

M O D E R N S O V I E T S O C I E T Y



B A S I L E K E R B L A Y

F O R E W O R D B Y M O S H E L E W I N

"An astonishing achievement... the term 'landmark' can be used to characterize its importance and its possible impact."—From the Foreword

Modern Soviet Society

BASILE KERBLAY

Translated by Rupert Swyer



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Preface to the English edition

The reader who expects to find in this book material to fuel an ideological war will be disappointed. Despite undeniable inequalities in living standards and differences in institutions and culture, Soviet society reveals that all people share the same fears, the same basic needs for security, self-development and genuine human relationships. Instead of breeding more division between peoples, whether between individuals or collectives, our intelligence must act to reduce it.

In the present English edition I have updated the statistics and revised the bibliographies. Some paragraphs have been rewritten to incorporate new data which have become available since the first edition. I am indebted to Rupert Swyer who brought both a gift for language and technical accuracy to bear on the translation of the French version.

BASILE KERBLAY
Paris, September 1982

Preface

The subject of this book is Soviet society as we find it today. We shall not be concerned with the different stages in the formation of this society, but we shall be referring to the past whenever necessary, to account for the persistence or revival of a national tradition which, like any other aspect of civilization, is resistant to change. Because this society is being built from day to day, because, like any human society, it is in perpetual movement, we must seek to understand both its structure and its dynamics. This study is therefore concerned not with drawing up an inventory of Soviet society, which must of necessity be immediately obsolete, but with spotlighting the signs of its future development. In a word, our study is intended as a forward-looking one, and in this it represents a break with educational tradition, which stresses knowledge of the past without giving sufficient thought to the future, that is to facts which individuals might hope to foresee and grasp.

Another reason why there has been a need for a synthetic view of contemporary society in the Soviet Union is that less attention has been paid to this aspect of Soviet life than to the Soviet economy. The quality and variety of studies of the economy are evidence of the often enthusiastic interest aroused in the west by the planning and rapid growth achieved by the Soviet Union. However, when we try to spell out long-term development prospects, economic analysis loses its way in the uncharted territory of social process. The future of the Soviet Union cannot be read in this or that growth target alone; it is far more likely to lie in the aspirations and abilities of the individuals and groups that guide its development.

Furthermore, although no attempt has yet been made to produce a general survey for the general reader with no knowledge of Russian, sociology in the Soviet Union has made considerable strides over the past ten years. We shall be referring extensively to these investigations, as well as to official statistics and doctrine, for it is through the Soviets' judgement of their own social system that we can learn how those directly concerned interpret it. Similarly, we shall be making use of Soviet newspaper articles and literary essays which, while

making no scientific claims, throw practical light on or bear direct witness to certain specific points. It will be necessary also to refer to foreign sources, because comparative studies may give us a firmer grasp of the specific features of the Soviet social system, and also because, by our criteria of objectivity, we are duty-bound to examine every interpretation, even if it proves necessary to point out their weaknesses.

We shall begin by examining the basic constituents of the fabric of any society, namely those features of social life that strike even the inexperienced observer of the Soviet Union: a territory comprising different populations in their respective geographical settings and with their own national traditions, both town and country, families and enterprises. First, we shall explore the basic groups, or microsociology, of Soviet society, before going on to analyse the structure of social relations and political institutions characteristic of society in general, or macrosociology. With this investigation behind us, we shall then take a look at the nature of Soviet society and at the driving forces specific to it. In other words, we will adopt the opposite approach from the one that seeks explanations of elementary facts in the macrostructure. There are two reasons for this: first, the reader does not necessarily have a grounding in sociology and will therefore find it easier to grasp more familiar facts concerning, for example, his or her family, home town or village – intergroup relations – and gradually, by an accumulation of elementary facts, learn to build up a more complex web of social stratification; also, however, we wish to avoid prejudging the character of the Soviet social system by dressing it up in an ideological straitjacket. Even Marxist critics are by no means unanimous in regarding nationalization of the means of production as sufficient to produce a radical transformation of social relations and in regarding a society of this type as incarnating socialism *ipso facto*. The empiricism of our approach is dictated by a concern to eschew dogmatism.

It is left to the reader to conclude whether or not Soviet society as it appears today matches up to his or her idea of socialism, and to what extent the influence of the past, remnants of the cultural tradition, urbanization and industrialization, the development of the most up-to-date techniques of production and communication, and social and political institutions invite, or discourage, comparison with western society.

