

**Michal Reiman – Bohuslav Litera – Karel Svoboda – Daniela Kolenovská: *Zrod velmoci. Dějiny Sovětského svazu 1917–1945*. Prague: Karolinum, 2013, 584 pp.**  
**Pavel Kolář: *Der Poststalinismus. Ideologie und Utopie einer Epoche*. Cologne – Weimar – Vienna: Böhlau, 2016, 370 pp.**

Although the following reflections are published in our review section, they are strictly speaking of a different character. The reviewer is not an expert on the subject of the two books, i.e. modern Russian and Eastern European history; his comments are therefore primarily concerned with lessons that historical sociologists might learn from the two books, and to a certain extent with problems that they might raise. Moreover, one of the books was published five years ago, and by conventional standards, a review published in 2018 would be somewhat late in the day. But given the importance of the book, and the fact that it has not been translated into any Western European language, it still seems worth while to draw it to the attention of a broader audience.<sup>1</sup>

*The Birth of a Great Power: History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1945*, by Michal Reiman and his collaborators, is a major work, and some of its strengths should be underlined. First and foremost, and in line with the title, it represents a successful combination of geopolitical, historical and social analysis. Geopolitical approaches have been gaining ground in historical scholarship, and for good reasons, but the case is sometimes overstated. Stephen Kotkin, a major authority on Russian and Soviet history, argues that modernity is a geopolitical rather than a sociological category; most historical sociologists would assume that it must be both, and Reiman and his collaborators show convincingly that geopolitical processes intertwine with social ones. The narrative covers the exceptionally rapid collapse of an imperial power, caught

up in war at a particularly unsettled stage of its modernizing process, and unable to cope with the strains thus imposed on its polarized and multi-national society; it ends with the victory of a reconstructed great power in World War II and a brief survey of the postwar situation. This trajectory is one of history's most spectacular geopolitical transformations. But it involved a complex and radical revolutionary process, an exceptionally thoroughgoing destruction of the old order, and – as the authors show very well – a dynamic of divergence rather than maturing or unification among the revolutionary forces. What then followed was a new phase of state formation and imperial reconstruction, under the aegis of a counter-elite with significant popular support, but more and more reliant on a selective mobilization of forces and aspirations released by the revolution, combined with uncompromising repression on other fronts. The first major step towards re-emergence as a great power (but not a guarantee of future success) was the ruthless and immensely destructive, but in some ways highly effective modernizing leap that began at the end of the 1920s.

The transformation of Russia between 1917 and 1945 is thus an exemplary case of entangled geopolitical and social dynamics, and not one that would support notions of historical necessity. Reiman and his collaborators also have much to say on episodes within the process, and some points of that kind may be noted. The role of individual leaders in history is one of the perennial problems of historical sociology, and few cases are as frequently cited in such discussions as Lenin's leadership in the Russian revolution. The book reviewed here does much to demystify this issue, although the conclusions are not spelt out as quite as sharply as the reviewer would like. As the chapter on developments between February and October 1917 (pp. 58–111) shows, Lenin's famous first speech after his return from exile was neither well reasoned, nor did it reflect solid knowledge about the situation in Russia. The later victory of the Bolsheviks made the speech look like the beginning of a success story; but that was not at all clear at the time. The most independent-minded and reflective Bolshevik activists were shocked

<sup>1</sup> There is a much shorter version in English: Michal Reiman, *About Russia: Its Revolutions, its Development and its Present*. This text summarizes the essentials of the argument, but it is obviously not a substitute for a full translation.

