Gábor T. Rittersporn, Anguish, Anger and Folkways in Soviet Russia

Mark Harrison

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аспект; Ин-т истории и археологии УрО РАН, Екатеринбург, 2011, с. 108-112; А.В. Голубев, В.А. Невежин, Формирование образа советской России в окружающем мире средствами культурной дипломатии: 1920- первая половина 1940-х гг., М.-СПб., 2016, с. 18-19.

Ol'ga Poršneva

Université de l'Oural B.N. El'cin

Gábor T. RITTERSPORN

Anguish, Anger and Folkways in Soviet Russia

Pittsburgh : University of Pittsburgh Press (Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies), 2014, x + 396 p.

Gábor Rittersporn, an eminent social historian of Russia in Stalin's time, has written a blockbuster. In the introduction, he proposes a "conservative" agenda — one that returns to the roots of the revisionist approach to Soviet social history. Before revisionism, he suggests, historians focused on the "input" side, meaning the decisions and policies that emanated from the leaders of the party-state (p. 2). Revisionist historians of society turned attention to the "output" side: faced with these decisions and policies, what did ordinary people *do*, and with what results? Now there is also "post-revisionism": in those circumstances, what did ordinary people *think* and *feel* as they went about their lives? Rittersporn's agenda is conservative in that his goal reverts to understanding of the outputs, chief among which was the eventual collapse of the Soviet system. But it is still revisionist, drawing on all the insights of the revisionists concerning the lived experience of that system.

The book is divided into three parts, each divided into three chapters. In Part 1 "Anguish," chapter 1 is entitled "The omnipresent conspiracy." This chapter describes the conspiracy thinking of leading Bolsheviks on two dimensions: their belief in the hidden coordination of internal and external enemies, matched by their own conspiratorial practices. The chapter shows that such beliefs were not confined to the elite, but resonated widely in society. Chapter 2, "Catching spies, trapping the system" discusses the spy mania of the time, correlates it with available evidence about actual spies and saboteurs, and recounts the casualties, including the victims when it was the turn of the secret police to be savagely purged. This is the sense in which the system became "trapped" by its own beliefs. The chapter argues that Russian courts still fail to deal properly with the historical perpetrators and victims of the spy mania, so the trap is still in place today. Chapter 3, "Between Catastrophe and the promised land," deals with the thorny issue of popular support for the regime, and mass repressions as a response to the lack of it. It stresses regime perceptions of popular discontent derived from secret police reports, and argues that in 1937 the growing "war scare" was a contingent, not sufficient cause of the

“mass operations,” given that previous war scares did not have the same results (p. 76).

Part 2, “Anger,” begins with chapter 4, subtitled “Endemic violence, angry youth, angry Bolsheviks.” The subject of this chapter is the violence that young Soviet people met with every day in the 1930s, and the political overtones frequently ascribed to it. Chapter 5, “Loyalty and lost hope,” deals with the anger of citizens not with the Revolution as such, but with the Revolution’s outcomes: the failures of food security, personal security, and international security. Chapter 6, “Rebels,” turns to the cases of those who converted their anger into social and political action. Often enough they were true believers, motivated by the gap between Bolshevism’s goals and practices. The chapter points out that true believers of this sort were to be found in the communist leadership as late as the 1980s.

In Part 3, “Folkways,” chapter 7 is called “Breaking Step, Enjoying Carnival.” Just as revolution turned the world upside down, so did humour and burlesque. Their influence reached far into the party, at the same time as party leaders coordinated its repression. Chapter 8 is about “Entrepreneurship.” Entrepreneurs are defined after Josef Schumpeter, not as people who want to create an unknown world, but as people who rearrange the known world in new ways (p. 217). In that sense, it is true, the Soviet economy and state had a myriad entrepreneurs. But it neglects what Schumpeter saw as the outcome of entrepreneurship: “creative destruction,” something that the Soviet economy was designed to rule out. The chapter acknowledges this in passing: entrepreneurial innovation “brought modifications but not fundamental change” (p. 246). Anyway, the chapter’s point is that the Soviet economy forced millions to pursue ingenious survival strategies that, like their humour, sometimes greased the machine and sometimes corroded it. Chapter 9, the final chapter, is subtitled, “Misadventures of modernity.” The misadventures are those of the officials, who thought they were building a brave new modern world as they blundered about, and also the missteps of the citizens, who continually stumbled into the gap between programmes and outcomes.

