and Western historians of the Soviet Union are no exception. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, they worked in the main on the first decade and a half of the Soviet era, with many taking as their general goal to explain how the Bolsheviks garnered enough social support to make the Revolution last.[1] Then came Communism's implosion, which brought vastly improved access to Soviet-era archival materials, and the challenge of using them to reexamine basic assumptions about a system whose collapse few had foreseen. While some responded by producing new works on the Revolution's earliest years,[2] many more turned their attention to the 1930s, a decade long considered to be a critically important period in Soviet socialism's development, but long understudied by historians.[3]

The turn to the Thirties has been fruitful. Recent works on this era have not only greatly enriched our understanding of this era, but have also challenged much of the received scholarly wisdom about it, showing that life under Stalin, and the workings of the Stalin system, were far

more dynamic and complex than traditionally supposed.[4]

Elena Zubkova's *Russia After the War* does much the same for the period she covers. Indeed, her examination of the late Stalin years reinforces many of the conclusions reached in recent studies of the Thirties. But it does much more. It provides the first in-depth account of the early post-war era, and the best analysis to date of the war's impact on both the regime and society as a whole. And in it, she makes a persuasive, if largely implicit, argument that this was a critically important period in Soviet history, because between 1943 and 1957, Stalin and his successors not only transformed the Bolshevik project, but did so in such a way as to lay the groundwork for its eventual decline and collapse.

Zubkova, Director of the Center for Contemporary History at the Russian State Humanities University, is not the first scholar to argue for this era's significance. In her landmark 1979 study of late Stalin-era literature, Vera Dunham argued that that in the wake of the war, the regime entered into a tacit social contract with those whose

professional standing and cultural credentials placed them in the Soviet "middle class." Dunham maintained that under the terms of this "Big Deal," the Party-state agreed to provide the members of this class with both a certain level of material comfort and the right to live part of their lives outside politics. In exchange, it asked only political quiescence. By entering into this arrangement, it fundamentally changed Soviet socialism, effectively renouncing its longstanding ambitions to transform society, and to keep the population in a state of constant mobilization.[5]

Zubkova makes explicit her intention to "continue and amplify" Dunham's work by mobilizing evidence from a range of newly available primary sources, most notably public-opinion reports secretly compiled for the use of regime leaders (p. 4). But she does not endeavor to prove Dunham's thesis -- in Zubkova's reading, the sources do not confirm the thesis, and indeed paint a picture of a regime that fought to avoid making any concessions to anyone. Zubkova suggests that if a "deal" did exist in the late Stalin years, it was small, and based solely on fear -- regime leaders' fear that the Soviet population might rebel if not given some real reward for winning the war.

This fear was exaggerated, but not entirely groundless. The war made ordinary people aware of their own collective power, and of the regime's dependence on them. Moreover, by placing Russia's fate in their hands, it awakened in them what Zubkova calls a "public spirit," that is, a shared sense of their own responsibility -- and right -- to play an active role in public life, a sphere the regime had heretofore reserved entirely to itself (p. 5). This placed Stalin and his cronies in an exceedingly difficult position. Unwilling to take any meaningful steps toward political liberalization, they knew that many in Soviet society expected them to do just this.

But they did not, and indeed moved resolutely to reestablish close political control over society, and to crack down on certain groups, such as

intellectuals and students, whom they considered particularly threatening. As Zubkova shows, this wave of repression was less brutal and broad than that of the late 1930s, but regime leaders were too paranoid and bound by habit even to consider the possibility that it was unnecessary. (Unfortunately, she makes no effort to explain whether the roots of this closed-mindedness lay in official ideology, Stalin's personality quirks, or some combination of these and other factors).

Rather than pressing them to introduce reforms, "the people" simply accepted their refusal to do so -- the war had made society more self-confident, but not more assertive. For Zubkova, this turn of events was tragic, but hardly inexplicable. Victory had brought a rush of genuine popular affection for the regime, which claimed and was broadly accorded the lion's share of credit for winning the struggle against Nazism. Moreover, and more significantly, people had become so accustomed to both Stalin and the Soviet project as to be effectively unable to conceive of alternatives to either, or to imagine a political system in which their collective voice would be heard and would have an impact. Everyone wanted change, but very few were prepared to do anything but hunker down and wait for it to come "from above." As Zubkova shows, this was true even of most former front-line soldiers, whose wartime experiences had given them a unique -- and often uniquely jaundiced -- perspective on Soviet reality.