Admittedly, any investigation of the real world presupposes a conceptual framework and a set of assumptions, placing the author in the uncomfortable position of having to assert his own preferences. These preferences and intentions are first and foremost pedagogic. We have not set out here to present an exhaustive or definitive picture of Soviet society, still less to judge it with reference to any particular model, value or doctrine; our purpose is to provide readers with a travel guide to enable them to pursue for themselves the never-ending exploration of the contemporary Soviet world, or, more precisely, to equip them with an investigative method and the requisite materials, and to wish them the best of luck – in the field if possible.

Foreword

This book by a noted French scholar is, to my mind, an astonishing achievement. By its structure and avowed aim it does not aspire to be more than a text-book, small, compact and matter-of-fact. In reality, when compared to the existing literature on Soviet Russia, it encompasses so many novel features that the term 'landmark' can be used to characterize its importance and its possible impact.

The book comes at a time when shallow and one-sided statements concerning Soviet Russia seem to be preferred to more pondered reasoning. The media and even part of the academic community, rather than providing analyses, have been projecting a simplified, often misleading picture through the repeated use and abuse of sometimes even the most trivial details of the régime — all to the detriment of a deeper understanding and assessment of a subject of immense importance. The appearance of this book, with its careful statements and balanced views, its refusal to simplify and openness to ambiguity and complexity, its cognizance of failures, achievements, drift and change, is a welcome, refreshing and stimulating antidote to moods of the moment.

But many other traits of this work are of a kind many a teacher or researcher worth his salt dreams of. To begin with, it uses historical data and historical analysis skilfully, allowing the reader to get a sense of change over time, the passing of stages and generations, and to appreciate the unfolding of a broad historical canvas and drama. This key historical dimension is enhanced by what is a genuine multi-disciplinary endeavour where the successful blend of data and concepts offered by sociology, economics, political science, ethnography, cultural studies and literature support each other and contribute to an emerging broader entity. The author achieves this effect not only by a good organization of material and a judicious distribution of chapters, but more importantly by an unobtrusive and flexible conceptual apparatus, implied or suggested rather than dogmatically imposed.

The three hundred or so pages offered to us contain a constant flow of ideas,

findings, new formulae and thought-provoking questions; at the same time, an amazing amount of data is crammed into this modest space, on geography, population, social classes and cultural trends, nationalities and economics – not to mention the hobbies, drinking and eating habits, career preferences and fashions of Soviet Russia. Kerblay is equally expert in depicting rural society which he knows better, probably, than anybody else, as well as in the more novel and complex problems of social mobility which he compares constantly with those of the US and France. We learn about universities and the school system, about the industrial world and the realities of industrial enterprise, and are informed in a more detailed way from the best and newest sources about the type of manager workers prefer as compared to the preferences of engineers. We also get enough to whet our appetite, and look for more elsewhere, on values, deviance and criminality. Finally, we turn to chapters dealing with factors or mechanisms that integrate the whole system, the polity and the sphere of culture, subjects that demand great competence to discuss, remain controversial but also exciting and are presented here expertly and concisely.

Obviously, all this and more is needed when the author's aim is to offer an integrated picture of a socio-political and cultural system of a huge and multinational country. And herein lies the most important contribution and the chief novelty of the book. It promises to deal with 'modern Soviet society' – and this is precisely what it does.

The author tells us at the outset why this broader picture is indispensable. Concentration on economic growth or on some other single aspect of Russia is insufficient. Instead, social realities must be studied. But 'social realities' or 'society' is quite a task, intellectually and professionally. No-one can claim that the usual disciplines, like economics or sociology, ethnography or demography, are easy to practise. But at least they are already established and have at their disposal elaborate scholarly tools and professional bodies, university departments and institutes. And this means that important dimensions and aspects of the whole are studied expertly while the whole, the aggregate, is left out. But specialized departments for the study of a country's 'society' are, even in the best universities, almost unknown. Sociology is the one branch that makes the study of society its business, but sociologists tend to leave the study of history, demography and much of what we call culture to others, excluding them from their own constructions altogether. The methodological and conceptual problems of discussing the broader canvas of society still remain unsolved. To make things worse, an established departmental structure creates a tendency to view anyone who tries 'to integrate' the disciplines as being pretentious and, at best, amateurish. Sometimes the established disciplines like economics or political science can give the impression that they can discover almost all there is to be known about the past and present.