by the speech, and if it had a certain impact, that was partly due to Lenin's long-standing authority within the party, partly to vague but attractive promises of strength through radicalization. Another episode to be reconsidered is Lenin's role on the eve of the Bolshevik seizure of power. A closer look at the record – exemplified in the book – shows how obsessed Lenin was, for several weeks, with the perceived opportunity to strike at a rapidly weakening power centre; but it is also clear that his self-imposed exile in Finland limited his grasp of the situation in the capital. He thought that the date finally agreed for the insurrection would be too late, and some of the plans he played with during the preceding weeks are best described as hysterical nonsense. The upshot is that the leadership of the Bolshevik party, long doubtful about the direct bid for power (some of them resisted even at the final hour), acted as a counterweight to Lenin and brought his plans closer to conditions on the ground. And there was a third factor: Trotsky possessed mobilizing and organizing capacities which neither Lenin nor any of the other leaders could match, and his role was crucial. Moreover, the whole action depended on circumstances over which the Bolsheviks had only partial control. In short, the victorious October insurrection looks less like an achievement of one leader than a synergy of several factors, including Lenin's drive – an unlikely outcome, but then Russia in 1917 seems to have found itself in a situation where only improbable outcomes were possible.

Finally, Reiman and his collaborators give a thoroughly debunking account of Lenin's last years. His tactics within the party leadership in the years 1920–1921 are described as a kind of *coup d'état*, consolidating the power of a faction put together in a hamfisted way, and sealing the victory by a ban on factions which lent itself to more and more repressive uses. Lenin not only engineered Stalin's appointment as general secretary; he also took the lead in changing intra-party rules and practices along lines eminently conducive to more dictatorial rule. In view of all this, the reservations about Stalin in Lenin's much-quoted and mislabelled "political testament" cannot be taken very seriously.

On the other hand, the oppositional currents within the party are given a very critical treatment. All things considered, and with a view to their history from the beginning to the end of the 1920s, they do not deserve Robert V. Daniels's description as the "conscience of the revolution." They were too handicapped by the fetishism of party unity, too fixated on different priorities and consequently reluctant to join forces, and they all underestimated both Stalin's abilities and his single-minded drive for supreme power. But they can be given credit for targeting the dubious premises of Stalin's pursuit of socialism in one country as well as the weaknesses of his "socialist offensive" at the end of the 1920s; their leaders also had a better grasp of international politics than the Stalinist faction. But one point that emerges very clearly from the discussion of this subject is the untenability of speculations about Bukharin as an alternative leader. His inconsistencies and his inability to sustain political conflict seem to have ruled him out of that field.

The ups and downs of the first two five-year plans are discussed in detail, with emphasis on the fact that this was not a once-and-for-all gamble, but a decade-long roller-coaster with successes, debacles and unforeseen complications. The question of dependence on foreign technology is treated as an open controversy, where scholars still defend very divergent estimates; but this factor was clearly more important for the first five-year plan than for the second.

To conclude, some questions about conceptual and interpretive issues should be raised. The first one has to do with the great emphasis that Reiman and his collaborators place on plebeian forces and attitudes in the Russian revolution. The distinction between a civic and a plebeian revolution in 1917 makes sense (with some reservations, indicated in an article on the October revolution elsewhere in this issue). But the term is also applied to the post-revolutionary power elite, especially the forces allied with Stalin, and to the political culture that crystallized around them. Here one might wish for a more precise conceptual definition; more importantly, there were other factors in play, and they seem irreducible to the continuity of a plebeian

political culture. The shattering and brutalizing experience of the civil war counted for much in the formation and methods of the Soviet state. Another aspect, less frequently noted, is the primitivizing logic of Leninism, certainly not explainable in terms of plebeian origins. Its effects can be traced on several levels. Lenin's invocation of Marxism as a complete and self-contained world-view was an imaginary reference; no such thing had yet been developed. When the Bolsheviks seized power and established a political monopoly, the imaginary teaching had to be given a more tangible and structured expression; the result was Marxism-Leninism, a comprehensive ideological edifice built in haste and on oversimplified foundations. Even compared to Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and some theorists of the Second International, it was a regressive formation. Another fateful feature of Lenin's legacy was the insistence on party unity. Lenin's vision of it was unrealizable, and provoked never-ending schisms, which in turn tempted the leader to take stronger measures. That became easier after the seizure of power, and Stalin took that line to extremes far beyond the practices envisaged by Lenin. In one of the latter's most unhinged pamphlets, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, the claim that even a one-man dictatorship can represent the interests of a progressive class is defended against the advocates of democracy; Stalin seems to have fused that idea with the traditional notion of the Russian people needing an autocrat. Finally, it has more than once been suggested that Lenin turned Clausewitz on his head and treated politics as a continuation of war by other means (if I am not mistaken, Victor Chernov's obituary on Lenin is the first recorded source). That view became more pronounced as Lenin's strategy developed. The decisive step was the interpretation of World War I as a logical and terminal outcome of capitalist development; it culminated in the appeal to transform the imperialist war into a civil war. Lenin's actions after his return to Russia followed that line; the civil war that turned out to be intra-imperial rather than international radicalized it, and Stalin took it to extreme lengths. Violence became the unconditional and ever-ready medium of politics.

