

**Book Review: Soviet Society Today. Michael Rywkin,
Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989. xii + 242 pp.**

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Soviet Society Today is a book with two possible uses, but whether it is the best resource for these two situations is debatable. Teachers of undergraduate survey courses in Soviet society, politics or culture may find Soviet Society Today a moderately worthwhile text with which to begin a syllabus which would follow with more in-depth explorations of the main issues and aspects of Soviet social life. Soviet Society Today offers a broad, if shallow, overview of Soviet life: cultural, ideological and social frameworks; social hierarchies, power structures and occupational groups; shared values and divisive conflicts. Arranged by sections-- "The Background," "The System," "The Social Structure," "The Standard of Living," "The Way of Life," and "Uniformity and Diversity"-- Rywkin's book presents a wide range of basic facts about the Soviet Union, and provides enough illustrative detail to be engaging enough to maintain student interest.

In addition to beginning students of Soviet society, general readers who wish to understand the basic structures, problems, processes, paradoxes and contradictions of Soviet Society, may also find this a clear and readable overview-- although many of Rywkin's observations and descriptions of Soviet authority and the behaviors of the citizenry are already obsolete, an almost unavoidable complication for writers in this era of sped-up change and counter-change in the U.S.S.R.

On almost every other page Soviet Society Today features short sidebars called "Voices"-- translations from the contemporary Soviet press which illuminate more effectively than Rywkin's text the ways in which Soviet people-- famous authors and unknown working-persons-- view their world and the changes taking place within it. These "Voices" provide the non-specialist reader with tantalizing examples of the sorts of complaints and worries typically expressed by Soviet people in their journals, newspapers and on T.V. The main problem with them is that they are unanimously negative, presenting only the unpleasantness, inefficiencies, inequalities and absurdities of the Soviet system. While complaint is admittedly the primary mode of expression in the glasnost' era, it is hardly the only one, and it would have served the

reader well had Rywkin included some commentaries showing more positive perspectives, for balance.

The main problem with texts like *Soviet Society Today* is the way in which they have to oversimplify history, politics, culture, ideology, arts, social structure, etc. in order to fit these topics into a tidy and accessible package. I imagine that historians would be horrified (or at least amused) by such renditions as "periods of weakened central authority inevitably ended in successful foreign invasions. Disunity among Kievan princes facilitated the Mongol conquest, the Time of Troubles invited Polish occupation of Moscow" (p. 15). As anthropologists, many of us would prefer to try to wean students away from non-discursive and over-simple treatments of society, to focus readings around texts which admit more uncertainty, and which challenge the traditional cultural lenses and categories through which we view and make sense of societies not our own.

It is the unquestioning ethnocentricity which bothers me the most about Rywkin's book. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this tendency: "During the post-Stalin years, the return to better manners accelerated. Today, Soviet citizens behave no worse than their Western counterparts, and sometimes better" (p. 163). "What is lacking in Russian tradition is the notion of suffering as something abhorrent rather than ordained" (p. 17).

Juxtapositions and comparisons with the West, which the author probably intended to help the uninitiated visualize the Soviet world, often carry weighty implications, for instance: "The enormous building at Dzerzhinsky Square in Moscow, larger than Macy's department store in New York, contains the infamous Liublianka prison and serves as a reminder of the KGB's permanent presence in the capital" (p.49). The hidden message here is that while New Yorkers can enjoy all the harmless, "democratic" pleasures and indulgences of a lavish department store, Soviet citizens have only the eerie presence of the KGB in their city center-- clearly an unfair juxtaposition of institutions.

Casual romanticizations of the tsarist era abound, as in: "In Leningrad, a city fortunately untouched by the modernization drives of the 1930's, the beauty of the past contrasts sharply with the blandness of the present: instead of the elegant ladies of tsarist days stepping down from stylish carriages on to the famous Nevsky Prospect, one sees only long lines of tired customers waiting before decrepit storefronts" (p. 138). And how can we make sense of comments like that when the same book contains the following: "Thus the nationalities situation in the USSR is

complex, a mixed bag of impressive achievements (such as modernization of formerly backward national groups) and abject failures... (p. 61).

Books like David Shipler's *Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams* or Kevin Klose's *Russia and the Russians*, though still suffering from certain ethnocentricities, and from the fact that they don't reflect the changes and new conflicts created by Gorbachev's reforms, could, given adequate class discussion, provide more challenging, multi-layered, and engaging opening texts for undergraduate courses. Hedrick Smith's *The New Russians*, though containing many disputable interpretations of Russian culture, nonetheless provides a stimulating and up-to-date starting-point for the study of Soviet society. More academic essays, such as those in Hoffman and Laird's *The Soviet Polity in the Modern Era*, or Shtromas and Kaplan's 3-volume *The Soviet Union and the Challenge of the Future*, if well-chosen to avoid the more ideologically stilted pieces, might allow students to experience a better sense of the churning complexity of Soviet society.