

The Bolsheviks and the National Question 1917-23

Review Number:

80

Publish date:

Friday, 1 October, 1999

Author:

Jeremy Smith

ISBN:

9780333727591

Date of Publication:

1999

Price:

£80.00

Pages:

304pp.

Publisher:

Macmillan Press Ltd

Publisher url:

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?PID=258176>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Raymond Pearson

For almost half a century, the classic description and analysis of Communist treatment of the nationalities question over the early years of the Bolshevik regime has been Richard Pipes magisterial *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917- 1923*, published by Harvard University Press in 1954. To suggest that Pipes depicts the ideology-mandated suppression of the non-Russians drive for independence and their forcible incorporation into a Soviet Prison of Nations whose management is passing from the mistaken idealism of Lenin to the brutal megalomania of Stalin might caricature his interpretation but still conveys the essence of what has been seen by many as a sub-zero Cold Warrior work of history. With the end of the Cold War, the greater availability of primary sources from ex-Soviet archives is enabling historians to add documentary substance to their past misgivings about Pipes antagonistic interpretation. That the new preface to the third and latest edition of *The Formation of the Soviet Union* published as recently as 1997 makes no serious attempt to update a perception dating from the darkest days of the Cold War could be regarded as provocative. It is therefore no surprise that a new-generation researcher mining the archive collections of the Russian Federation has now challenged the long-established but arguably outmoded holy writ of Pipes and produced what could be taken for the first post-Cold War interpretation of the critical foundation years of the USSR.

Jeremy Smith diplomatically suggests that Pipes covers rather different territory from his own study, for example focusing on the major nations which became the Union Republics rather than the smaller

nationalities within Russia and the Transcaucasian peoples targeted by himself. He also claims that while Pipes considers the earlier processes by which the borderlands were sovietised and brought under Bolshevik control, his own work focuses on the policies which were implemented once Soviet power was in place (p.xi). Notwithstanding this modest disclaimer of the challenge implicit in his study, Smith's tactful proposition that the two works are distinct yet complimentary (sic) cannot mask the fundamental divergences of interpretation which suffuse virtually every page of the text.

To take just three of the most striking examples of clash of interpretation. First, while Pipes account postulates an Olympian duel of titans between Lenin and Stalin over the direction of Soviet nationalities strategy, Smith's line emphasises the broader debate within a Bolshevik elite which could hardly have been less monolithic in its attitude to the national question. To Smith, while Lenin and Stalin were indisputably the champions of debate and the second-rankers like Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev and Zinoviev played only modest roles, middle rankers little known in the West like Frunze, Kuibyshev, Ordzhonikidze and Rakovsky were perhaps unexpectedly prominent and influential. Smith also underlines the shifting nature of the political positions of the leading players, in particular claiming that Lenin and Stalin (not to mention the legendary anti-revisionist Rosa Luxemburg) changed their minds and positions so frequently and radically over the national question that the later terms Leninist and Stalinist have no coherent meaning in the period 1917-23. The tacit Pipes dichotomy between the idealist-cum-intellectual camp headed by Lenin and the practitioner-cum-managerial camp masterminded by Stalin is a retrospective myth of polarisation which cannot be sustained under close historical examination.

Second, Smith contests Pipes emphasis on ideological grand strategy (which again may well reflect the historical conspiracy theory typical of the climate of Cold War and McCarthyism over the late 1940s and early 1950s when *The Formation of the Soviet Union* was being written). Aside from the kaleidoscope variety and patent confusion of the opinions of the Bolshevik elite over the national question, ideological commitment was bound to be an early casualty of the immensely complex and infinitely demanding early years of the Soviet state. Stressing the accelerating primacy of improvisation, Smith persuasively argues that the Bolsheviks national policy, based on ambiguous and frequently inconsistent theories, was neither foreseen nor planned [but] instead evolved haphazardly in response to particular circumstances (p.241).

