Dorena Caroli, Histoire de la protection sociale en Union soviétique (1917-1939)

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REFERENCES

Dorena CAROLI, **Histoire de la protection sociale en Union soviétique (1917-1939)**. Paris : L'Harmattan, 2010, 316 p.

- 1 Dorena Caroli has written a rich study of Soviet “social protection” in the first two decades of the fledgling Soviet regime.¹ A historical treatment of this long-neglected subject is particularly timely today, as Russian policy-makers review the scope of their system of social protection. Imaginatively and thoroughly researched in archival, published and unpublished sources, Caroli’s book will be a “go-to” resource for historians interested in social policy in inter-war Russia.
- 2 The book is organized chronologically. Five chapters, of uneven length, take the reader from the first foray into the provision of sickness and accident benefits under late tsarism through the troubled thirties, when responsibility for social protection was transferred from the social insurance *kassy* to the trade unions. Of particular significance for historians interested in the formative years of Soviet state structure will be the chapter on NEP, when an identifiable “system” of social protection was put in place, and the chapter on the First Five Year Plan, when the provision of social benefits was balanced against the priorities of economic development. The author’s historical sweep is long and her canvas broad. Under the umbrella of social protection, Caroli includes sickness, disability, unemployment, maternal and child health, and pension benefits. She analyzes not only the policies governing the allocation of benefits but also the construction of the categories of the working population which underpinned the entitlements.

- 3 The most innovative aspect of the book is Caroli's "bridging" of macro- and micro-historical approaches. Going beyond an exclusive focus on the legal, financial, and institutional structure of social protection, the author examines the impact on the everyday life of the population of the way benefits were delivered or, as the case may be, not delivered. To tap that lived experience, she presents material from some seventy letters written by Soviet workers to a variety of authorities to complain about unresponsiveness to claims of entitlement. These letters, drawn from the archives (particularly the archive of Krupskaja's secretariat) create a vivid portrait of the constraints under which some workers, deprived of their pension or sickness benefits, labored. To deepen her examination of lived experience on the ground, the author adds two case studies. The AMO automobile plant in Moscow, which the author follows from the NEP period through the end of the First Five Year plan, turns out to be an ideal site to observe the way the structure of social protection shaped the daily life and struggle of workers. By contrast, the second case study —the examination of School # 25 in Moscow— is strangely disconnected from the story the author is telling. Be that as it may, the larger project of bridging macro- and micro-history is of first rate importance. In the spirit of that project, the reader wonders whether the bridge functioned as a two-way conduit. Is any evidence that the letters of complaint had an impact on the framing and re-framing of provisions for benefits and the categories on which those provisions rested?
- 4 Caroli's book is animated by two arguments. The author documents in some detail the way the newly forming central state administration —itself in the process of formation and re-formation—progressively removed itself from direct involvement in social protection, ceding function first to local insurance funds and, ultimately in 1933, to the trade unions. Whether this was a case of institutionalization or de-institutionalization might be debated. What is beyond question is that the fledgling Soviet state in the thirties was weak, with little capacity.
- 5 Second, Caroli argues that the driving force behind the welter of social protection policies was not the commitment to create a socially inclusive polity, but rather the desire to support the industrialization drive. More to the point, so runs the argument, by privileging some categories of workers over others, the social protection measures had a discriminatory impact. (Hence Caroli's reservations about describing Russia as a *social welfare* state, my emphasis). The author acknowledges the role played by the economic exigencies of forced industrialization and the Great Depression in the setting aside of the bold revolutionary promises of social protection, yet sometimes she also implies that the regime's normative commitment to universalism was soft. What, the reader wonders, is the relative strength of these two factors and in what way, if any, are they connected?
- 6 Finally, there is the question of the place of the Soviet project of social protection in the European canvas. As Caroli points out, Russia was not the first country to introduce social protection provisions. Drawing on literature on German and British welfare measures, she compares the scope and design of those European measures to the Soviet project. But the reader sorely misses a sustained analysis of how those who designed Soviet social protection measures viewed their project vis-a-vis similar projects undertaken by other countries. What were their models and their negative exemplars?² Research on the Soviet framing of measures for health protection revealed that foreign models and experience were discussed at great length not only in the Russian

Commissariat for Public Health but also in the public health and medical journals and monographs.³ Was there nothing of this sort in the case of social insurance? At issue is more than a fine point of intellectual history. An analysis of the discussions by the Soviet architects of social protection measures would deepen the arguments Caroli makes.

- 7 A few quibbles with what was otherwise a fine book. First, the book would have benefitted from a road map. At points, the chronological framework is not sufficient to hold the pieces together. Secondly, Caroli's book would have benefitted from a subject and author index.

NOTES

1. The book was originally published in Italian as *Un Welfare State senza benessere: Insegnanti, impiegati, operai e contadini nel sistema di previdenza sociale dell'Unione Sovietica (1917-1939)*, (Macerata: Eum, 2008).
2. For the role of foreign models in domestic debates, see Susan Gross Solomon, "The Politics of Inclusion: John Kingsbury and the Soviet Health Care System," in Anne-Emanuelle Birn and Theodore Brown, eds., *US Health Internationalists, Abroad and at Home* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
3. David Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press: 2011).