

## The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991

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**Reviewer:**

Peter Waldron

This is a wide-ranging collection of sources that aims to cover the whole sweep of Soviet history: Richard Sakwa's work on the politics of the Soviet Union makes him well placed to produce such a volume. *Sources in History*, the series in which the book appears, sets as one of its aims to merge source material and commentary into a single integrated narrative. This book admirably fulfils this objective and hence the author's introductions to each document - alongside the selection of sources themselves - give a coherent view of Soviet history. The material is arranged chronologically, using conventional periodisation, dividing the history of the Soviet state into ten separate topics from the rise of Bolshevism to the fall of the Soviet Union. The emphasis of the chapters focuses on domestic affairs, apart from the sections dealing with the period between 1939 and 1953 which concentrate on the war and its aftermath.

The material that Sakwa has selected presents a well-knit view of the Soviet Union. This book is clearly orientated towards giving an account of Soviet history that recognises political developments as lying at the heart of the experience of the state and its people. There is an unusual emphasis on Soviet political ideas, allowing readers to gain some insight not just into the well-trodden paths of Lenin's thought, but also into later ideological developments. The debates in the 1920s over the course that the Soviet state should take are reflected at length with interesting extracts from key figures in the leadership, as well as its critics - such as Lukacs (pp. 135-7) and Nadezhda Mandelstam (pp. 173-5). Stalin's ideas are well represented, both in the crucial period of the 1920s and early 1930s, and also in the last years of his life. Extracts from later figures in the Soviet leadership also help to illuminate the course of the state's development. Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's very different styles and ideas are given full exposure, and the dead hand that characterised the later rulers of the USSR is made very evident. At the same time, the trends of opposition to the state's leadership are also given full exposure. Trotsky's 1936 writings on *The Revolution Betrayed* provide a starting point to consider the nature of Stalin's regime, and there are also extracts from foreign observers of the Soviet Union, such as Richard Crossman. The dissident movement reached its fullest extent during the last decades of the Soviet Union's existence as Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, Medvedev, Amalrik and others each launched attacks upon the USSR. Their opinions are given full and clear expression in this volume. This

approach has important benefits. The Soviet Union saw itself as a state that was based explicitly upon ideology, and political theory played a much more significant part in the life of the state - and of Soviet society - than in the West. At a time when political ideology has been largely discredited in the West as a means of discourse, it is very helpful to be reminded of the ways in which theoretical approaches shaped the history of the twentieth century.

The Soviet Union attempted to give the impression that it was a monolithic structure in which political differences had disappeared, and that a state and society had been created which were entirely cohesive. But, internal debate continued to flourish. Discussion within the leadership was as fierce as inside any governing elite, tempered only perhaps by fear during the 1930s. While some of these discussions were carried on behind closed doors, wider Soviet society had to be kept in tune with the thinking of its leaders if social cohesion was to be maintained and there was to be appropriate adherence to the state's objectives. Political debate could not, therefore, be contained to the elites but they did seek to minimise its transparency by utilising language and terminology that was often opaque. Much official writing on Soviet politics is difficult to comprehend and, as a result, much of the work of the opposition is equally awkward. The utilisation of so much formal political writing in this volume gives an insight into the nature of Soviet politics, but it is not always easy for the untutored reader to gain a full understanding of the issues that are being debated. Sakwa's introductions to the extracts are helpful in providing a context for the issues that they discuss, but there are times when the complexity of the issues and the awkwardness of Soviet political language mean that a fuller commentary could have made the subject matter more accessible.

The volume's concentration on politics, while producing a coherent view of the history of the USSR, means that it falls short of - what is perhaps the impossible task - of giving a comprehensive picture of the Soviet Union. The approach that Sakwa has taken is one that suggests that political elites occupy the commanding heights of both state and society and that their activities and utterances do actually determine the course of history. The material dealing with the crucial processes of industrialisation and the collectivisation of agriculture at the beginning of the 1930s focuses overwhelmingly on the official interpretation of events. Stalin's speech on 'liquidating the kulaks as a class' (pp. 179-80) is followed by observations from Kravchenko on his own experience in the countryside (pp. 180-3), but this is the only element of 'popular' reaction to the events that were tearing rural society apart as collectivisation was implemented. A similar pattern is followed in the presentation of industrialisation. While Sakwa sees cultural transformation as being 'an essential part of [this] revolution from above', he adopts an approach that concentrates on changes to the intellectual atmosphere in the Soviet Union - literature and history in particular - rather than focussing on the impact that Stalin intended his revolution to have on the attitudes and behaviour of the population as a whole. The experience of terror in the 1930s is also portrayed in a way that gives limited evidence of the impact of these tumultuous events on the population of the Soviet state. It is not altogether easy to divine the experience of 'everyday Stalinism', to use Sheila Fitzpatrick's phrase, from the extracts in this volume. Sakwa's approach deliberately eschews this way of looking at Soviet history: he states in the introduction to the volume that he selected material 'through which a theoretical appraisal of its [the Soviet Union's] rise and fall can be made' (p. xx). This is an entirely defensible way of approaching the topic, and has much merit since it suggests that the USSR was a state that is open to normal methods of political analysis, rather than laying stress on the supposed uniqueness of the Soviet state.