Third, while Pipes 1923 scenario posits a definitive Stalinist victory over an idealistic but ailing Lenin who only had months to live, Smith argues that the autonomist-devolutionary position of the nationalities was still strong: it was not inevitable either that administrative centralism would prevail or that the authoritarian process would be headed by Stalin. Far from the course of the future Soviet Union being already immutably determined by the time of the death of Lenin in January 1924, the situation was still remarkably ambivalent. For instance, the policy of *korenizatsia* or indigenisation successfully recruited many minority nationality activists into the Communist Party establishment, stabilised Bolshevik control across its non-Russian jurisdiction and unintentionally ensured that national consciousness survived the russification of the 1930s (p.162). Nothing was pre-ordained by the first five years of the Bolshevik regime: the discrete competitive dynamics of the remainder of the 1920s and the Second Revolution of the 1930s were cumulatively required to effect the Stalinist state.

For all its meticulous scholarship and indefatigable research, Smith's commendable study exhibits some relatively condonable shortcomings. Much of the unrelieved denseness of the text comes with its ideological-cum-political territory: the bewildering plethora of institutional acronyms makes reading impossible without regular recourse to the thoughtfully-provided collected list of abbreviations. However, the uncompromising

character of the unrevised doctoral thesis is all too evident. The single small map provided is insufficient to illustrate the detailed narrative and closer copy-editing would have prevented some minor blemishes (like spelling the adjective principal as principle throughout). Moreover, there seems to have been no effort to make the text more accessible to either the general or specialist reader, an issue which the editors of the *Studies in Russia and East Europe* series might care to re-examine.

More generally, the study is so short on context as to be almost hermetic. Concentrating on Smith's unforgiving text, it is easy to forget that his coverage of the ideological debates should be set against the backdrop of a bloody and chaotic Civil War which eventually claimed some twenty million lives through battle, disease and starvation. The index significantly contains only five references to the Whites and just three references to the Civil War, a revealing demonstration of the study's tunnel-vision focus on the tortuously Byzantine, occasionally murderously Florentine political intrigues of the new Bolshevik establishment.

An even broader sense of contemporary historical perspective would have been more than appropriate. The cataclysmic effects of the First World War meant that most of Europe faced similar dilemmas over the immediate post-war years. While the jurisdictional fate of much of the ex-tsarist empire was taxing the Bolshevik leadership, the political disposition of the remainder of eastern and central Europe was being determined by the Allied statesmen at the Paris Peace Conferences of 1919-23. Europe east and west was suffering a mirror-problem: how to contain rampant nationalism in an era of imperial collapse through geopolitical contrivances hopefully concocted to promote stability and progress. The national question over which the Bolsheviks agonised was just part of a fresh, post-war challenge which was already exercising all Europe and much of Asia and was soon to become global in scope.

In conclusion, while it seems timely (and therefore tempting) to greet the approaching ten-year anniversary of the collapse of Soviet power with a comprehensive post-mortem, it is apparent that Smith would not claim to have produced either a complete refutation of the Pipes interpretation or an exhaustive analysis of the period 1917-23. He is admirably candid in conceding that the opening of the archives has not yet produced stunning revelations (p.xii) but rather a better understanding of the day-to-day workings of the Communist Party and Soviet government. Various processes and episodes remain impenetrably mysterious: considering Lithuanian-Belorussian rapprochement in 1919, Smith concedes that none of these [interpretations] provides a convincing explanation of Litbel (p.75); investigating the Ukrainian Borotbists over 1919-20, he confesses that no adequate explanation for this abrupt reversal has come to light (p.122); and contemplating Lenin's wavering role in the Georgian Affair of 1922, he confesses that the precise reasons for this U-turn are not clear (p.203). It is to be hoped that the current re-evaluation of the early Soviet period will continue to be fueled by a further opening-up of ex-Soviet archives in (and possibly outside) the Russian Federation. In the meantime, Smith must be congratulated on contributing a thoroughly professional, laudably open-minded (and occasionally present-minded) piece of work-in-progress. This study may not have sensationally transformed our perception of the period, in other words revolutionised the historiography of the Revolution, but it has undoubtedly deepened and enriched our understanding of its always complex and often contradictory processes. Whether Smith can eventually construct a definitive replacement for the classic Pipes volume by building upon the present penetrating critique of, and necessary and welcome corrective to, its Cold War assumptions and features remains to be seen.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/80#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/974>

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