

character of the Soviet state can obviously be shared by others, it seems to refer to discussions that are outdated, thanks principally to research like Lewin's own. The appendix on the extent of the Gulag is a case in point. Instead of a much-needed contribution to our comprehension of one of the chief but less studied issues in Soviet history, Lewin simply disputes the figures proposed by other scholars on the inmates and victims of the Stalinist camps. Nonetheless, *Russia/USSR/Russia* will rightly be hailed as another major piece of research by one of the leading scholars in the field. As a means of understanding one of the crucial periods of this century, it has much to recommend it.

Andrea Romano

CLARKE, SIMON, PETER FAIRBROTHER, [and] VADIM BORISOV. *The Workers' Movement in Russia*. [Studies of Communism in Transition.] Edward Elgar, Aldershot [etc.] 1995. v, 431 pp. £49.95.

This volume is a systematic presentation of a vast amount of data, much of it collected directly through interviews and direct observation, about three major sections of the new Russian labour movement, from its origins in 1989 until the end of 1994. It offers detailed accounts of the workers' committees and the Independent Miners' Union (NPG) in the Kuzbass (with some discussion of the national and other regional unions); the Sotsprof confederation of unions, both its national level and its primary organizations (with special attention to the First Moscow Watch Factory and the Moskvich auto plant); and the Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Unions, also at various levels.

The authors' stated purpose might appear modest: "Not so much to provide an explanation [. . .] as to provide some evidence on which to base further discussion of such explanations" (p. 1). However, this is a valuable and quite unique book. It is all the more remarkable in view of the difficulty of systematic data collection in the chaotic conditions prevailing in Russia, and in its labour movement in particular.

The book's title, however, is somewhat puzzling, as it implies that the "traditional" unions inherited from the Soviet period are not part of the workers' movement, even though they were and remain the principal labour organizations. Despite their numerous shortcomings, they are no more detached from their membership than, for example, the national Sotsprof or even the national NPG, as it eventually evolved. Politically, the "traditional" unions have shown more independence than the "alternatives", despite the authors' claim that they continue "to be bastions in defence of whoever happens to be in power" (p. 406). Their political independence was most pronounced in the crisis of September 1993, which surprisingly is barely mentioned in the book. The "alternatives" supported Yeltsin's coup, which ushered in a presidential autocracy, while the "traditional" federation, at least until Yeltsin's threat to dissolve it was really felt, defended the constitution and parliamentary democracy.

This book is really the story of the failure of the "alternative" labour movement. It was not an unmitigated failure, but by the end of 1994 these organizations were clearly only marginal elements in the labour movement and, except for the air traffic controllers (and a few other transport-related unions not covered in the

book), they did not represent attractive alternatives to the “traditional” unions for the vast majority of unionized workers.

For all the richness of its data (the detail is sometimes even excessive), the book’s focus on the structures, policies and actions of the “alternative” organizations and their leaders at the various levels neglects important parts of the picture that would have helped in understanding the failure and in “discussing explanations”. Moreover, despite the modesty of the authors’ expressed aims, in practice there can be no narrative without at least implicit explanation.

There are a number of key questions concerning the “alternative” labour movement about which one is left wondering by this book. Except for the air traffic controllers, driven mainly, it seems, by craft interests, the other unions discussed in it were formed largely because the old unions were perceived to be unreformable. But was this really the case? The obstacles to reform are not made clear enough in the book, especially in view of the progress achieved by the “traditional” miners’ union, which by the end of the period discussed was doing a better job defending its members than the NPG. Even outside of the coal sector, there are local “traditional” unions and even some national ones (though the latter are mainly in Belarus and the Ukraine) that have undergone very significant change in a progressive direction.

One also remains puzzled about the reasons for the stubborn attachment of the leadership of the “alternatives” to Yeltsin and to liberal reform, long after their rank and file had turned away from them. Indeed, despite the economic and political disaster Yeltsin has inflicted upon Russian workers, the majority of these union leaders even today continue to support him. Various factors are offered in the course of the narrative, but none satisfactorily explains this dogged loyalty. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that corruption – through union business activities, by political figures and organizations, by the AFL-CIO – is an important element of the explanation of the evolution of the “alternative” movement. This factor crops up repeatedly in the book (though too often in footnotes rather than in the body), but, unfortunately, the authors did not consider it a “real issue” and made the explicit decision not to be “diverted by widespread stories of scandal and corruption” (p. 14). It would have been interesting, for example, to know what brought the second secretary of the US embassy to court at one point on the side of the leaders of the air traffic controllers (p. 369)!

But perhaps the question that begs most for a fuller explanation is the marked tendency of almost all “alternative” unions to focus on various forms of politics (and often also on business activities) and court battles, while neglecting day-to-day organizing activity among their members. (Of course, this is also true of most “traditional” unions, although they have a more structured presence in the enterprises, partly inherited from the past and partly due to their acceptance by management.) This tendency is all the more puzzling in view of the fact that in the period studied the “alternative” unions were able to lead significant rank-and-file mobilizations (though their own role in preparing these mobilizations on the ground was often minimal). In other words, their members or supporters were active.

The book offers some elements of an explanation in the material advantages of the “traditional” unions, the hostility of management, the legal framework, etc. Another piece of explanation no doubt is to be found in the attitudes and interests of the leaders of the “alternative” unions themselves, though these too need to

be explained. But a key element of the answer has to be sought in the rank and file, their material situation, their relations with management, their perception of their interests, their consciousness and “mentalities”. It is perhaps the major shortcoming of this book, even as a narrative, that relatively little information is presented about so key a player in the workers’ movement. (At the same time, it has to be recognized that it is the player that is the most difficult to study.)

These unanswered, or partially answered, questions come together in the strategic choice of the “alternative” workers’ movement to pursue its aim of creating a democratic, independent labour movement through a strategy of splitting rather than reform of the “traditional” unions from within. As difficult as the latter strategy was – and is – to realize, it is a real choice and it was made by many of the activists of the 1989 miners’ strike. The alternative unions were based upon the most active part of the working class. And so their splitting strategy, at least for a certain period, served in practice as an alternative to day-to-day organizing and mobilizing on the ground: for a time, the “alternative” unions could take the lead of collective protests even without organization. But only for a time, since, as the authors note in their conclusion, these isolated protests could not achieve their goals. As the situation deteriorated, even the most active workers became demoralized or else they left their enterprises to find jobs that could provide for their families.

Even the apparently narrow motives of the air traffic controllers were partially defeated by the political isolation that resulted from their split, though it is among such “worker aristocracies” (locomotive drivers, blue-collar port workers, etc.) that “alternative” unions have had at least some relative success for their members.

To be effective, the workers’ struggle in Russia had to be waged on a political level against the Yeltsin “reforms”. The “alternative” movement played an extremely negative role in this by drawing the most active sections of the working class into Yeltsin’s orbit or by neutralizing their potential opposition. By the same token, by depriving the “traditional” unions of many of their most independent and active elements, they made their reform so much slower and more difficult. This may have been partially compensated by pressure from the competition provided by the new unions, but that competition also sometimes had the effect of pushing the traditional unions more firmly into management’s embrace.

A certain enlargement of the focus of this book would have allowed it to provide fuller answers to these central questions. Even so, this is an extremely valuable contribution to the study of the contemporary Russian labour movement. It presents systematically a wealth of data that shed important light not only on the workers’ movement but on Russian civil society in general as well as on its political system. No serious student of Russia can afford to overlook it.

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