All these considerations tone down the role of plebeian habits or traditions. Another reservation also focuses on the question of continuity and discontinuity. Reiman and his collaborators tend, in my opinion, to over-rationalize Stalin's actions in the second half of the 1930s (this is, needless to say, not to be confused with a defence of them; nothing of that kind is to be found in the book). They do not pretend to have a sufficient explanation for what they call the mass murder of post-revolutionary elites, but the strongest emphasis seems to be on the claim that Stalin had reasons to fear a widespread and potentially explosive opposition to his policies; they had resulted in a confused mixture of successes and disasters, and Stalin was no doubt aware of the resultant discontent across the social spectrum. He appears, on this view, to have opted for a wholesale elimination of possible opponents, not just a liquidation of former rivals as well as collaborators who had disagreed with him on specific issues (pp. 393–483). The argument is comparable to other ways of rationalizing the great purge, such as J. Arch Getty's thesis that Stalin was combating a Russian tradition of clans with particular interests and strategies forming inside the power elite, and that the purge was analogous to punitive and preventive actions undertaken by earlier autocrats, such as Ivan the Terrible (whom Stalin credited with a much more progressive historical role than previous revolutionary leaders and ideologues had ever done). An obvious objection to this latter parallel is that Stalin's purge was organized on an incommensurably larger scale than any historical example, and with an unprecedented ideological charge. More generally speaking, and with reference to the book reviewed here, something is missing in the over-rationalizing explanations. Mass murder of the 1936–1938 calibre is not conceivable without some kind of vision (however inappropriate that term may seem), some imagined purpose and rationale (unless we opt for the very implausible and rarely defended view that the recourse to violence cuts action loose from meaningful references). In Stalin's case, there was obviously a good deal of strategic calculation, not least in the careful combination of show trials and backstage

killings, but there was also a vision perhaps best captured by Kotkin's description of Stalin as a "massacring pedagogue." He envisaged a new generation of cadres who would identify totally with the leader and unquestioningly follow his instructions; those who stood in the way had to be eliminated. How this lethal phantasm took shape is not a question that can expect a conclusive answer. That would require a synthesizing knowledge of historical, ideological and psychological knowledge, which is not within the horizon of rational expectations. All that can be said here is that Stalin's final fusion of imperial and revolutionary traditions was also a mutation into something monstrously new.

To conclude, one conceptual problem should be briefly noted. It is clear that Reiman and his collaborators do not reject the notion of totalitarianism. They refer to the political regime of the Soviet Union as totalitarian, and even to a totalitarian model of society. But there is no discussion of the concept, and that leaves some questions unanswered. The idea of totalitarianism emerged in the interwar years as a response to new and unexpected metamorphoses of power, but it was from the outset a contested concept with widely divergent definitions. Looking back on its career, and with a view to recent debates, two main approaches may be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the definition favoured by political scientists (and much used during the Cold War); it focuses on clearly demarcated institutional structures. On the other hand, there is a line of more philosophically grounded reflection, going back to the works of Hannah Arendt, Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, and giving more weight to the symbolic and imaginary dimensions of power, as well as to the fusion of its various forms. The present writer favours the second alternative, but this is not the place to discuss it further.