The Soviet experience from 1917 until the eventual collapse of the state in 1991 was, however, one that encompassed many moments of high drama, of great excitement as well as demonstrations of both popular enthusiasm and of iron will by Soviet rulers. The selection of material in this volume gives only brief direct glimpses of the earth-shattering course of Soviet history. There are occasional pieces of material that grip the reader, and illuminate an issue by conveying a sense of the excitement that should pepper the study of Soviet history. Akhmatova's *Requiem* suggests something of the awful nature of the 1930s and there are significant sections of the material dealing with the 1941-45 war that send a chill down the spine. Beria's secret memorandum of 1940 to Stalin describing the 25,000 Polish officers captured after the Soviet occupation as 'inveterate, incorrigible enemies of Soviet power' and recommending that they all be shot gives a clear view of the simple brutality of Stalin's regime (pp. 249-50). But it would be useful to be able to read descriptions

of the tumult of 1917 and its aftermath and of the growing chaos that gripped the Soviet Union in its final years to appreciate the dramatic circumstances in which the regime both came into existence and then perished.

Sakwa's approach does allow us to grasp an essential feature of the Soviet Union - and one that is often misunderstood by students. The level of central direction in the Soviet state gave it an exceptional quality and this collection of documents is very good at exemplifying this feature of Soviet existence. The section of the book that deals with Khrushchev and the problems of reform in the post-Stalin environment demonstrate very clearly how the centralised nature of both state and society had created problems that were to prove intractable. Agriculture was the focus of Khrushchev's attempts to bring about change. Stalin's policy of collectivisation had clearly failed to enable Soviet farming to prosper. Sakwa includes an extract from an appeal to Khrushchev that condemns Soviet agricultural policy for resulting in 'only crab meat and green peas' being on sale in many regions (p. 314). Collectivisation represented the epitome of central control, giving farmers little latitude in what and how they could cultivate. But Khrushchev's solutions had to operate through the same prism of centralisation. Soviet rulers recognised very clearly that their political power depended upon strong central control of the economy. In political terms, Khrushchev could not go too far in denouncing the appalling excesses of Stalinism; his speech to the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 (pp. 316-22) was made in secret and had to tread the difficult line of condemning the 'cult of personality' that Stalin had constructed, while insisting that the essential structures of state and society that had developed during his nearly 30 years in power were truly Soviet and must be maintained. This was the position taken by Soviet rulers for another 30 years, until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and began to comprehend that the ossified nature of the Soviet state was dragging its economy into the dust.

Even though Sakwa's main focus is on domestic matters, this selection of documents is also good at illuminating the development of Soviet foreign policy. The Soviet state had come into existence in 1917 determined to promote its model of revolution abroad. The impact of this position both on the USSR itself, and on foreign states, was immense and long lasting. This selection of documents allows the reader to trace this development from the early days of the Comintern (pp. 105-7) through the isolationism of the early 1930s to Soviet fighting in the Second World War. A particular strength of Sakwa's approach is the way in which he integrates the discussion of foreign policy into the domestic context of Soviet history. The extracts relating to the 'Cold Peace' between 1945 and 1953 combine analysis of the Soviet Union's international position with Stalin's attempts to re-impose orthodoxy at home by imposing greater control over nationalities, science and art. The treatment of the last years of the Soviet Union gives equal insight into the interaction of domestic and foreign policy. Gorbachev's 1988 speech to the United Nations (pp. 461-4) ranged widely across issues that were relevant to both the Soviet Union's place in the world and to the internal politics of both his own state and the Soviet satellites of Eastern Europe.

This collection will prove useful to students taking courses on the history and politics of the Soviet Union. It will certainly help them to understand the nature and significance of a once-mighty state that disappeared from the map almost overnight. The ease with which the Soviet Union was dismantled has, perhaps, led to the development of a view among students today that the USSR was a weak and feeble entity, destined for oblivion from its inception. Sakwa's selection of sources, together with his illuminating commentaries, should help to dispel that view and to allow readers to gain insight into the reasons why the Soviet state attracted both admiration and opprobrium in almost equal measure over three quarters of the twentieth century.

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