And so by the late 1940s, she notes, "a coincidence of interests [had] developed [between] the government's unwillingness to engage in bold reforms, and the people's willingness to temporize" (p. 98). What about the Big Deal? If one existed, she suggests, it came only after Stalin's death. She pooh-poohs as cynical, failed tricks the Stalin regime's efforts to make consumer goods cheaper and more widely available, makes no mention of the huge housing construction campaign that began in the late 1940s, and overlooks the early

post-war expansion of the health-care system.[6] And in her account, before March 1953 no one had any real right to live a private life,[7] or to devote one's free time to non-political activity.[8] Indeed, she sees that late Stalin-era living conditions were so bad, and the regime so repressive and unforgiving, that private happiness could only exist as the absence of unhappiness (p. 85).

Change finally came after Stalin's death. But it was incomplete, and came in fits and starts, as his successors, after several years of prevarication, tacked back and forth between reform and reaction, confusing the population and severely shaking their own base of support. Could they have managed the transition better, such that it ended not in repression, but real political liberalization? Not in Zubkova's account. As Khrushchev realized, because change entailed breaking with the past, it also entailed criticizing the Stalin system. By allowing the public to participate in the latter process, he hoped to win broad support for the former. The problem: Stalin and "socialism" had, over time, become so closely identified that for most people, they were impossible to tell apart. As a result, Khrushchev's attacks on Stalin seemed to many to be attacks on the very ideal which he claimed to be defending, and in which they still fervently believed. To others, meanwhile, the official invitation to condemn Stalin's excesses was also an invitation to press for basic changes in the socialist system itself. And so within months of the Secret Speech, de-Stalinization had split Soviet society, and brought the new East European empire to the brink of revolt.

Terrified by the consequences of its actions, the regime moved quickly to deal with them, putting down the Hungarian rebellion, lashing out at students and the liberal intelligentsia, and reimposing strict limits on public discourse. Had it hesitated, Zubkova suggests, de-Stalinization might well have led to the rapid collapse of the Soviet system (pp. 191-201). The Soviet population had emerged from the war with two fervent

hopes: for a more open, less brutal political system, and for an improvement in living conditions. While Stalin's successors ultimately failed to fulfill the first, they did much to fulfill the second, particularly after de-Stalinization's failure, which made more pressing the need to shore up their base of support. They devoted enormous resources to the construction of housing and the manufacture of consumer products. They gave people more leisure time and more freedom to decide how to use it. And they expanded the quality and availability of health care and other social services. Critically, they also sought to make these things available to all. Under Stalin, one had had to earn the right to a private life, and to personal material comfort, whether by rising to a certain rank or making some extraordinary contribution to socialism. But his successors asked little in exchange for the goods, services, and privileges that made up the Soviet good life.

In the short and medium term, these efforts achieved their intended end, buying the regime a broad measure of popular support, on the basis of a social contract that largely fits the description of Dunham's Big Deal. But as Zubkova suggests, in so doing, they arguably also condemned Soviet socialism to a long, ignoble decline (pp. 175-177). The Khrushchev and Brezhnev regimes staked their claim to legitimacy on their ability to provide the general population with a constantly rising standard of living. But in their rush to do so, they turned private material well-being from a reward into an entitlement. As Zubkova shows, this had many effects, perhaps the most important of which was to make much more difficult the use of material incentives to get people to work harder. [9] This deprived the political leaders of the late Soviet period of what would likely have been their most effective tool for raising productivity [10] -- which they had to do in order to fulfill their own promises to the population. Over time, this led to a yawning gap between popular expectations and the Party-state's ability to fulfill them,

and thus, inevitably, to the collapse of popular support for the socialist project as such.[11]

Zubkova's treatment of this shift is provocative, but brief, and begs an important question: Didn't its roots extend back to the beginnings of the Soviet project, or, at very least, to the late Stalin era? After all, the regime always made plain its ambition to run the economy according to the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," and by the early postwar years, it had begun to make a real effort to do so.

She overlooks this important continuity between the Stalin and post-Stalin eras because she discounts the importance of ideology as a factor shaping the worldview and choices of Soviet politicians. It is a curious, and unfortunate, aspect of her work that throughout, she demonstrates convincingly that most ordinary people believed quite sincerely in the ideals of the system, yet presents their leaders as believing in nothing, and indeed as motivated solely by the ambition to gather and keep as much power as possible.

Russia After the War has other faults as well, although these are perhaps less serious. As Hiroaki Kuromiya has noted, the loaded term "public opinion" is used far more often than in the Russian original, and far too frequently to refer to private individuals' thoughts in the late Stalin years, when political conditions made impossible the coalescence of a true public opinion.[12] As Alexander Dallin has pointed out, each of its nineteen chapters could be the basis for a separate monograph,[13] which is perhaps another way of saying that it is at times disjointed. At times, Zubkova crafts too-broad generalizations on the basis of too little data -- perhaps the best example is her chapter on the early postwar political schemings of a few groups of young people, whom she christens "the anti-Stalinist youth movement" (p. 109-116) Finally, although M.E. Sharpe presents this as a textbook, it is probably unsuited to this task, both because certain pas-

sages (on the 1947 currency reform, for example) cannot be understood without a specialist's knowledge, and because the English translation is often stilted.