Pavel Kolář's book on Post-Stalinism deals with a different epoch and has a more limited focus. It sets out to correct the conventional post-1968 wisdom about the last decades of Communism. While it is true that Khrushchev's attack on Stalin at the twentieth congress of the Soviet Communist party triggered an enduring legitimization crisis, to which no definitive answer

was ever found, it is very misleading, but all too common, to describe the subsequent history of Eastern European Communism as a linear and unmitigated decline. The same applies to the notion of a complete and universal loss of faith during the final phase. On both counts, Kolář convincingly presents a much more complex picture. It must, however, be said that he overstates his case when he argues that a consciousness of epochal change (*Umbruchsbewusstsein*) puts post-Stalinism alongside the historical landmarks of 1789, 1848 and 1918 (p. 329). The aftermath to 1956 was more lively and multifaceted than later generations liked to admit, but it did not leave an intellectual, political or ideological legacy comparable to the earlier dates mentioned by Kolář.

The concepts of utopia and ideology are central to Kolář's analysis of post-Stalinism. Events and efforts of the years after 1956 can be analyzed on many levels. The story includes limited but not insignificant adjustments of the power structures in place, unavoidable after the posthumous downgrading of Stalin as a leader and an ideological classic; major protest actions, and in the Hungarian case even a revolution, suppressed by Soviet intervention; the most significant political restructuring took place in Poland, where a previously imprisoned Communist leader came to power and negotiated a new *modus vivendi* with the Catholic Church, put an end to the collectivization of agriculture, and granted the universities significantly more autonomy than before (what he did not accept was the demand for an institutionalization of the workers' councils that had emerged in 1956).

Kolář's main focus is on intra-party responses to de-Stalinization and the resultant controversies, which can now be documented in much greater detail than in earlier work on this period. He compares three countries with a very different record: Czechoslovakia, Poland and the German Democratic Republic. As noted above, Poland underwent the most significant political changes. The sources cited by Kolář lead to a more nuanced picture of developments in Czechoslovakia than has commonly been presented in scholarship on the period. In 1956, there was

more unrest and controversy within the Czechoslovak Communist party than retrospective accounts have tended to suggest, but the leadership succeeded in blocking further progress; however, in the long run, this episode can be seen as an early advance signal of the most significant post-Stalinist breakthrough, the reform movement that culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968. The German Democratic Republic was, for well-known reasons, less receptive to messages of change than the other two countries, but even there, the post-Stalinist turn marks a date.

Notwithstanding these differences, Kolář argues that the analysis of post-Stalinist discourses, more or less critical, supports a conclusion that can also draw strength from broader perspectives on political events: post-Stalinism brought about changes to the cultural profile and horizon of the regimes in question. Kolář sums up these innovations under the twin headings of utopia and ideology. The utopian goal of progress through socialism to communism remained non-negotiable for the ruling parties, but the meaning of this obligatory promise did not remain unchanged. Kolář uses the term “processual utopia” to describe the main shift. At a minimum, this meant more emphasis on practical measures and visible progress, rather than on official foreknowledge of the road ahead. Less conformist versions could emphasize the need for ongoing criticism and self-correction; this was the road taken by reform communism.

The concept of ideology refers less to an “other” of utopia than to an overall framework which also allows the formulation of utopian goals. There was no principled retreat from the claim to exclusive ideological authority, but as the official frame of reference became less stridently monolithic and more responsive to changes, ideological schemes became more adaptable and open to selective use. One example mentioned by Kolář is the way the notion of a “cult of personality,” coined by the Soviet leadership to limit the impact of de-Stalinization, could be taken over by those who had in mind a more radical criticism. An example worth noting, although belonging to a somewhat later period than the major part of Kolář’s discussion

and therefore not mentioned in the book, is an article published in 1962 by the Czech economist Radoslav Selucký; he suggested that “the cult of the plan” should be treated as a phenomenon akin and comparable to the cult of personality. This provoked an intemperate reaction in high places, but the article did help to spark further discussion. Other symptoms of ideological ambiguity are important for the understanding of the final phase. Official commitment to an ideological system did not necessarily mean equal acceptance of all its parts; it is true that Marxist-Leninist notions, more or less consciously held, could enter into perceptions of reality, even when belief in the more normative claims of the state doctrine had tacitly been written off. But even on the cognitive level, awareness of shortcomings could lead to limited and semi-secret borrowings from other sources. In the 1980s, the Czechoslovak authorities permitted and encouraged – without any publicity – the study of neoclassical economics, and this turned out to be an important part of the preparation for a neo-liberal transformation.