Throughout his book, Rittersporn draws on a wealth of episodes and experiences found in public and private archives, diaries, and letters. These descriptions are what gives the book its life. In the process, the book lives up to a promise that the author gives in the introduction: “The term *state* will ... be used as sparingly ... as possible” (p. 7). In the Soviet Union (or perhaps anywhere) “the state” was not a thing apart from society. Decisions were made and policies pursued, not by “the state” but by identifiable human actors, singly and in groups. The logic of this becomes fully apparent in the epilogue, where Rittersporn attributes the collapse of the Soviet state to toleration of the entrepreneurial folkways that agents of the state adopted in response to the state’s own shortcomings.

The book has some shortcomings. Moving through its landscape, we often have no idea where the path leads, or why we must enter the marsh instead of skirting round it. The horizon is fog-bound. We long for signposts, which the author provides as chapter headings and subheadings, but these are no use because they point to places we’ve never heard of: “Data, Successes, Blunders” (p. 50); “Ambivalent

loyalty” (p. 114); “False Prophets and Closet Rebels” (p. 159). Even the book’s title becomes a mystery, because what separates anguish from anger in the historical record is rarely made apparent. This is an author that likes to tease the reader more than to help.

A strong message of the book is that the attempt to create a planned economy led to chaos, and that the Bolsheviks’ totalitarian aspirations were continually subverted by the counter-strategies of the subjects. It’s a fair point, although not new. It also leaves something out: the planned economy that the Bolsheviks created was, for a considerable time, a success. Not a success, perhaps, for the ordinary workers and peasants who had to make it work, but still a success for its creators. Lenin and Stalin wanted a centralized command system for the mass production of things, especially of the things that they saw as means of power in the world: locomotives, lathes, power stations, ships, tanks, and planes. Here was the system, even if many people experienced it as chaos, and the system worked, turning a third-class economy into a first-class military power. After many years the system collapsed, but not before it had qualified as one of the most durable of modern dictatorships.

This important book is certain to have an influence on future scholarly research and on the teaching of Russia’s social history. How widespread that influence will be is not entirely clear. For some readers it will be enough to dip into the pool and catch hold of some fascinating gem. Others will require plenty of deep breathing followed by prolonged immersion to grasp Rittersporn’s project in its entirety.

Mark Harrison

University of Warwick

Sheila FITZPATRICK

On Stalin’s Team

The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics

Princeton et Oxford : Princeton University Press, 2015, 364 p.

Il a fallu attendre longtemps avant que les historiens de l’époque soviétique ne commencent à accepter l’idée que Stalin n’agissait pas dans un vacuum. Nombre d’adeptes de la confrérie ne sont pas encore tout à fait certains que le dictateur ait eu à trouver un *modus vivendi* avec la réticence des paysans à se plier à sa politique rurale, ni s’il avait été bien avisé d’adapter sa politique pénale à la résilience d’une criminalité sociale engendrée par le régime lui-même ou s’il avait dû composer avec un appareil de l’État-parti, où les réseaux d’assistance mutuelle des cadres se reconstituaient et persistaient, même après des purges meurtrières. De ce fait, l’approbation unanime par les collègues d’un ouvrage qui montre que l’équipe dirigeante du père des peuples soviétiques n’était pas qu’un instrument docile n’est pas acquise.

Pourtant, Sheila Fitzpatrick argumente bien son cas. Elle identifie un noyau dur au sein du Politbureau du Parti qui, ayant survécu à toutes les vicissitudes d’une