

Ilic, Melanie; Smith, Jeremy (Hrsg.): *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*. London: Routledge 2009. ISBN: 978-0-415-47649-2; 240 S.

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The Khrushchev era in the Soviet Union, 1955 to 1964, has recently received well-deserved attention in the academic literature, though much work remains to be done in casting a light on this period, one both complex and ambiguous, yet at the same time crucial to determining the eventual outcome of the Soviet project. Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith's edited volume, *„Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev“*, represents a solid contribution to the historiography on the Khrushchev years.

The volume begins with an introductory essay by Melanie Ilic. With a deft touch, the author provides a useful, succinct overview of current academic discussions surrounding the Khrushchev years. Ilic appropriately highlights the turn away from state repression and toward communist utopianism, consumerism, Leninist principles, and public engagement. Yet for a book that emphasizes the persona of Nikita Khrushchev in its title, the introductory essay should have taken a stronger position on determining which of these transformations we should attribute to the new leadership, and which spring more directly from the postwar Stalin years.

Many of the articles in the volume take a stronger stance on this issue, for example Mark Smith's treatment of housing construction. Focusing on the conceptual framework of citizens' rights, Smith points out that the rights promoted by the Stalinist leadership in the 1936 Constitution remained largely on paper. He insightfully argues that it was only in the Khrushchev era, with an escalating campaign to construct housing accompanied by a more predictable system of distribution, that such rights became truly meaningful for the vast majority of the population: an achievement he clearly attributes to the post-Stalin leadership. Less convincing is Smith's juxtaposition of the „rationality“ of technocratic construction experts against the „ideological“

position of political figures: the viewpoint of the experts should not be considered apart from the broader Soviet context, powerfully shaped by communist ideology.

Pia Koivunen's piece on the 1957 Moscow International Youth Festival also clearly delineates the Khrushchev and Stalin years. She convincingly demonstrates that the festival served as a means for Khrushchev to implement his innovative ideas of the possibility of „peaceful coexistence“ with capitalist democratic states. By drawing on not only archival and published sources, but also interviews with festival participants, Koivunen captures the way that the event provided many young people with a different way of seeing the world, despite the presence of Soviet social control mechanism. The essay, though, would have been stronger if it placed the 1957 Moscow International Youth Festival more squarely in the context of local and regional festivals occurring within the Soviet Union during those years.

Exploring a central ideological document of the Khrushchev years, the 1961 Third Party Program, Alexander Titov presents a more complex evolution from Stalin to Khrushchev. His examination reveals that a number of the elements of the 1961 Program originally appeared in a 1947 draft version, yet the harsh ideological environment of the late 1940s made the more lenient draft proposals unacceptable. Thus, Khrushchev took full public ownership of the promises in the 1961 Program, most notably the lofty economic goals: failing to achieve them, Titov argues, played a critical role in eventually discrediting the regime. However, Titov does not provide convincing evidence on the way the population interpreted the Program, undermining this claim.

Both the empowering of lower-level trade union committees and revival of women's councils, „zhensovet“, resulted in increasing public engagement in governance, examined by Juande Jo and Melanie Ilic respectively. The former argues that Khrushchev's reforms of trade unions reflected the broader decentralizing policies of the new leadership, aimed to encourage popular support for reforms, and helped improve worker's lives. Ilic writes that the revived „zhensovet“, though aimed

more at the state's needs than what women themselves wanted, escalated social responsibility and neighborliness, and resulted in tangible improvements in women's lives, in parallel to Jo's finding for worker's lives.

Reflecting the reconceptualization of the Khrushchev years as a time of not only liberalizing reforms, Robert Hornsby, Joshua Andy, and Julie Elkner dissect state coercion. Hornsby tackles the question of political dissent, suggesting that much of the public outbursts took place in the form of strikes and armed uprisings, aimed against specific policies and individuals without questioning the system. By the Brezhnev era, as the Soviet regime satisfied the consumption demands of workers, dissent increasingly sprang from the intelligentsia and took on an anti-systemic character; it also moved toward soliciting political pressure from the „west“ instead of strikes and armed uprisings. Based mostly on secondary sources, Andy's piece examines one such armed uprising, the 1962 Novocherkassk revolt. Elkner's innovative work helps reconceptualize our understanding of the image of the political police officer or „checkist“. The authorities began to rehabilitate the „checkist“ in a major campaign from 1958 onward, increasingly presenting the „checkist“ as a professional, educated, sophisticated, and benevolent figure, to target the young generation and deal with the inroads made by „bourgeois“ ideology.

More engagement by the authors of the disparate chapters with each other would have strengthened the book. For example, one wonders to what extent the women's councils became involved in the debate over whether the Khrushchev authorities should reverse the late Stalinist policy of denying unmarried mothers the rights to have courts determine the paternity of their children, which Helene Carlbeck writes about. Another possible link would be to consider the „zhensovety“ members as parents in relationship to the 1958 education reforms, the topic of Laurent Coumel's chapter: did such organizations constitute interest groups that shaped public opinion and contribute to undermining these reforms, as Coumel finds for scientists and pedagogues?

Some important topics are, inevitably, either inadequately or not at all covered in this

volume, such as center-periphery issues, especially in non-Russian republics, foreign policy, peasant studies, and Soviet popular culture. The first two are partially made up by the companion volume by the same editors, „Khrushchev in the Kremlin“. More problematic is the lack of substantial interdisciplinary engagement or dialogue with historians working on other contexts, a necessity in ensuring wider relevance for Soviet history. Despite these issues, this collected volume significantly advances the historiography on the Khrushchev era, and by further opening the curtain on important processes taking place within Soviet society and government, supplies a basis for further innovative work. It should be read by all interested in the USSR and more broadly post-World War II historical developments.

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