Some may think that such tendencies are not representative, but unfortunately they are widespread, regrettable and damaging to scholarship. No-one

can do anything without the disciplines, but aggregates must be studied too. An aggregate like 'society' is difficult to handle, but it certainly is a discipline in its own right; yet, as we have noted, no systematic training is available to take on this kind of effort.

In the case of Russia, the absence of global studies is particularly detrimental: one-sided approaches and inadequate theories make us very often miss the deeper springs of the social system and polity, and we end up making proposals and predictions that are constantly belied by events. The study of Russia offers many examples of blunders committed by observers and politicians, friends, foes and neutrals alike. One does not have to go far in search of such examples.

Attentive students of Russia are now aware of a great and growing number of phenomena that should be incorporated into the study and overall picture of the functioning of the Soviet system. Only some of these can be mentioned here and most of them, and more, can be found in this book. Most studies of Russia have tended to concentrate on the state — including its main props such as party and ideology — not unnaturally, of course, for this system and this part of the world. Much has been learned thereby that was and is of great importance. But the almost exclusive insistence on these salient aspects has created a tendency to isolate them or, to put it briefly, to isolate the state from the historical process. The state was pictured hovering above the social structure, shaping it mightily and not shaped by anything itself, certainly not by social relations — they were relegated in many studies to a secondary position, together with 'all the rest' like historical tradition, culture or values. There was some justification for this kind of singling out of the state and of 'statism' during, say, the Stalinist period, but it can be shown that even then such an approach was inadequate. It is even more misleading for the study of the post-Stalinist period and for reflecting on what lies ahead.

In fact the state, however powerful, and even at its most despotic, is always dependent in different ways on the broader social matrix, is part of it and interacts with its components. A study that takes a harder and longer look can show how this interaction accounts for the state's policies, its responses to social pressures and needs, and even for the absence of such responses. The latter happened often enough, sometimes reaching catastrophic proportions, notably at the end of the civil war, during the great purges and in the last period of Stalin's life. Such rifts between state and society lead to mass terror, or mass uprising, or in the decline of the whole system. Sometimes a reaction sets in and some social groups begin to pressure for change and reforms in order to counter the decline or patch up the cracks. Soviet history provides enough examples of ups and downs of this kind, and such trends cannot be excluded when studying the present and trying to look into the future.

But the image of a bureaucratic hierarchy or of overlapping hierarchies running the economy, society and culture with a totalitarian grip, a pyramid of power where orders flow down and information and obedient execution flow

up – an image that was widespread during an earlier stage in Soviet studies – is by now probably discarded by most scholars. Sometimes it is even replaced by an opposite view of a Russia where nobody and nothing is obeyed, nothing works and the bureaucracy is just an illegitimate burden on a society that is only yearning to send the whole thing packing. Such a view is even more misleading than the previous one and can become a source of considerable errors of judgement. Much remains to be done to reconstruct a more realistic picture of power, of relations between state and society and within the ruling circles – including the forms and directions of change, and of the character of crises when change occurs, and it does.

A reminder of recent changes in a well-established discipline might clarify the argument. Economists today, for example, understand much better than before the real versus the formal modes of the economy's functioning. They know about the 'second economy', maybe even a third one too, and about a welter of informal but widespread practices without which nothing works – and more relevantly without which the description and analyses of how the economy works (or doesn't) will not stand.

As one moves to the broader social system and its main components – workers, technicians, managers, peasants, intelligentsia, bureaucrats – the picture of the social system becomes a real maze of formal and informal arrangements and mechanisms, open and clandestine, official, unofficial and anti-official; this system is full of pressure groups, ideas and ideologies, complete with different religions, nationalities and nationalisms, which are there for every student to see – and to ask why such things were not always seen before.

Despite their powers, Soviet-style authoritarian régimes often do not really have the power to control or suppress change, generational conflicts, cultural variety, fashions, fads, language and thought patterns. Not in industrial societies in any case. And leaders do recognize and adapt to social realities all the time, however unenthusiastically. This point is worth elaborating upon briefly.

The history and sociology of labour in the Soviet Union show that 'the labour force' – in its narrower meaning of 'workers' and in the broader one of 'the employed' – always exhibited a tendency to act in accord with their own perceptions of their interests; they often ignored orders and plans that ran against their wishes, but also accepted or shared in varying degrees some of the régime's values and aims. On the whole, though, labour showed a high degree of spontaneity in its actions, and labour-force recruitment remained mostly a market phenomenon. To be precise, the labour market was imposed on the planned system after the latter discovered that ordering people around and 'distributing' them administratively to the available jobs were just not feasible. And it always had deleterious effects on productivity which the régime could not afford.

