Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization: The Consolidation of the Modern System of Soviet Production Relations, 1953-1964 by Donald Filtzer
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it possible they knew something more than we are allowing them here?

Nichols has made a daring entry into the academic arena. If he has fallen somewhat short of achieving his goals, he has nevertheless raised a host of interesting ideas and improved the level of debate in the field.

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Donald Filtzer has written a sequel to his indispensable Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization (1986), which treated the prewar Stalin era. Again relying on a close reading of the Soviet press, now supplemented with the numerous post–1956 studies conducted by Soviet sociologists, Filtzer brings his analysis of Soviet class structure into the period of Nikita Khrushchev, with concluding comments on Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms and the end of communism.

Here as in his earlier work, Filtzer elaborates on the interpretations of Leon Trotsky and Milovan Djilas, arguing that the Soviet Union must be understood as a society in which a ruling elite (rooted in but not identical to the bureaucracy) consciously pursued its class interests and strove to consolidate its political domination. The elite’s actions, we are told, were largely successful, resulting in the rise of Stalinism, a system in which workers were “atomized,” that is, restricted to individual responses such as absenteeism, turnover, and soldiering. Taken together, however, the “individual” actions of millions of workers, abetted by managers desperate for labor power, amounted to de facto control over the labor process and thus represented the imposition of limits on the elite’s ability to extract surplus, the basis of the elite’s existence. While Stalin was still alive, various headlong assaults on workers’ control over the labor process were tried, but none worked. The result was something of a standoff: no organized, overt challenges to the elite’s hegemony, but an economy characterized by exorbitant costs, poor-quality output, and high spoilage.

Against this background, Filtzer maintains that “de-Stalinization was faced with one overriding task to which all the others—no matter how great their historical ramifications—were subordinate, namely the need to increase efficiency of surplus extraction” (p. 231). He points out that under Stalin the Soviet Union achieved great-power status, yet with the dictator’s death in 1955 Khrushchev inherited a militarized industrial economy that produced few consumer goods (just three pairs of socks for each member of the population), while agriculture was in a shambles. The problem, however, was not only the need to shift investment from heavy to light industry and agriculture but also to induce workers to raise productivity—without the possibility of recourse to the coercive power provided by the market, that is, the threat of unemployment, which, Filtzer speculates, at that time would have provoked possibly uncontrollable protest and disorder. In other words, the elite perceived that the Soviet system had to be reformed, but wanted to do so without undermining basic class relations. This contradictory approach doomed the Khrushchev reforms to half-measures, which were predictably ineffective.

Filtzer once again expertly details the staggering waste of the Soviet economy by marshaling vivid examples gleaned from the Soviet press (applying, without saying so, “capitalist” notions of efficiency and rationality in his account). This time he adds a welcome analysis of what he refers to as the role of patriarchy in consolidating Soviet class relations (in the form of a valuable chapter on women workers), as well as a suggestive discussion of Harry Braverman’s argument on deskillling, shown to be especially applicable to the Soviet Union (a problem that has been examined in considerable depth by Soviet sociologists). But the heart of the book comprises a review of the various labor reforms undertaken during the period 1953–64, including the centerpiece wage reform, whose goal of reestablishing a connection between earnings and work performance was effectively subverted by workers, thanks (as always) to the collusion of factory management, whose willingness to circumvent or betray central directives is said to be derived from the class-based, inefficient socioeconomic system and thus inimical to correction.

Enter Gorbachev. Having tried to tinker with “the system” by means of a series of inconsistent reforms, and supposedly having rejected something Filtzer calls genuine social democracy (an ideal whose institutional structure is largely unspecified), “the elite” opts for the introduction of private property and the market in a desperate, but once again successful, gamble to secure its class interests. For Filtzer, the turn to capitalism is not an unexpected outcome of unforeseen historical circumstances but a deliberate strategy, and one pursued not by various social groups or factions therein but by “the elite.” How such an argument squares with the manifestly improvised and reactive character of central policies, the fierce resistance by large segments of the former Communist elite to privatization, and the strikes by miners, among whose demands was a call for the rapid transition to the market, remains unclear.

