

## Russia's Troubled Century

**Review Number:**

71

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 May, 1999

**Author:**

Robert Service

**ISBN:**

9780674403475

**Date of Publication:**

1997

**Price:**

£25.00

**Pages:**

688pp.

**Publisher:**

Allen Lane: The Penguin Press

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Christopher Read

In many ways Russia is the touchstone of the twentieth century. Most of the main features of our troubled age have impinged on it more heavily than any other single country. In terms of events the holocaust; two world wars; revolution; civil war; the collapse of empire (twice); autocratic tyranny; pitiless, bureaucratically organised terror; and the cold war have left scar upon scar. It has been deeply affected by Communism; Fascism and anti-Semitism (of a home grown variety as well as the international struggle against it); dictatorship; the command economy and its over-rapid dissolution which has sent the country into a so far unstoppable downward economic and political spiral. Disasters, part natural, part manmade have piled one on the other - famines, earthquakes, drought. At the same time the country was modernised. Over a hundred nationalities and linguistic groups with ways of life ranging from yurt-dwelling nomads of the desert to igloo builders of the Arctic, have been subjected to often modest but nonetheless transforming levels of education, health care and economic opportunity in widespread industrial enterprises such as railways, power grids, mines and factories. For a third of the century Russia achieved superpower status and significantly rising living standards; basic education, housing and healthcare for all; and a modicum of economic security with full employment and the virtual elimination of absolute poverty. A dramatic struggle has taken place between transforming and resistant cultural forces, primarily between 'scientific' atheism and religion. Despite everything a brilliant intelligentsia artistic and scientific tradition survived within official, unofficial and émigré channels, from the philosopher Solov'ev (who died in the first year of the century) and Tolstoy through the Silver Age and avant-garde of the early Soviet years (Blok, Belyi, Mayakovsky, Kandinsky, Chagall, Stravinsky, Eisenstein, Pavlov, Timiriazev) through the years of Stalinism (Mandel'shtam, Bulgakov, Gorky, Pasternak, Kapitsa, Shostakovitch) to the last Soviet and post Soviet years (Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn, Brodsky, Voznesensky, Kozintsev, Tarkovsky). New areas of excellence emerged. In games and sports such as soccer, ice-skating, athletics and chess world super stars

emerged. Today basketball and ice hockey players remain among the most bankable of Russian exports. Excellence of performance in orchestral music (Rostropovich), ballet (Plisetskaya), film (Cherkassov, Smokhtunovskii) and theatre (Vysotskii) won world wide acclaim as did the achievements of space engineers and cosmonauts, notably Yuri Gagarin. Hundreds more famous names could be added. One should not forget the millions of more humble achievers who contributed to the building and staffing of schools, hospitals and other enterprises, not to mention the successive generations of *babushki* who kept church rituals (and much else) functioning. Then there are the millions of Soviet Army soldiers, like Gorbachev's father, who fought his way from south Russia via Kiev to the Carpathians in pursuit of the Nazis, virtually losing touch with his family for three years in the process. Recounting the achievements of ordinary people in the face of such terrible events could go on forever. Could any single volume capture the disasters, achievements, colour, paradoxes and drama of Russia's twentieth century? How could a historian deal with the tremendous selectivity needed to produce a manageable account? More specifically, how does Robert Service's volume face up to and deal with such a challenge?

Very reasonably, the author chooses to focus on the central political arena and the system that emerged after 1917, making up what he calls, in a chemical metaphor, the Soviet compound which forms the basis of the Soviet system in that while there may be important changes of relationship between the components the basic substance remains the same. The virtue of the approach is that it allows Service to meditate and expound on the political leadership of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, areas in which he feels particularly at home and in which he has great expertise. Lenin is presented as a tough, determined, complex, highly-intelligent but also devious person. While one might argue with some of the details, especially that Lenin was even more driven by destiny than the author allows, the picture is less caricatural and more nuanced than other recent portrayals. Unfortunately, Service's format does not allow him to linger long over controversial points, or even to suggest which points are more arguable than others. As a result, Service's own views stand unchallenged in the text. One might differ from him in saying that, vital though they were, the April Theses themselves were not necessarily a clarion call for immediate revolution nor did they provide the framework for an instant transition to socialism. (p.47) Indeed, one of the theses mysteriously announces 'it is not our task *immediately* to "introduce" socialism.' However, on most crucial aspects of the revolutionary period one can only applaud Service's judgement. In particular, he points out that a basic assumption of Lenin's Bolshevism was the unwavering growth of support and he could not cope with its failure to materialise. He is also right to castigate the non-Bolsheviks for their suicidal boycott at the Second Congress of Soviets and for pointing out the gap between popular revolutionary ambitions (e.g. peace, bread, land, all power to the soviets) and Lenin's more distant utopian aspirations to a classless, conflict-free society to be achieved at any cost, including civil war which was, in essence, an extension of class struggle. Through these crucial experiences and events the basic Soviet compound emerged - a monopoly of power in the hands of a one-ideology party; subordination of legal and constitutional propriety to political convenience; and expropriation of large segments of the economy. (p.123)

