
Roger Pethybridge has boldly rewritten his *Social Preludes to Stalinism* (1974), making use of additional, although still largely traditional sources, and a novel perspective. If in the end he reaches much the same quasi-deterministic conclusions about the fateful clash between the country’s dreadful “social backwardness” and the “fanciful schemes” of its “theorizing” rulers, he does so in a refreshingly unconventional way.

Simply yet effectively, the author takes two years—1922, the breathing space between War Communism and NEP, and 1926, the transition between the apex of NEP and the onset of industrialization—and compares them. In an even greater innovation, he has decided to travel: from Smolensk to Tver and then on to Kursk, from the middle and lower Volga up to Petrograd and then down to Moscow—and back again all the way to Smolensk, with detours to Siberia and Kazakhstan (!), covering thousands of versts through a country that in 1925 had only 5,500 lorries for more than 150 million people.

“Perhaps the main contention of this study,” he writes, “is that the edges both affected and evaded the thoughts and actions of the center more than has been realized or studied so far.” This ostensibly trite pronouncement acquires great weight during the course of his journey because he begins in the provinces and spends long stretches there before arriving in the capitals, picking up a plenitude of arresting vignettes along the way.

Visiting Smolensk province in 1922, we learn that “the doubleheaded-eagle notes from the old regime, overstamped with Bolshevik insignias, continued to circulate for lack of anything else,” and that “the whole financial network of NEP was shaky.” In Kursk that same year, we discover that the Nepmen were prerevolutionary traders ironically nurtured during War Communism by the Soviet state, and that commissions from the center were obsessed with a single insignificant state farm and oblivious to much else. On an excursion to Omsk okrug, courtesy of Rabkrin/Central Control Commission, we ascertain that complaints were made about corruption in the local Party fraction (said to comprise card players and careerists) by a church soviet. In another Siberian Party cell, we find out, the members dabbled in spiritualism, organizing a session to recall the spirit of Karl Marx.

Inevitably perhaps, Pethybridge’s breadth of coverage is greater than his depth. His travels encompass the satanic proletarian mills and the righteous intelligentsia salons; the besieged yet tenacious onion-domed churches and the upstart granite-sheathed cathedrals of the haughty yet brittle Bolshevik Party. But his accounts of them all lack a certain immediacy. He revels in the country’s awe-inspiring diversity, but pays only the barest attention to nationalities (aside from the Russians). He makes a half-hearted attempt to scale Marxist-Leninist ideology, but soon turns back, insisting that it is just too high up near the clouds and therefore not worth the climb.

It is the lingering rhythms of the village that reverberate strongest in his imagination and elicit his most abiding reflections. He emphasizes the decidedly Bolshevik atmosphere in Kharkiv, a proletarian bastion, and the fact that just outside of town Bolshevism, as if were, disappears. Throughout the countryside, he tells us, rumors spread quicker than newspapers: “Centrally inspired directives,” he asserts, “took so long to penetrate to the provinces that they were superseded before they could be implemented.”
The looming confrontation between the "proletarian revolution" and the "peasant country" is never far in the background.

In Pethybridge's treatment, the NEP appears much as it has since it was abrogated: a paradox involving both a relaxation and an assertion of central control. He never sets down what NEP constituted in terms of policies; nor quite solves the mystery of how centralism won out over local autonomy. And the Bolsheviks confound him. They were Marxists, he writes, but their Marxism consisted in "abstraction" and "generalization." He argues that "Bolshevik leaders debated the socioeconomic future of their country in unusual isolation from real conditions in Russia at large." Yet he also shows that Rabkin often had excellent data, and lauds the agency's "eagle-eye." Similarly, he wrestles with the work of Carr, whose grasp of detail he admires but whose interpretations he claims to find lacking, but then fails to make explicit what, if anything, written by Carr he is revising.

Like many before him, Pethybridge believes NEP was not viable—he calls it, economically speaking, "a house built on sand"—so something had to be done. He criticizes the infamous decisions taken, without, however, specifying what the options were. He omits consideration of the international situation, arguing that the decision to abandon the NEP was undertaken by an isolated Bolshevik leadership (Stalin) in flight from realities—as if the vaulting ambitions to bring about a new world of plenty found no resonance among the people, or was unrelated to geopolitics.

Pethybridge leaves us with a renewed appreciation for the rural administrative vacuum following the liquidation of gentry in 1917-18, for the strength of military traditions reinforced by WWI and the Bolshevik experience in the Civil War, and for the authentic social orientation of the country's new rulers (in the areas of national health, social security, education). Above all, this pleasantly idiosyncratic book illustrates the benefits to be derived from paying more than lip service to the Soviet Union's diversity.

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This book represents what is best and worst about collections of conference papers. Fortunately, the fault lies not with the papers themselves, which are generally of high quality. Revised versions of essays presented at the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies at Harrogate in July 1990, the various chapters present samplings of important works-in-progress, several of which are apparently in advanced stages. On the other hand, the grouping of topics seems forced in places, and the idea that the social and cultural history of post-1917 Russia is a "new direction" in the field is beginning to show signs of strain.

The collection consists of four sections. The first, "The Politics of Soviet History," is a single essay on Gorbachev and history by Pierre Broué. This chapter economically reviews post-1987 discussions of major Bolshevik revolutionaries in Soviet publications, but it fails to address, except by reference to work by R. W. Davies on the subject, the much