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Immo Rebitschek and Aaron B. Retish, eds. *Social Control Under Stalin and Khrushchev: The Phantom of a Well-Ordered State*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023. 368 pp. ISBN 978487544270.

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Social Control Under Stalin and Khrushchev aims to expand the ways in which we should see power in the Soviet state. The edited volume approaches the unifying theme of “social control” through a wide range of topics, including the more familiar territory of the secret police and the Gulag along with nonpolitical policing, the legal system, taxation, and welfare provision. The editors of the volume explain its agenda in terms of the need to look beyond the Stalinist regime’s use of “seemingly unregulated mechanisms of terror,” instead widening the perspective to consider “less brazenly violent mechanisms to discipline” the population (p. 3).

The volume is novel not just in its broad thematic scope but in its chronological range. Too often, researchers—perhaps bogged down by the sheer density of post-Soviet archival holdings—have been inclined to pursue research within the customary and narrow chronological boundaries of the 1930s, World War II, late Stalinism, and the Khrushchev period (sometimes shorthand as the Thaw). An unfortunate byproduct of this structure of the field has been the tendency for scholars to assume rather than interrogate the scope and nature of change during the many watersheds in Soviet history (perhaps best encapsulated by specific years of 1933, 1937, 1945, or 1953). The present volume makes the welcome move of bringing together similar scholarship across periods, allowing fuller consideration of how the Soviet party-state maintained social control in different contexts.

The historiographical contributions of specific pieces are often considerable, but the overall framing of the volume remains somewhat opaque. What did social control entail in the context of the Soviet Union? How did it differ from state terror, police control, legal order, or administrative exploitation? In practice, social control seems to encompass all of these phenomena.¹ The volume’s introduction defines the term as “a complex set of processes and means used by institutions and individuals to establish norms of behavior in a community and to penalize deviance from these norms” (p. 5). Given this emphasis on “norms of behavior” here, it is striking that none of the pieces in the volume bear the influence of Michel Foucault.

If the capaciousness of this approach has the advantage of allowing the editors to bring together a rich body of articles, it does make it a challenge for the reader to draw wider conclusions from the book as the whole. To undertake this task, I organize the

¹ One reflection of the fuzziness of the social control construct is that several authors tend to couple it with different terms. Alan Barenberg seems to use “social control” and “population management” interchangeably (p. 136) when discussing the Gulag, while Yoram Gorkizki and David Shearer both seem more comfortable using the term “social order.”

discussion around three themes: the bureaucratic state under Joseph Stalin and its perceived limits, the formulation of Soviet policies regarding control and repression, and the role of legal institutions in Soviet rule, particularly after Stalin.

The first consistent theme is a return to a set of questions pursued by Jan Gross, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and other social historians: How did the Soviet state draw on ostensibly non-state actors or “society” to bolster its rule? How did non-state actors interact with an overbearing state that sought to harness their energies for its own interests, and was there any room for exercising agency “from below” in the process? Several pieces deal with this problematic: Aaron Retish discusses the patchy enforcement of legal cases involving men shirking on alimony payments to mothers in the 1920s and 1930s; Maria Starun examines comrades courts and other factory-floor institutions; Juliette Cadiot surveys the discourse of petitions for pardon from people incarcerated under the laws on theft of socialist property; and Timothy K. Blauvelt reconstructs the motivations of a secret police “perpetrator.”

For all their strengths (and especially their depth of archival research), these papers suggest the difficulty in conceptualizing “agency” in the context of Stalinism. If the chapters show that a wide range of institutions were involved in maintaining social control, they have less to say about the nature and extent of this phenomenon. Starun argues that comrades’ courts and conflict commissions “acted largely independently of other bodies” (p. 98), but the evidence she cites points to a different picture: Once the New Economic Policy was rejected in the late 1920s, these grassroots bodies lost most of their limited ability to represent workers’ interests and became “transmission belts” for party campaigns and enforcement of labor discipline. Retish concludes that the alimony cases showed the workings of an “imperfect system of social control” (p. 42), but this formulation raises more questions than it answers. It would seem to be inevitable that mobilizing a largely uneducated population for the goals of a revolutionary regime would be a messy process prone to crosscutting bureaucratic and personal conflicts and cultural norms, as seen in Retish’s piece when alimony cases were shaped by conservative gender roles of the countryside. But does such a picture really demonstrate that considerable impediments to state power were on display in Retish’s case study or others in the volume?

Blauvelt’s consideration of the career and motivations of Georgian chekist Sergo Davlianidze raises another question that other scholars in the volume largely avoid: What did agency mean in the context of Stalinism with its omnipresent ideological discourse and terror? Davlianidze could hardly have acted other than he did, Blauvelt suggests provocatively, given the way he “internalized the official rhetoric” (p. 125), in part under the influence of the peer relations and incentive structures he encountered in the secret police. Questions of ideology, agency, and selfhood, of course, have been a driver of scholarship on Stalinism, and it is to be regretted that so few pieces in this volume consider social control from the perspective of such historiography.

The second major approach I see in this volume is the study of how Soviet party-state institutions envisioned and sought to implement social control. Three pieces stand out in this regard: Samantha Lomb studies how Moscow and local authorities in the Kirov region treated the “individual smallholders” in the 1930s countryside; Alan Barenberg examines the system of *katorga* introduced during World War II that ex-

posed select cohorts of Gulag convicts to particularly harsh labor and living conditions; and Immo Rebitschek looks at institutional responses to street children and juvenile delinquency in the first half of the 1950s.

