search in Moscow and Beijing, this book demonstrates the magnitude of what can be accomplished with the materials now available.


Reviewed by Golfo Alexopoulos, University of South Florida

Peter Kenez’s brief survey of Soviet history has a number of important strengths that make it valuable for students and scholars alike. It cogently describes the functions and failures of Soviet central planning, introduces some of the major historiographical debates among Western scholars and even discusses the views of official Soviet historians and their influence on what Soviet students were taught in schools. Kenez’s treatment of literature and cinema is especially interesting and greatly enhances the book.

Kenez makes his arguments well, but in certain instances he offers explanations that are not entirely persuasive. Although his discussion of the various factors that helped the Bolsheviks win the revolution and the civil war is sound, he is less convincing when he tries to analyze why Josef Stalin refused to mobilize troops at the German-Soviet border in 1941 even after numerous intelligence reports had warned of an impending German attack. Kenez states that “one must look for a psychological explanation” (p. 138) of Stalin’s failure to act and his lack of confidence in the Red Army’s ability to stop the Germans. Kenez does not stress Stalin’s faith in the Molotov-von Ribbentrop Pact, his distrust of Western intelligence, or his fear that mobilization might be read as a provocation. In attempting to explain how Stalin was able to defeat the so-called “Left” and “Right” oppositionists, Kenez argues that “Stalin won because he ultimately succeeded in persuading the communist activists, who at this point were decisively important within the political system, that his policies were realistic as well as within the Leninist tradition” (p. 81). It seems unlikely that persuasion and realism were actually of much significance in this case.

Kenez aptly highlights the role of officers and soldiers in the February (March) 1917 Revolution and asserts that “once the chain of command and the bonds of authority were broken, the imperial order collapsed with amazing speed” (p. 16). But he does not take account of the important divisions within the military and the role of insubordinate officers in the failed 1991 August coup. Indeed, the book generally is rather weak in its treatment of military affairs. Kenez describes Stalin’s military purges in only two short sentences, and he does not mention Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky or discuss the scope and depth of the purges. Kenez merely notes that “the Stalinists eliminated the high command of the armed forces” (p. 106), but he needs to elaborate on this point if he wants to demonstrate that the purges affected military readiness on the eve of the war. Another important omission is the impact of the U.S. Lend-Lease Act on the Soviet war effort, since Marshal Georgii Zhukov himself admitted that American aid was significant. Moreover, Kenez makes the questionable assertion that
after the battle of Moscow, Hitler’s defeat “was only a question of time” (p. 141). Who really believed this in December 1941? The claim that in the Brezhnev era “the Soviet Union achieved its greatest international success; it became a world power, second to none” (p. 218) is also overstated.

Kenez analyzes the important role of ideology in the behavior of Soviet leaders and deftly balances his interpretation with the caveat that the Bolsheviks “were pragmatists, able to concede where necessary” and sometimes “showed considerable flexibility” (p. 55, 58). At times, however, the balance tips too strongly in favor of an ideological explanation. Although Kenez rightly notes the difficulty that historians encounter when trying to determine people’s “real” beliefs, he often makes claims about this matter without qualification. For example, he asserts that there was a “loss of idealism” (p. 218) after Khrushchev: “Nikita Khrushchev was the last Soviet leader with a firm belief in the superiority of Marxist-Leninist ideology” (p. 210). Kenez argues that Soviet leaders after Khrushchev abandoned utopian ideology, ideological commitment, and “the promise of a just and affluent society” (p. 216). In the Brezhnev era the Soviet people “had lost faith in the noble ideas of equality and freedom as essential features of the future communist society” (p. 217). Kenez stresses ideology as a key distinction between the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, but his statements exaggerate both the idealism of the earlier period and the lack of ideological commitment in later years.

On the question of nationalism in the Soviet Union, Kenez persuasively describes the various factors that promoted ethnic identities. For example, he mentions Lenin’s policy of “indigenization,” which fostered the development of national languages and cultures, and he explains that “the ironic consequence of this policy was the growth of national consciousness among the non-Russian population of the union” (p. 58). In the rest of the book, however, Kenez does not explain how indigenization created ethnic enclaves and elites or how these elites encouraged nationalist sentiment for their own purposes. Instead, he stresses the role of modernization, universal literacy, urbanization, and mass mobilization. Significantly, he notes that, “above all,” nationalist sentiment grew because of shifts in population. Russians moving to Central Asia or the Baltic states “created a desire among natives to get rid of outsiders” (p. 233). National identities emerged “in opposition to outsiders” (p. 233) and to “mixing, closer acquaintance with others, even intermarriage” (p. 271). It is not exactly clear why, of all the factors that promoted nationalist sentiment, Kenez chooses to emphasize migration and demographic changes. Finally, he argues that “it was not Stalinist or post-Stalinist repressive policies that created nationalism,” but surely these policies contributed greatly to nationalist resentment of the Soviet state, particularly in the Baltic States and Ukraine.

The book’s great strength is the amount it covers in a concise and readable form. Inevitably, though, some crucial issues are left out that should have been discussed. First, more extensive analysis of Stalin’s and the party’s perceptions of internal and external enemies and threats (the fear of capitalist encirclement, paranoid concerns about kulak theft and deception, etc.) would have helped Kenez explain the leadership’s crash industrialization program and its insistence that peasants give up their
grain to the point of starvation during the collectivization campaign. Second, there is surprisingly little on the Gulag system and life in the camps. Since the author claims that the NKVD secret police force was at times more powerful than the party, it is important to explain that the power of the NKVD was due in large part to the vast network of labor camps that it managed.


Reviewed by David Powell, Wheaton College

Although Soviet Communism, like its Nazi cousin, raised barbarism to the level of state policy, some of its activities and institutions still strike one as more bizarre than evil. The League of the Militant Godless, an organization employed by Josif Stalin to "storm the heavens," ridicule and humiliate clergymen, and transform "superstitious" citizens into atheists, is one such institution. In chronicling the League's rise and fall, Daniel Peris—formerly a history professor at the University of Wyoming and currently employed by a Western investment firm in Moscow—reminds us that some aspects of Soviet history were at the same time horrifying and comical.

Set up in 1925, the League was, in Peris's words, a "nominally independent organization established by the Communist Party to promote atheism." It published newspapers, journals, and other materials that lampooned religion; it sponsored lectures and films; it organized demonstrations and parades; it set up antireligious museums; and it led a concerted effort to persuade Soviet citizens that religious beliefs and practices were "wrong" and harmful, and that good citizens ought to embrace a scientific, atheist worldview.

The League arranged competitions between christened and unchristened infants (to demonstrate that there were no differences in their health or growth rates), and it staged contests to show the superiority of "godless fields" (agricultural plots that used modern soil and plant science) over those of religious peasants who employed traditional techniques and asked a priest to bless their land. In addition, the League opened antireligious museums in former monasteries and churches around the country. In 1929, "godless shock brigades," "godless factories," and "godless collective farms" appeared. Groups of industrial workers and farmers promised to fulfill and overfulfill their production plans, while simultaneously deriding religious beliefs.

The League was a classic Soviet "mass organization." Within a decade it claimed to have 5.5 million members, 2 million more than the Communist Party itself. From the beginning, however, it offended more people than it persuaded. One Soviet commentator termed the League's efforts "all bluster" and derided it as an "atheist sect"; another said that the League had "adopted all of its adversary's worst features of intolerance and fanaticism." Membership figures for branches were inflated, and reports of antireligious activities were simply made up to please higher-ranking officials. Entire