Kolář places the post-Stalinist changes to ideology and utopia in a broader context, not least in relation to the shifting fortunes of class and nation as privileged historical actors. Here he seems inclined to accept the widely shared claim that the nation has, universally and unequivocally, proved more resilient than any class-based alternative, and he quotes Catherine Verdery’s study of Romania, where the move from class to nation was more evident before the fall of Communism than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. But Romania was an extreme case. At the moment of the Communist takeover, the party was by far the weakest in the region; it tried to compensate for this by a particularly repressive rule, but in the long run, the strong legacy of nationalism (including memories of a vigorous Fascist movement) prevailed. More generally speaking, a differentiated view of the shift from class to nation is needed. The victory of nation-based narratives over class-based ones has been much more massive in some places than others, and references to class have sometimes gone into terminal decline without any corresponding rise of nationalism. In this regard, a

comparison of the Czech republic with other countries in the region – Poland, Slovakia, Hungary – is very instructive. A further consideration is that national narratives are not all of a piece; they may contain a more or less explicit imperial component, and the idea of a civilizational nation (i.e. a nation claiming distinctive civilizational identity), formulated by Hans Antlöv and Stein Tønnesson, deserves more discussion. If there are cases of civilizational nations, China is surely an example of the first order.

The reference to China raises another question. In Kolář's book, the Chinese experience figures primarily as a negative lesson, perceived by Eastern European critics of Stalinism as a particularly frightening illustration of the regime pathologies they were combating. But a closer look at the record shows that matters were more complicated. In retrospect, it seems clear that a Sino-Soviet conflict was developing from 1956 onwards, that Mao Zedong saw the attack on Stalin as a threat to his own pretensions, and that official Chinese pronouncements on contradictions within the people, as distinct from those between the people and its enemies, were meant to deflect the critique of Stalinism. At the time, some critical Marxists in Eastern Europe saw it differently and sought inspiration in Chinese texts. The most striking example was the Czech philosopher Zbyněk Fišer, alias Egon Bondy.

Kolář's book is meant to throw new light on neglected aspects of Communism in Eastern Europe after 1956, not to present a comprehensive and balanced history of its decline. It would therefore be unfair to criticize it for not venturing in the latter direction. But it is a reminder of the need for a complex analysis of the whole process, with due attention to domestic and international factors, and to transformative aspirations as well as structural obstacles.

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**Ulrich Beck: *The metamorphosis of the World*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016, 223 pp.**

The reviewed book is the posthumously published work of one of the most important European intellectuals of the last few decades, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1944–2015). Beck studied in Freiburg and Munich; he acquired his professorship in 1979 in Münster; from 1981 to 1992 he lectured in Bamberg. From 1992 until the end of his professional career, he worked at *Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich*. At the end of the 1990s, he became a visiting professor at the *London School of Economics*. He was the editor-in-chief of the journal *Soziale Welt* and the editor of the *Edition Zweite Moderne* book series in *Suhrkamp* publishing house. In addition to his academic activities, he latterly devoted himself as an expert to the field of modernization and environmental issues, as well as socio-political activities aimed at supporting the vision of a federalized and cosmopolitan Europe.

Beck became world-renowned with the book *The Risk Society*, first published in the year of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 (in English it was published in 1992). The book kick-started global interest in risk issues, which was very intense for many years and created hundreds of similarly oriented publications. The total number of books in which Beck is listed as author or editor exceeds thirty. Beck's work has been published in translations in some two dozen countries. Among the best known are the titles *Reflexive Modernization* (1994, co-authored by Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash); *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995); *The Reinvention of Politics* (1996); *World Risk Society* (1998); *What Is Globalization?* (1999); *The Brave New World of Work* (2000); *Individualization* (2002, co-authored by Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim); *Cosmopolitan Europe* (2007, co-authored by Edgar Grande); *German Europe* (2013).

In his most famous book, Beck showed that the industrial and scientific-technological achievements of contemporary civilization sharply contrast with its vulnerability. The author describes contemporary society as a risk society. A characteristic feature of contemporary risks is