Because Filtzer assumes that the elite and the workers are in an objectively antagonistic relationship, he recognizes no need to investigate anyone’s actual attitudes. He also has almost nothing to say about intra-elite struggles. Moreover, there are essentially no historical actors in his book. Not just the workers but even Filtzer’s uncannily enduring elite,

This book by John Van Oudenaeren focuses on attempts by the Soviet Union to moderate Cold War hostilities and pursue constructive policies in its relationship with the states of Western Europe between 1953 and 1985. The strength of this approach is that it highlights the complex evolution of Soviet relations with the West European powers, topics that are often obscured in treatments focusing on the Moscow-Washington rivalry. The weakness of this strategy is that, given the preponderant role America played in East-West relations, downplaying U.S. involvement tends to produce a somewhat astigmatic view of Soviet policy in Europe. Yet Van Oudenaeren’s emphasis on the détente process as the core of the Soviet Union’s approach to Europe is a welcome corrective to the traditional Cold War literature, with its one-sided depiction of Soviet hostility, intransigence, and subversion. The author does not, however, thoroughly examine the dialectical interaction of cooperative and competitive aspects of the Soviet doctrine of peaceful coexistence.

Van Oudenaeren opens with a discussion of the origins of the Cold War, especially the breakdown of the various diplomatic and political mechanisms for inter-Allied cooperation. He suggests that Joseph Stalin initially intended to maintain some level of cooperation with the Western powers, mainly to preserve levers of influence in the West, while at the same time consolidating his hold on Eastern Europe. The West, the author contends, refused to permit this “double standard,” so the years 1947–49 saw a steady shift of Soviet policy toward intransigent non-cooperation, culminating in the Korean War and the threat of war in Europe as well. In advancing this line of argument, the author expressly rejects Marshall Shulman’s suggestion that a thaw in East-West relations began as early as 1949. Instead, Van Oudenaeren contends that the turning point came only in 1953 with Stalin’s death.

The author is especially interested in tracing the institutionalization of détente—that is, the birth and evolution of the various organizations, committees, ongoing diplomatic negotiations, economic structures, non-governmental groups, and so forth, which formed the matrix of the détente process. Most of the book is comprised of topical chapters, each developing the thesis that, from Nikita Khrushchev to Konstantin Chernenko, the Soviet Union sought ways to minimize the risk of war and increase cooperation (on its own terms, of course) with the nations of Western Europe. The topics covered include the heritage of wartime four-power negotiations, traditional diplomacy in other venues, the arms control process, economic relations, the use of non-traditional means (parliaments, political parties, trade unions, cultural exchanges, churches, and peace movements) to pursue diplomatic goals, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. I found the long chapter on arms control negotiations and the detailed discussions of non-diplomatic channels for advancing Soviet foreign policy objectives to be especially valuable.

The last chapter contains a brief section labeled “Soviet Policy, 1985–90” and an even shorter one on “Soviet Policy, 1989–90.” Given the book’s 1991 publication date, Van Oudenaeren is curiously reticent in appraising the extraordinary changes wrought by Mikhail Gorbachev. “While Gorbachev was groping his way toward a new conception of détente,” the author contends, “his policies on specific issues remained for the most part rather traditional” (p. 353). This judgment seriously underestimates the revolutionary results of Gorbachev’s abandonment of the class struggle theme in Soviet foreign policy and his acceptance of the reasonable sufficiency doctrine in defense policy. The book does document, however, the sluggish Western response to the accelerating Soviet campaign for arms control and détente generally, although the tight focus on Western Europe partially obscures the special role played by the Reagan and Bush administrations in impeding rapid progress in these areas.

Specialists in international relations and Soviet foreign policy will constitute the main audience for this book. The author, a leading RAND Corporation researcher, employs a topical and analytical approach to East-West relations that sacrifices narrative line (and with it, readability) in favor of rigorous thematic analysis. This organization also makes for considerable repetition, since each of these chapters covers the whole period from 1953 to 1985. Moreover, the text is splattered with an alphabet soup of abbreviations for organizations (SSOD[UN], ESRO, ENI, COMISCO, and so on) and processes (CBM, CSBM, FBS, NST) that presents yet another obstacle for less sophisticated readers. Although Duke University Press has published this book in a paperback edition, its usefulness as a textbook will be limited. Only the most well-informed and determined undergraduates will succeed in plowing through it.

The book is based on extensive research in both Soviet and Western published documentary sources and secondary literature. Inevitably, given the broad chronological and topical scope of this volume, the author relies to a great extent on the work of other...