



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: D. Priestland (2007) *Stalinism and the politics of mobilization : ideas, power, and terror in inter-war Russia*]

van Ree, E.

Publication date

2008

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Revolutionary Russia

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Ree, E. (2008). [Review of: D. Priestland (2007) *Stalinism and the politics of mobilization : ideas, power, and terror in inter-war Russia*]. *Revolutionary Russia*, 21(2), 219-221.
<http://x.doi.org/10.1080/09546540802461266>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-war Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 487; notes; index. £55.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-0-19-924513-0

In this original work David Priestland proposes a new way of looking at the inner-party struggles and political campaigns in Soviet Russia from 1917 to 1939. The author's main purpose is to arrive at a new frame of interpretation of the Great Terror. The book also comprehensively treats the whole period leading up to it from October 1917 onwards. The Terror is treated in one of the five chapters of this chronologically structured work. Taking into account the significance of the structural aspects of the Soviet state and economic and international factors, the book lays emphasis on ideology. Historical developments are presented in detail, based on extensive use of secondary literature as well as archival research, but the work has an abstract and theoretical flavour.

Priestland offers a new model to classify the various types of Bolshevism and shows that essential parts of early Soviet history can be fruitfully interpreted in terms of an interaction between proponents of these types. Like Ken Jowitt and Stephen Hanson before him, the author takes Max Weber's threefold division of legitimate authority (rational, charismatic and traditional) as a point of departure for his analysis of the varieties of Bolshevism. He also refers to Alvin Gouldner's thesis of the 'two Marxisms', one voluntaristic and the other deterministic. But Priestland distinguishes three Bolshevisms: 'revivalist', 'technicist' and 'neo-traditionalist'. Bolshevics of the first type represented the charismatic tendency and the voluntarist strain in Marxism. They emphasized the power of ideas, popular enthusiasm and moral incentives as the driving forces of history. They saw the proletariat as foreshadowing the communist New Man of the future, engaging in voluntary labour instead of toiling out of need. The mobilizing 'revivalist' discourse had powerful Romantic overtones, setting great store on spirit, belief and energy. The revivalists were divided into an elitist tendency, nurturing a military command style, and aficionados of popular mass mobilization. The 'technicists' corresponded to Weber's rational authority and followed deterministic Marxism. In their model, economic progress, technology, efficiency and scientific order were what really counted. Those among them who were open to liberalism had an eye for the market and trade. For the more elitist-oriented, centralized planning carried more

weight. In contrast to the other two tendencies, 'Neo-traditionalism' was not in the first place an ideological project but, rather, reflected a sociological shadow-reality. The term refers to the growth of fixed-status hierarchies. Patron–client networks were formed around party bosses and there was a tendency for Soviet social strata to harden out into estate-like groups. 'Neo-traditionalism' also refers to specific policies in favour or to the detriment of hereditarily determined class or national groups, for example workers and people from the 'former classes'. But according to Priestland, in contravening the Marxist goal of the egalitarian order, Neo-traditionalism was an incoherent amalgam rather than a legitimate ideological position.

This rather abstract model works elegantly as an interpretation of the party struggles from 1917 onwards. In a very brief summary that does no justice to Priestland's engaging analysis, we get a view of how Leninist revivalist policies ran into the ground by the end of the civil war. The New Economic Policy represented a shift to a technicist approach, with the Left Opposition sticking to an adapted form of revivalism. When the Stalinist group (for several reasons) returned to revivalism in the late 1920s, again in a version of their own, it was the turn of the Right Opposition to stick to existing (technicist) policies, but without much success. Technicism only made a comeback when radical revivalism ended in chaos in the early 1930s, but was, again, drowned in the revivalist excesses of the Great Terror.

In Priestland's interpretation, it was typical for Stalin to combine revivalist and technicist policies, with the emphasis shifting in the course of the years. His Bolshevism was characterized by the fact that he was able to bring together very different approaches – from radical mass mobilization to the military command style, and from centralized planning to concessions to the market. Priestland acknowledges that Stalin never abandoned the rationalist underpinning of the Marxist project, but nevertheless emphasizes the Romantic side to him: his vitalistic style of popular mobilization, the notion that technology without spirit was 'dead' and his conviction that the Bolshevik cause needed commitment more than anything else. This Romantic side has been much underrated in the literature and in bringing it to light the present book adds an important new facet to Stalin.

I have some doubts, though, concerning the relevance of the model for the events of 1937–38. Priestland plausibly points to Stalin's use of popular mobilization against 'enemies', his thesis of the intensification of the class struggle and his belief that political education now became more decisive than technology. However, it would be hard to read the Great Terror from Stalin's part as a struggle for revivalist socialism against the technicist model. This was not really what the Terror was about. As Priestland acknowledges, Stalin's fears were focused on rooting out alleged spies, traitors and potentially disloyal elements. Although he did indeed see these people as class enemies, mass mobilization and political vigilance were mere instruments in the service of his paranoid obsession with state security. The issue of revivalism versus technicism is, then, of limited help in understanding the motives behind the Great Terror.

One of fine points of this book is its treatment of Maoist China. There are very few studies around treating both Communist giants in an informed way. In a concluding chapter Priestland makes an illuminating comparison between Mao's Great Leap Forward and Stalin's Great Break and between the Cultural Revolution and the Great Terror. He makes a plausible case for his model being a useful tool not only for the study of the USSR but of Communism in general. Indeed, the concept of 'revivalism' seems

to be more relevant for the Cultural Revolution than for the Great Terror. In China, mass mobilization was more extensive than under Stalin and was also understood as a permanent, constitutive feature of socialism rather than as mainly a *modus operandi* to round up enemies. Perhaps Priestland has read a little too much of Mao into Stalin? That being said, this book is a must for all scholars and students interested in comparative Communism.

Erik van Ree
University of Amsterdam
© 2008 Erik van Ree