By comparison, Stalin 'drastically rearranged and reinforced the compound of the Soviet order' by ending cultural and religious compromise and by 'crudifying' politics and hyper-centralising administrative institutions, (p.169) In other words, Stalin builds something distinctive which is, none the less, rooted in Lenin's practice. To back this up Service continues, as he perhaps must in many cases given his format, simply to tell us what transpired rather than to argue it. Certain features, for example, Stalin's 'personal degeneracy' (p.174) and Radzinsky's account of his second wife's suicide - according to which she died as a protest against collectivisation and Stalin's flirtations with other women (p.195) - are treated as axioms rather than points which need to be proven by evidence. The same is more or less true of the sketch of Stalin's character. He is said to have 'always been a solitary fellow' (p.195) and 'a prickly character' although some sources point to his gregariousness and sociability, at least in his earlier years. None the less, on the big issues Service is a very reliable guide who, unlike others, does not assume that, since many of Stalin's actions were loathsome, every evil rumour or theory about him must be true. Service dismisses the view that the famine of 1932-3 was deliberately targeted at the Ukraine as a form of genocide (p.202); reminds us that, despite the opening of the archives, the case for Stalin's complicity in Kirov's murder remains 'not proven' (p.214); and presents, by the standards of the last decade or so, fairly 'modest' totals

for deaths during the terror, that is 1.5 million for the years 1937-8 (p.222) and a prison camp population of 2.9 million in 1939. This does not, of course, mean that Service is 'softer' on Stalin than those who calculate impossibly high figures for his victims, rather he is more scholarly in basing his conclusions on the best available evidence. In fact, Service goes almost as far as any of Stalin's critics in granting him few, if any, positive characteristics or achievements. He is indubitably right to compare the Stalin leadership to a gang (p.241) and is very sound in arguing that though the term 'totalitarian' 'fails to encapsulate the contradictions within this extremely nasty and orderly but also extremely chaotic reality', particularly since it implies 'totality in practice as well as intent', none of the suggested alternatives 'better describes either the messiness of real Soviet conditions or the basic structure or intent of power in the USSR'. However, this is not to say that one can assume that Stalin had 'designs on Eastern Europe' (p.269) nor that he might not have deserved a little more credit than he is given for conducting war-time military and foreign policy. Not to grant this makes it hard to understand the grudging respect many allied observers and negotiators, Churchill included, accorded him for his grasp of the situation in its larger and more detailed aspects. Indeed, the presentation of war-time decision making, in which generals had to speak their minds and were largely respected for it by Stalin (p.265) and accounts of Stalin, even in the post-war period, having to manoeuvre clumsily into position to undertake policy changes raises questions. Why is it that, right to the last, Stalin has to set up a Presidium and seven-man Bureau to circumvent Molotov, Beria and others (p.327), if it is correct to say that Stalin's associates even in the Politburo needing 'an unswerving obedience to the whim of the leader' and that they could 'never safely object to a line of policy which Stalin had already approved.'? (p.252) Perhaps we do not fully have the evidence yet to answer this conundrum of an apparently limitless power which, on one hand, was able to consign the wife of a key colleague, Molotov, to the camps or bring about the execution of Politburo member Voznesensky but, on the other, still had to be finessed through constraining bureaucratic channels and cultural restrictors which required a conformity with the dominant discourse and the main themes of ideology which was less than automatic. Dictator though he undoubtedly was, Stalin could not simply snap his fingers and say 'off with his (or her) head'.

One of the great pleasures of Service's account is the life which he manages to breathe into the late, pre-perestroika, Soviet years. While Khrushchev provides ready potential for colourful anecdote the ensuing 'years of stagnation' do not. Yet Service is undoubtedly right in seeing them as crucial in preparing the way for transformation and collapse. While being obviously aware of the heroism of dissenters - who, as Service points out, were described by the regime as 'other thinkers' in their preferred Russian term - it is to legal 'dissidents' such as the writer Soloukhin and 'bards' such as Vysotsky and Galich that Service turns to demonstrate the hidden tensions of society, sagely reminding us that 'Marxism-Leninism had never been the world view of most citizens' (p.418). He puts his finger right on a crucial point when he tells us that even in the Khrushchev years the children of the elite 'did not give a fig for the Party Programme' rather they hankered for jeans and pop music. 'The language of Marxism-Leninism was used by them in furtherance of their careers' but 'the worm had entered the apple; the offspring of the nomenklatura despised the state ideology'. (p.370) Perhaps less judiciously this also provides the opportunity for the first of numerous digs at Gorbachev who is, in part, presented as a naive, provincial 'Marxist-Leninist' without fully teasing out the implications of Gorbachev's early reformism in making his version of the ideology very different from that of the leadership, especially after the traumatic invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. This is surprising since Service makes good use of little known sources like the writings of Dubcek's colleague Zdenek Mlynar, whose friendship with Gorbachev goes back to their student days in the early 1950s. From 1968 onwards, as has become very clear during the anniversary last year, a growing Czech-style reformist group existed - practically undetected by most western political analysts at the time - within the grey conformity of the party. So, rather than being conservative, potential reformers like Gorbachev, Iakovlev and Burlatsky were as unimpressed by the Brezhnevites as the less political members of their generation within the nomenklatura. Recognition of this would perhaps help produce a more consistent view of Gorbachev. While generously recognising the extent of Gorbachev's achievement - 'great was the work of his hands' - and stating quite correctly that the outcome was 'the unwilling result of his activity as it developed' (p.484) and that he may well have overestimated the innate attractiveness of his ideas (p.464), Service suggests Gorbachev was a reluctant reformer. At no point, however, did he go back on (as opposed to slow down) the reforms in the USSR or Eastern Europe. Indeed, he came miraculously close to success and had the Union