It is also well known that managers, though quite dedicated to their tasks and to the régime, are nevertheless reacting in a variety of ways to the realities of their environment, to its contradictions and inconsistencies, and are thereby considerably influencing the way the system is functioning. They accumulate labour surpluses which the régime doesn't really want, they hide productive capacities from the authorities in order to get smaller plans, or engage in barter of machines and materials with other managers in order to overcome the deficiencies of the official supply system. Much of this is actually now the real *modus operandi* and is either fully accepted or just tolerated. But some such activities are not that benign, even in intention. Cliques and 'family circles', as they are called in Russia, are formed in order to promote their interests, and some engage in illicit activities that clash directly with the law and the authorities, and are prosecuted by the state.

Phenomena of a similar character are known to operate within other administrations – not just among factory managers. The bureaucrats are not only servants of the state; they have always created many headaches for top leadership and frustrate them no less than do other groups of the population. Bureaucrats often fail to perform as expected or to supply truthful data; they have kept developing – not unlike the factory managers – their own informal groups and practices, as well as moods and ideologies that express their aspirations and objectives. They can also impose some of these on the leadership.

We observe similar manifestations of social spontaneity in the sphere of education, and one can quote the well-known example of Khrushchev's educational reforms, which were rejected and finally simply scuttled by a widespread opposition of parents, educators, and many government officials – themselves, of course, also parents. New generations of young people come into the social and political arena and develop their own reactions and preferences, and these are powerful factors of social reality. Career preferences and the scale of values of the young are often far from what the leadership would like to see. We also know that in this supposedly worker-orientated system the real status ladder climbs away from the workers, despite the régime's efforts to turn the system round. The educated layers from different walks of life would consider work at the factory bench a degradation for their children and for themselves – and this would be particularly true for an *apparatchik*, who considers himself the spokesman and carrier of the state's national and revolutionary missions. In fact, those powerful *apparatchiki*, so influential in the political sphere, are not capable of setting the tone and reversing the social status ladder, at least not as it is viewed by most people. They often notice with envy that scholars and writers, or just any Ph.D. (which are not too numerous in Russia), are more respected than even the top officials, and they exhibit a deep need to share in the informal but valued social recognition by trying to acquire academic titles and positions.

In different social groups authorities keep discovering moods and dispositions, sometimes even 'ugly' ones, as well as some that have religious trends,

and different types of nationalism have also always been a problem; they were often independent of and stronger than the dictatorship, and imposed their own demands or accommodation.

Thus, the Soviet system is a product of much more than political pressures, controls or an official ideology. The state, which has at times been aggressively active and buoyant, has at other times seemed quite preoccupied with taking numerous opinion polls, as leaders realized that social realities could grow out of control. It is worth repeating that even at the height of the purges, scores of edicts threatening penal consequences in cases of non-compliance often went no further than the state archives.

When the real maze of social, economic and cultural spheres is brought into focus, the story of Soviet Russia, its society and political system, past and present, changes considerably. The study itself becomes much more exacting and interesting, and the theoretical constructs needed for the incorporation of so many aspects and for the interpretation of what is going on and why suddenly need to be rethought. Professor Kerblay is a pioneer in this difficult undertaking. The material to be incorporated in such an endeavour is vast and its organization is far from simple. It is certainly not just a mechanical problem of organizing data. Even the question of what is to go into the picture is not easy to answer. Scholars would certainly agree that data on economics, sociology, politics and demography should be there. But all the rest is controversial. How much of history, if any, and of what kind? And culture, if at all? And exactly how much politics and 'politics' in what sense?

The reader will see for himself how the author has solved these problems and will, perhaps, want to argue about some of his opinions or solutions. But the reader will also find himself immersed in numerous innovative formulae, often elegantly presented.

