



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: N.E. Rosenfeldt (2009) The "Special" world: Stalin's power apparatus and the Soviet system's secret structures of communication]

van Ree, E.

DOI

[10.1080/09546545.2010.483805](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2010.483805)

Publication date

2010

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Revolutionary Russia

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Ree, E. (2010). [Review of: N.E. Rosenfeldt (2009) The "Special" world: Stalin's power apparatus and the Soviet system's secret structures of communication]. *Revolutionary Russia*, 23(1), 140-141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2010.483805>

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.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, *The 'Special' World: Stalin's Power Apparatus and the Soviet System's Secret Structures of Communication*, 2 Vols. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009. Pp. 1,153; illustrations; notes; index. £100.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-87-635-0773-8

In this impressive study, Niels Erik Rosenfeldt discusses the structure and functioning of the ramified apparatus of *sekretnye* ('secret'), *osobyie* ('special') and *spetsial'nye* ('special') departments in the communist party, the NKVD/MGB and the Comintern under Stalin. It is no easy read. Apart from the extraordinary length of the book, the notes for both volumes have been placed at the end of Volume 2. This means that, while reading the first volume, one must have both at hand. Together the two bricks weigh 1.5 kilograms. Even for the interested reader it is difficult to remain focused on what often reads like an encyclopaedia. Nonetheless, the achievement is admirable. This kind of information on the special apparatus has never been brought together before. The study is very well researched, critically combining as it does long-available information from Soviet officials who deserted to the West with newly dug up Moscow archival materials.

Rosenfeldt's theoretical approach is sound and promising. His point of departure is the crucial role of *konspiratsiia* ('secrecy') in the functioning of the party. The study also contains an informative discussion of the rules of secrecy in the Stalinist bureaucracy and of the treatment of classified documents. The matter is highlighted from two main angles. Historically, as an underground party, the Bolsheviks relied for their lives on respecting the rules of secrecy and they continued this practice when they came to power. In many ways, they acted as if they were still in the underground, a mentality stimulated by their international isolation and their position as a ruling minority party. From a political science point of view, Rosenfeldt argues that control over communications and the flow of information is the main lever of power in a state. For Stalin, this lever had two sides: to deny information to as many people and institutions as possible, and to concentrate as much information as he could in his own hands. The special apparatus, mainly consisting of intertwining party and NKVD establishments, was instrumental in achieving these purposes.

Rosenfeldt describes in detail the various tasks of the special apparatus branches, such as handling classified documents, with a courier service and a specially trusted staff to open sealed envelopes; the vetting of cadres; checking up and reporting on the implementation of decisions; and producing policy papers on specific issues. His meticulous documentation of the complicated 'secret' and 'special' structures in the party, people's commissariats, army, NKVD and Comintern, and of the various

research and policy institutions joined to them, left this reviewer bewildered. But this is due to the baroque complexity of Stalinist organisational politics rather than any shortcomings on the part of the author.

The most interesting part of the work is probably the detailed study of the party chancellery, the focal point in the network. The so-called Bureau of the Central Committee Secretariat, re-christened the Secret Department in 1926, had Stalin's personal secretariat as its leading unit. The other party secretaries' personal secretariats were also included in the Bureau/Secret Department, but the General Secretary's main assistant served *qualitate qua* as its leader. This leading position was occupied consecutively by A. M. Nazaretian, L. Z. Mekhlis, I. P. Tovstukha and A. N. Poskrebyshev. Stalin's power was underscored by the fact that the secretariats of the Politburo and Orgburo were not autonomous institutions but were also included in the Bureau/Secret Department controlled by him.

When, in 1934, the chancellery became the Special Sector, much more than a change of name was involved. The chancellery moved from Old Square to the Kremlin. Whereas the secretariats of the Orgburo and the Secretariat remained on Old Square, the new Special Sector exclusively serviced the Politburo and Stalin personally. Stalin's first assistant, Poskrebyshev, remained the Special Sector's leader. Rosenfeldt plausibly interprets this as a further strengthening of Stalin's power in that the other party secretaries' assistants were now physically and organisationally removed from the apparatus servicing the Politburo. Thus, the 1934 reforms could be seen as part of the process of enhancing Stalin's autocratic power over his colleagues. However, finally, in 1952, the General Department located on Old Square and servicing the party apparatus gained in power compared with the Kremlin Special Sector servicing the party presidium, which might suggest a relative weakening of Stalin's position. After many years of loyal service, Poskrebyshev was dismissed.

Rosenfeldt positions himself on the traditionalist side in the old 'revisionism' debate. The helpfulness of returning to this debate, which climaxed many years ago, is doubtful. But, even if one goes along with it, Rosenfeldt's argument does not seem completely thought through. On the one hand, the author insists that the availability of the special apparatus helped Stalin in fortifying his autocratic power. On the other, he emphasises the relatively autonomous role of the chancellery's staff. What seems at first sight to have been a purely administrative establishment, a mere mailbox, was in Rosenfeldt's interpretation much more than that. There exist different kinds of power and Rosenfeldt argues that these mailmen, the guardians of the state's secrets, had more actual influence than has been assumed. The more prominent among them were no errand boys, but Stalin's advisers and analysts, authors of influential policy reports. If true, this would greatly strengthen claims concerning the influence (perhaps even power) of the personnel involved. Ironically, therefore, by focusing on the level of ordinary administrative staff *below* Stalin, Rosenfeldt arguably presents not a 'traditionalist' but rather a 'revisionist' approach of his own. His study would have profited from acknowledging this and theoretically following up on it.

Erik van Ree
 University of Amsterdam
 © 2010, Erik van Ree