Nonetheless, this is an important work. Zubkova makes an enormous contribution to our understanding of the everyday world of what she calls "that elusive abstraction, the [Soviet] people," and argues convincingly that its relationship to the regime was very much two-sided, exceedingly dynamic, and driven largely by mutual misunderstanding and fear (p. 4). Moreover, she shows that regime leaders' efforts to broaden their base of popular support, without surrendering their exclusive hold on power, played the most important role in driving Soviet socialism's evolution from "Stalinist" to "late," and that the roots of this process can be traced back at least to the late wartime period.

Russia After the War will be an invaluable aid to historians of the Soviet Union as they turn their attention to the post-war era, begin to study the process by which Stalinism became something else, and search for the roots of the socialist system's eventual decline and collapse. Indeed, their first task will be either to elaborate or disprove arguments Zubkova has made here, or to flesh out others she has only suggested. Whatever significance historians ultimately accord her work, it will undoubtedly play a major role in shaping the way in which this era is studied and understood.

Notes

[1]. See, among many others, Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A Case Study of Collectivization*, New York, 1968; Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*, New York, 1976; Diane Koenker, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution*, Princeton, 1981; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, Oxford, 1982; Donald Raleigh, *Revolution on the Volga: 1917 in Saratov*, Ithaca, NY, 1986; and Daniel Kaiser, ed., *The Work-*

ers' *Revolution in Russia, 1917: The View From Below*, Cambridge, 1987.

[2]. See, for example, Richard Pipes, ed., *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive*, New Haven, CT, 1996; and Vladimir Brovkin, *The Mensheviks After October: Socialist Opposition and the Rise of the Bolshevik Dictatorship*, Ithaca, NY, 1987.

[3]. Although scholars disagree as to why it was so important—some focus on the Purges and the Terror, which they treat as revealing Bolshevism's essence (see, for example, Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Permanent Purge: Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism*, Cambridge, MA, 1956), some highlight what they see as Stalin's unfortunate corruption of the socialist experiment (see, for example, Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography*, New York, 1973; and Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, Oxford, 1989), while others emphasize what they consider the regime's success at broadening and strengthening its base of social support (see, for example, Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*).

[4]. See, for example, J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938*, Cambridge, 1985; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization*, Oxford, 1994, and *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, Oxford, 1999; David Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929-1941*, Ithaca, NY, 1994; Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley, 1995; Veronique Garros et al, eds., *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, New York, 1995; and Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941*, New Haven, CT, 1996.

[5]. Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middle-Class Values in Soviet Fiction*, Cambridge, 1979.

[6]. See, for example, her account of the 1947-54 consumer price cuts (pp. 139-141), the political effects of which she treats only briefly, focusing instead on their negative impact on the economy as a whole. On Soviet consumer culture in the early post-war years, see Julie Hessler, *Culture of Shortages: A Social History of Soviet Trade*, Univ. of Chicago, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1997, 352-367. On the construction campaign, see this reviewer's unpublished paper, "Home Is Where the Heart Is: Housing Construction and the Birth of the Soviet Welfare State, 1943-1953." On the health-care system, see Chris Burton's unpublished paper, "Welfare Paradigms and Late Stalinism: The Case of the Soviet Health System."

[7]. Right up until Stalin's death, she contends, "personal life [was] perceived as a kind of accessory to the production process" (p. 171).

[8]. See, for example, her account (pp. 111-114) of the ways in which various official actors dealt with spontaneously formed, non-political youth groups.

[9]. She quotes the chairman of a Brezhnev-era collective farm: "If we didn't work before because we knew that they would not in any event give us anything, we don't work now because we know that they will give it in any event" (p. 176).

[10]. To be sure, they could have followed Stalin-era practice by using force to try to achieve this end; they could also have allowed more private initiative and market competition. But fear of popular wrath likely prevented them taking the first tack, and until the Gorbachev era, ideology certainly prevented them from making a serious, sustained effort at taking the second.

[11]. In his analysis of the long decline of the GDR economy, Jeffrey Kopstein makes precisely this argument about East German socialism. See his *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1997.

[12]. Published in Russian as E. Zubkova, *Obshchestvo i reformy 1945-1964*, Moscow, 1993. See

Hiroaki Kuromiya, review of Zubkova, *Russia After the War*, in *The American Historical Review* 104:5 (December 1999): 1796-1797.

[13]. Alexander Dallin, review of Zubkova, *Russia After the War*, in *Slavic Review* 59:1 (Spring 2000): 228.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Andrew Day. Review of Zubkova, Elena. *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4228>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.