

Ronald Grigor Suny. *The Soviet Experiment*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. xvii + 540 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-508105-3.



Reviewed by Robert Lewis

Published on H-Russia (October, 2000)

Understanding Twentieth-Century Russia

One feature of the breakup of the Soviet Union is that it has provided a great encouragement for leading scholars, who have worked for many years on the history of the Soviet Union to stand back from their more narrow particular research interests and to address the wider issues of the period covering the Soviet Union's existence. As Ronald Suny states in his Introduction, "that turbulent tale now has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (p. xiii). In joining the list of scholars attempting an overall view of the seventy years of the Soviet Union, Suny brings with him some thirty years of research experience on Soviet history.

The book is divided into five sections. The first, "Crisis and Revolution," looks at the Imperial legacy and the two revolutions of 1917. In the second, "Retreat and Rebuilding," Suny sees retreat not as starting with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), but with the rolling back of the grass-roots democracy of 1917 and the signs of the formation of an authoritarian state. Parts Three through Five, "Stalinism," "Reform and Stagnation," which ends with the death of Brezh-

nev, and "Reform and Revolution," covering the Gorbachev years, contain a number of chapters dealing with particular themes. In the terms of detail, however, it is the Stalin years, which receive the greatest attention, comprising about one-third of the text.

Within this structure, Suny covers a wide range of themes, from foreign policy to a discussion of art and culture under Stalin. Not surprisingly, given the author's long-standing expertise and interest, considerable attention is given to the history and experience of the Soviet Union's various nationalities. The final chapters on more recent times tend to focus more on political change, with less material on economic and social aspects than in the earlier parts of the book. Each chapter has suggestions for further reading at the end.

In a book such as this, which seeks to survey a long period and many issues, authors always face a fundamental problem. Do they concentrate on "telling the story" in their own terms, or seek to pay full attention to the debates which surround many of the issues discussed? If we look at Suny's treatment of some of the "big" questions in

Soviet history, then we find a variety of approaches.

In some cases, Suny presents the variety of views without coming down strongly for one or other explanation. We see, for example, in his discussion of October 1917 that he states that "historians are divided between those who explain the October Revolution as a Bolshevik conspiracy or coup d'état and those who emphasize the deeper social conflicts that propelled the Bolsheviks into a dominant position" (p.53). In discussing the origins of the Cold War, he sets out both sides of the debate and then goes on to report that the opening up of the archives in the 1990s has not radically clarified the issues.

Elsewhere, his own opinion comes through more strongly with a briefer note of the debate about an issue amongst historians. When looking at the rise of Stalin he makes it clear that he does not support the view that Stalin changed his political views cynically to gain political control. "While some historians see Stalin as the supreme Machiavellian," Suny considers that he "probably did not choose his policies only because of future political advantages they might provide—but rather because they would help to achieve the kind of socialist society he sought to build" (p. 167).

An example of giving priority to 'telling the story' is in the case of Lysenko and Lysenkoism. Suny doesn't explore the reasons which enabled Lysenko to dominate Soviet biology. He simply calls him "infamous" and notes that he "proposed an erroneous theory of environmental influence on heredity" (p.283). Later he notes that Lysenko "conspired with Stalin to purge the Academy of Agricultural Sciences" (p.371).

It is worth noting Suny's views of some of the other important questions of Soviet history. For example, he supports the view that NEP still had a future at the end of the 1920s. He sees the Purges of the 1930s as very much a top-down phenomenon, with Stalin "turning on his own administra-

tive elite" and being "not content with the efforts of his police" (p. 262). He cites approvingly Vera Dunham's view of late Stalinism as seeing the "embourgeoisement of the entire system" (p. 375).

In his brief concluding remarks, which come at the end of the final chapter which deals with the Yeltsin years, Suny looks at the impact of the USSR in terms of "modernization". For him the "great achievement of the Soviet experiment was the rough modernization of a backward, agrarian society" (p. 505). Picking up on the use of the adjective "rough", he sees the Soviet Union at its fall as "an incompletely modern society" (p. 505). In this respect, he sets the Soviet experience against the background of 1960s western modernization theory. Soviet modernization excluded such aspects as democratic institutions and "a consumer-driven economy" (p. 505). The absence of the latter can be set against W. W. Rostow's classic analysis of long-term development in terms of the stages of economic growth which appeared at that time. In Rostow's analysis the final stage of economic growth was the age of high mass consumption.[1] It should be noted that this book had the subtitle *A Non-Communist Manifesto*.

Previously in his discussion of the Gorbachev years, Suny had included the nationality question as a third problem area-- "the decolonization of the non-Russian republics" (p. 484)--alongside democratization and economic reform. In his view the system was not able to survive an attempt to handle all these issues at the same time. He does, however, raise the possibility that the adoption of a pattern of sequential reform on the Chinese model, or better economic conditions might have enabled further modernization to take place under the Gorbachev model.

In a general book of this type each specialist reader is likely to find areas which he or she considers not to have been the necessary fullness of treatment. Thus for this particular reviewer, who is primarily an economic and social historian, there is too little on the problems of the Soviet

economy in the 1930s and the effect of the Purges on economic performance in these years.

The quotations from a variety of sources, such as speeches, decrees and memoirs, which Suny used liberally, contribute much to the liveliness of the text. However, it is frustrating that he does not give us detailed references to these quotes; it makes it difficult for the interested reader to pursue these materials further, or for the lecturer to get his students to do the same.

Overall Suny's book presents a well-written survey of the Soviet Union over the seventy years of its existence; the quality of writing and its scope and coverage make it a very useful text for the students of those of us who teach the twentieth-century history of Russia and the Soviet Union.

Note

[1]. W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

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: Robert Lewis. Review of Suny, Ronald Grigor. *The Soviet Experiment*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. October, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4634>



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