Kerblay's method of dealing with the state, as we have already noted, consists in treating it historically and incorporating it into the general matrix where it belongs. This is particularly praiseworthy for being methodologically sound – and deserves serious discussion. Concerning the ubiquitous and notorious police surveillance in the Soviet Union, a realistic and flexible formula is offered – without disregarding in the least the system's reliance on police and on other control mechanisms, such as ideology, censorship and monopoly of information. Police and informers (*stukachi*) are facts of life, well known to the population, 'but the vast majority of Soviet citizens escape this surveillance, though knowing full well it could be applied to them' (p. 256). Considering police controls, Kerblay says further that it would have been 'just as dishonest to avoid all reference to them as it would [have been] to imagine a society governed by force alone' (pp. 256–7). To what extent, then, do public opinion, interests and moods influence policy-makers? Kerblay can see the growing weight of these factors, but he points to three main deficiencies in the system that counter their growth. These are, first, the lack of constitutionally recognized procedures

for the renewal of leaders; second, the lack of juridically guaranteed procedures for redress and for combatting arbitrary use of power; and, third, the absence of sufficient autonomy within the separate spheres of economic, cultural and political life and of an appropriate separation of powers to guarantee such an autonomy. This particular deficiency puts an enormous 'burden of wisdom' on the national leadership in guiding the system into new stages of development.

This last point could be elaborated upon by adding that other systems which do exhibit a high degree of autonomy in the key spheres of social life can survive even with a very undistinguished leadership, whereas the Soviet system is more vulnerable to crises of confidence and more prone to abuse the levers of coercion. The fact that in recent decades no return to massive violence against the population has occurred inside Russia can be explained by the appearance in the system's *modus operandi* of channels, however rudimentary or informal, for expressing and catering to the specific needs of the main spheres of social life. Kerblay seems to adhere to the idea that economic development leads necessarily to the kind of separation of powers that is needed to assure the autonomies in question — and certainly it is true that growing social and cultural differentiation and variety must find expression, or the system stagnates. For some observers the Soviet system today betrays this kind of stagnation as it responds inadequately — or worse, negatively — to the demands of social development.

It is around these kinds of needs, when inadequately met, that problems and pressures keep accumulating in the Soviet Union and in similar systems. The central issue becomes the system's ability to respond, to evolve and to survive. The historical experience of Soviet Russia is always worth remembering when dealing with such problems. The hurdle of underdevelopment is still in the process of being cleared, and already the problems of a developed society are gathering with great strength. Soviet Russia's position as a superpower adds complexity to these difficulties and dilemmas. But the outcome of pressures and counter-pressures are not known and predictions are difficult. Conservative, authoritarian methods seem to be in force now, probably as a result of not really knowing how to do better; and this is not necessarily just a Soviet predicament at the moment. At the same time, in the course of recent social and economic developments new possibilities are appearing in the social system which could offer solutions and eventually a new, reform-minded leadership. After all, as we have already hinted, this too has precedents in the Soviet Union, and it remains a possibility being no less probable than the violent convulsions some observers keep predicting.

The political system, as Kerblay underlines, 'was not built in a day; no one planned it or created it. . . . It did not spring up on virgin soil but is heir to a secular tradition' (p. 241).

This is an excellent formula and it could be slightly expanded by adding that the sum total of all past social and economic changes are constantly reflected

in the state's development, implying a capacity for modernization and change. The system's totalitarian appetites and traits are, according to Kerblay, a result of ideological monopoly – 'a fully fledged religion of the state' (p. 248) – but one could suggest an amendment here too that continues in the direction of Kerblay's own earlier proposition that the system was neither planned nor created. Ideology, too, though certainly a factor of considerable and autonomous impact, can be seen as a product of historical development amenable to change in content and function, and not really the primary cause of a penchant for coercion and conservatism. Leaders of the party know quite well – again from a number of surveys, if any were needed – that the official ideological tenets and the propaganda that go with them have an ever diminishing return, and one can even argue that in real life ideological monopoly doesn't work. It is not true any more that a single official creed is the only operative guide to action. More than one ideology, a mixture of modes of thinking and frames of references, co-exist and not only in society at large but also inside the party and inside the leadership. This phenomenon isn't even new any more and it had to occur because a rigid and codified 'Marxism–Leninism' could not, except in official rhetoric, respond to the régime's real needs in the process of governing.

I do not know whether Professor Kerblay would agree with this treatment of Soviet ideology, but such a view actually reinforces his general findings. If there is more than one ideology in use, or if the official shell keeps accommodating features borrowed from elsewhere, then this could mean that the régime's capacity to learn, to expand its experience and to respond to the problems of the day is enhanced, even if only on a pragmatic basis. Observers of Russia in recent decades would probably have no problems with such an assessment despite the country's lapses into dogmatic and backward practices and its inability to rotate its over-ripe leadership.

The reader will find that Kerblay's remarkable book offers many surprises and provides occasions to argue and to learn on every one of its pages. It remains only to wish this work success in reaching the general and academic reader.

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