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chronological approach and incorporate other art forms as well, such as radio or photogra-
phy. Surely these are media that fixate reality in a documentary manner par excel-
lence, but are less studied than the works or the period covered in this book. A stunning
omission from the bibliography is Maria Zalambani’s book on the Literature of Fact

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Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, The ‘Special’ World: Stalin’s Power Apparatus and the
Soviet System’s Secret Structures of Communication, 2 Vols. Copenhagen:
£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’), osoby (‘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 konspiratsiya (‘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 communica-
tions 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.

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