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## Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition

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**J. Arch Getty, *Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 384. £29.95 (hardback). ISBN 9780300169294**

Arch Getty's new book makes a powerful contribution to the neo-traditionalist interpretation of Soviet history. The book focuses on the 1920s and 1930s, but has much to say about the nature of Russian history as such. In a nutshell, Getty argues that, even though the Russian economy was modernised in the course of the twentieth century, Russian politics never was. In Getty's interpretation, the Russian tradition is characterised by weak institutionalisation and a thoroughly personalised style of rule. Everything was about personal power wielded by leaders of competing cliques, and about the balance of power between these cliques and the autocrat, who was, again, merely leader of the most powerful clique of them all. The personalistic and patrimonial traditions were established in the pre-imperial, Muscovite era, and have continued to dominate Russian politics ever since.

The great value of this important book lies in the uncompromising way in which Stalinist realities are demystified, and in highlighting the actual practices behind the bureaucratic and ideological façades. The book could alternatively have been called 'How the Soviet Union was *really* ruled'. The tone borders on the cynical, but that is amply justified by the harsh nature of Soviet administrative practices.

The book treats many aspects of Stalinist politics and has a remarkably wide scope. Topics discussed include the practice of writing petitions to powerful persons; the conferring of awards on distinguished citizens; practices of collective responsibility and

punishment reminiscent of the old Russia; the quasi-religious cult of personality; and the sumptuous and gated lifestyles of the Old Bolshevik elite. In Getty's eyes, far from being the conscience of the revolution, the Old Bolsheviks arrogantly considered themselves almost a breed apart, with a natural right to rule.

*Practicing Stalinism* gives a fascinating overview and analysis of the relations between Stalin and the provincial cliques. In Getty's interpretation, during the 1920s, the provincial party secretaries supported Stalin not because they owed their power to him – they did not. Rather, they held the 'opposition' responsible for creating chaos and division, and thus endangering the security of their own powers in the provinces. On his part, Stalin supported the provincial power holders as factors of order. He accepted their firm entrenchment as a price to be paid. During the early 1930s, Stalin attempted to bring local cliques under his control, for example through the Commission of Party Control, but he failed. Provincial leaders played an important role in triggering the Great Terror in so far as they demanded more extensive powers to terrorise their own constituencies. According to Getty, Stalin was afraid that this would further undermine his own powers over them, but he gave in. The Great Terror was controlled from above by Stalin and emerged as a sort of compromise between him and the local secretaries. Getty finally argues convincingly that Stalin's terror against the local party leaders themselves highlights the power of these cliques as much as his own: he saw no other way to deal with them than through this highly disruptive process.

Underlying all this lies a very radical theoretical approach. Getty attributes the force of personalism to the persistence of tradition and the unconscious 'deep structure' of Russian popular psychology, rather than to any contemporary functionality, which, Getty argues, had long been lost. Undeniably, the unconscious persistence of tradition is an important mechanism, but it stretches the imagination to assume that a tradition would be able to persist for three hundred years almost exclusively on its own strength and unsupported by contemporary functionalities. Getty is, however, not inclined to accept the relevance of other, functionalist explanations, such as, for example, that informal practices of personal power and contacts were spawned by the inflated hyper-bureaucracies that were too unwieldy to deliver the goods. Accepting this alternative explanation would have brought the modernization thesis back into play, something Getty clearly hopes to avoid.

Getty insists that the Soviet state was not in any real sense a bureaucratic organism. The real powers of senior political leaders always trumped the merely formal powers of institutions. In two fascinating chapters, the concrete functioning of the apparatus of the Central Committee is highlighted. The Bolshevik 'grandees' and 'nobles' tended to take decisions essentially on their own, only subsequently to formalise them in the name of the committee that they served on. Many of these committees hardly ever met anyhow. Downstairs at the Central Committee, rule-bound rationality was taken more seriously, but the subordinate committees were consistently overruled by the grandees upstairs.

Getty's stark image of an uncouth elite of can-do men, throwing their weight around without any interest in formal procedure, is particularly convincing. But, again, does this prove that only people mattered but institutions did not? Bureaucratic hierarchies remained intact. It was not for nothing that the superior committees were monopolised by the most powerful personalities. To become effective, decisions had to be formalised in the name of a committee. To overrule a subordinate committee, a leader needed not only to enjoy higher personal prestige but also to occupy a higher

position in the official hierarchy. Did the Bolsheviks really, as Getty insists, hate bureaucracy? Undeniably, they continuously bent their own rules and cut corners, but at the same time they were all for professionalism, division of labour and the business-like style. The model of a bureaucratic-personalistic hybrid might be the more convincing one.

Getty refers to Bourdieu and Foucault to underscore his view that only individual people and their practices constitute solid reality, and to show that the state in general, not only the Stalinist state, is an ephemeral institution – a mere label. Another profound thinker to have made a similar point comes to my mind. It is somehow comforting to see that at the age of wisdom Arch has finally become a follower of Mrs Thatcher: ‘There is no such thing as society’.

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