The selections highlighted provide painstakingly researched studies of how agencies shaped or implemented policy toward the Soviet population—no mean feat given the institutional confusion typical of Stalinist rule. Yet they discuss this problematic in quite different ways. Lomb sees a contrast in how central and local authorities confronted the holdouts from collectivization, with the former adopting a strategy of financial pressure to expand the collective agricultural sector, and the latter endorsing more radical approaches inspired by experiences on the ground during the collectivization drive. If Lomb's reading is concerned with center-periphery dynamics, both Barenberg and Rebitschek draw attention to divided institutional interests in the center. Barenberg shows that policy toward the *katorzhniki* reflected two "organizing principles of the Gulag system" (p. 155): the maintenance of differential levels of punishment based on categories of prisoners and the economic exploitation of the camp population. Barenberg's piece makes an important intervention in a debate animating the study of the Gulag but has less to say about the maintenance of social control in the USSR as a whole.²

Barenberg and especially Rebitschek also consider the issue that marks the volume's third and most fruitful line of investigation: the study of the law and judiciary under Soviet rule, and especially in the transition to post-Stalinism. In addition to Rebitschek's piece, three selections engage legal issues in considering social control after Stalinism: Yoram Gorlizki provides an incisive discussion of how the system's post-Stalin campaign for "socialist legality" in policing collided with concerns about social order in the 1950s; Dina Moyal discusses how Soviet citizens invoked the language of socialist legality in housing disputes that reached the Soviet Supreme Court; and Evgenia Lazina provides a richly documented account of the emergence of the post-Stalin KGB's policing strategies in the 1950s.

All these papers provide valuable perspectives on the role of socialist legality—or the lack thereof—in the emergence of a post-Stalin political order. Rebitschek and Gorlizki show how Soviet rulers boosted the role of the procuracy over both secret police and lower-ranking police (*militsiia*) on the logic that "enforcing procedural norms" would mean "precision and predictability in exercising social control," as Rebitschek puts it (p. 231). In other words, the pieces show that replacing Stalin's more arbitrary and extralegal system with a *Rechtsstaat*-type model—in fact, the introduction to the volume goes even further back chronologically to the "well-ordered police state" of the premodern period discussed by Marc Raeff—was crucial for the post-Stalin reformulation of Soviet rule.

But socialist legality faced strong headwinds, the volume shows. Both Gorlizki and Rebitschek show that instilling legality and even just greater procedural correctness in the militia was easier said than done, such that the Soviet Union remained a fairly lawless place for its citizens. In part, the social disruption post-Stalin leaders inherited from the past was simply too great, a point Gorlizki makes with regard to the amnesty of 1953 and the crime wave that ensued. In different ways, Lezina and Moyal point to

² One wonders how the two "organizing principles" and their concrete implementation set the stage for the wave of Gulag protests in 1953–1954—granted, a topic rather different than Barenberg's exploration here.

another complication of socialist legality—its awkward fit in a socialist system operating according to essentially extralegal or, in a Weberian sense, “non-legal-rational” principles. Lezina emphasizes the success with which the KGB built up a mass surveillance network following the shrinking of agent networks of the early the 1950s, a development that ensured that “illegality” would remain a crucial component of social order in the post-Stalinist USSR. In contrast, Moyal shows that Soviet citizens became adept at utilizing the language of legality and “rights” in negotiating the Soviet bureaucracy—a welcome contribution to the understudied topic of how everyday citizens, rather than dissidents, engaged these concepts (Bugge 2008; Nathans 2024).

Social Control Under Stalin and Khrushchev makes its most important contribution by pointing to the shift toward “legal order” in the latter part of the chronology discussed. Such seems to be the unspoken conclusion of David Shearer, who offers a synthesis of his thinking on social control in what serves as the final word of this volume. Drawing on his own work on Soviet policing, Shearer introduces the useful concept of internal colonization to describe the militarized and “categorical” policing that he sees as having been the linchpin of social order in the 1930s. Shearer’s persuasive account tends to place the nonpolice institutions discussed in many chapters of this volume at the margins of Stalinist rule, which might be read as an unintentional critique of the social control model proposed by the volume’s editors.

Shearer also acknowledges the important contribution represented by the discussion of “regularized legal procedure” (p. 339) in the 1950s. One wonders whether narrowing the scope of the volume to the rich complex of legal issues it engages would have made for a more cohesive book. In particular, it might have offered more opportunities for tracing change across time. For instance, one might consider the campaign against theft of socialist property discussed by Cadiot—what, in Shearer’s terms, might be considered a militarized use of the legal system rather than a move to *Rechtsstaat*—as an awkward midpoint between the passage from the “emergency war state” (p. 340) of the 1930s and the more regularized authoritarianism of the post-Khrushchev years.

Focusing on the complex place of law and legal procedures in Soviet socialism raises a paradox. As Gorlizki explains, after the period of experimentation and flux marked by the Khrushchev period, the Soviet political elite undertook what would seem to have been a more effective strategy of social control based on stability in policies and cadres, a “prophylactic approach to repression” (so well described by Lezina), and rising living standards (p. 253). However, Shearer points to an oft-unexplored aspect of the Brezhnev-era model of control: the “greater degree of legal and judicial intrusion into the daily lives of Soviet citizens” (p. 341). Future research should explore how the Soviet population perceived the benefits and costs of the increased power of law in the late USSR, and perhaps specifically the seemingly unpassable chasm between “regularized legal procedure” and the essentially “charismatic” legitimacy of the Communist Party.

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