Treaty been signed as planned instead of the clumsy coup of 1991 throwing the process off the rails a different future *might* have emerged. It would make more sense to see Gorbachev as a thoroughly committed reformer. On a British talk show appearance with Clive Anderson a few years ago, he was asked what one thing he would change about Russian history. He instantly replied that he wished there had been no October revolution! Astonishing words for a former General Secretary of the CPSU and hardly compatible with any view of him as, ultimately, a closet Leninist.

While the political centre and the key personalities are the main focus of Service's attention, there are many other noteworthy aspects of the volume. The treatment of nationality issues is exemplary in that the balance achieved between centre and periphery is about right. The author keeps an eye on the minorities but does not fall into the trap of overestimating their significance as many post-Soviet accounts have done. One might, however, dispute whether such a good balance had been maintained in other important areas. In particular, foreign policy and linkages with the outside world in the broader sense are dealt with unevenly. There is a reasonable account of the origins of the cold war but only two lines on Vietnam, for example. Service mentions the shop window effect of the media and increasing foreign travel in and out of the USSR making more and more Soviet citizens aware of the more prosperous elements of capitalist societies. As a result a sense of a 'normal' modern life - free access to information, travel, more consumer goods, better living conditions - which was not emerging in the USSR during the 'years of stagnation' was built up. However, this crucial impact of *détente* in undermining the system is not made as explicit as the more prevalent and perhaps more questionable view, that it was the final Reaganite confrontation with the USSR which laid the foundations for collapse. Arguably, the 'second cold war' aided the reactionaries in clinging on to power longer than they might otherwise have done and encouraged them to turn the clock back.

One other area could also perhaps have been dealt with more consistently. In the key statement in which he puts forward the central importance of politics, Service also mentions that the political ambitions of the centre were frequently being thwarted. (p.xxxiii) Considerable attention is given to the social and cultural environment and there are some excellent chapters on, to take the best example, the nature and texture of everyday Soviet life in the 1930s. (Chapter 12) and frequent references to the survival of religion and the appeals of nationalism. Given the originality and expertise with which these points are made it might have been preferable to elaborate on them rather than on the more familiar central political narrative. After all to spend more time on Soviet politics, ambitions and institutions rather than the forces frustrating those ambitions is to focus on what has disappeared rather than on what has endured - the long-suffering people of Russia and their extraordinary survival cultures.

Finally two points which probably arise from personal preference as much as anything else. First, the tendency to state rather than debate, while understandable in a narrative history of such scope, could have been modified more than it was to at least alert the reader to alternative view points. While this is done for some issues, such as the terror, elsewhere it is not. For instance, major arguments about late tsarism are elided and the presentation of Tsarist Russia's wartime problems ignores the work of Norman Stone. Secondly, though the volume is very lively and readable, there is, at times, an evenness of tone which can see great events passed over without their drama being captured. The 1905 revolution, February and October 1917, the German occupation and the holocaust are all mentioned and significant points are made about all of them but the human drama is played down. Similarly, there is an evenness about lists of causes which are given without the more important being clearly distinguished from those which are less so. This may be because, by and large, much more time is spent on consequences than causes, of Stalinism, for instance. There are several chapters on its features but much less explicit analysis of how it came about.

These are, however, relatively minor issues. Service has produced an excellent account of Russia's troubled century. Although other books have appeared recently this is the most thoroughly post-Soviet account in breaking with cold war stereotypes of Lenin and Stalin in the interests of presenting them more firmly in their Russian context; incorporating the best of recent Russian memoirs and scholarship (for example, that of Oleg Khlevniuk on the 1930s); looking at the post war period as one in which the seeds of collapse were germinating and presenting a brilliant account of post-Soviet dilemmas and problems - making it certainly the best place to go to orientate oneself in the current confusion presided over by the farcical figure of

Yeltsin and his Second Empire style cronyism. The volume is a splendid achievement drawing on a wide range of classical and recent sources. It is a great tribute to the country under scrutiny. One can do no better than to conclude with Service's own final words: ' "Russia" has not stopped changing all this century. It would be idle to assume that her record in astounding herself, her neighbours and the world has come to an end.' (p.553)

**Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/71#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/723>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>