ollowing Stalin’s death, to stave off RCP critics such as Miron Constantinescu after Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech denouncing Stalin in 1956, and to prevent overt violence in Romania during the Hungarian revolution later that year.

In chapter twelve Deletant traces Romania’s growing autonomy from the Soviet Union. He shows that Gheorghiu-Dej repeatedly acted on the basis of personal interest rather than ideology in removing Constantinescu and Iosif Chișinevski in 1957, persuading Khrushchev to withdraw Soviet troops (first suggested in 1955 and accomplished in 1958), and starting a new series of arrests and purges in 1958. Deletant sees the rift with the Soviet Union as “initially economic” and “fueled by the mutual dislike felt by Khrushchev and Dej” (p. 281), but never “so deep as to stop Romanian collaboration [with Moscow] in intelligence and security matters” (p. 287). Indeed, when Gheorghiu-Dej died in 1965, the security police “remained intact, unreformed, and ubiquitous” (p. 288), ready to be used by his successor, Ceaușescu.

In his conclusions Deletant stresses that Gheorghiu-Dej created the conditions for the rise of Ceaușescu by eliminating any opposition inside or outside the party, by shaping the Securitate, and by terrorizing the population into submission or emigration. The volume contains a number of brief memoirs and documents, including an account by Emil Bodnăraș of his actions in 1942–1944, a 1947 Soviet report on the RCP leaders, a description of conditions in Aiud prison, and an unpublished attack on Ceaușescu written by Gheorghe Apostol in 1968. In sum, this book is extremely valuable, not so much because of any new or startling conclusions but because of its many new insights into individuals and personal relations within the RCP and its detailed, personal descriptions of regime terror.


Reviewed by Gaël-Georges Moulec, Robert Schuman Foundation (Paris)

This new book by Vladimir Shlapentokh, a sociologist at Michigan State University, looks back at Soviet “totalitarian” society from the perspective of the post-Soviet era “without placing moral judgments on the subject.” Maintaining—often, but not always—a balanced approach between a “totalitarian” description of Soviet society and an analysis of its functioning over a long period, Shlapentokh bases his work on four key premises: that “the society had a consistent structure and its main institutions remained largely intact after its emergence in 1918–1920”; that a distinction must be made between the Soviet regime centered in Russia and the “empire” that controlled non-Russians, in particular non-Slavs; that “USSR policies and socialist ideology were dedicated to the desire to catch up with and surpass the West”; and, finally, that “the official ideology was a complex construction, adapted to the regime and empire” and “should never be taken at face value” (pp. 3–4).
One can easily agree with Shlapentokh when he indicates that “the Bolshevik ideology quickly became a crossbreed of two major trends . . . socialism and Russian nationalism” (p. 14). Shlapentokh argues that the construction of the new society was intended “to overcome Russian backwardness and catch-up with the West in order to protect the empire from foreign invasion and to advance its geopolitical interests” (p. 17), a claim that understates the significance of Josif Stalin’s intensification of trends that had begun under Vladimir Lenin. To carry out this task as rapidly as possible, secrecy was critical. Soviet leaders developed a sophisticated ideological mechanism with two components: open ideology addressing the Soviet public, and a closed system of communication meant solely for the Communist Party elite and the nomenklatura, relying on special channels of information (pp. 54–61).

The most controversial aspect of Shlapentokh’s book is his resuscitation of a “totalitarian” conception of the Soviet political system as having been “supervised by the supreme leader” who relied on a “sophisticated selection of cadres” to build an “effective political Machine” that exercised “full control of the Province” (pp. 71–102). Scholars who have pored over declassified internal reports from the 1930s and 1940s will find these claims hard to accept. Stalin may well have sought “full control,” but the Soviet bureaucracy was notable for its incompetence, misunderstandings, counter-orders, and other traits that prevented the smooth implementation of directives from on high.

More convincing are the sections dealing with the Soviet economy, which Shlapentokh describes as “with all its flaws . . . a normally functioning system, with a history of ups and downs” (p. 110). The economy, he writes, permitted the buildup and maintenance of the largest military the world has ever known, and it also guaranteed at least a minimal living standard for all citizens from the 1950s on (pp. 118–126), having overcome the terrible famines of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

Analyzing public opinion, Shlapentokh argues that the population can be divided into “three mental worlds” (p. 130). In the first, the people supported the regime; in the second, they hated it; and in the third, they largely ignored ideological matters and spent little time, emotion, or thought on any world beyond everyday life. Shlapentokh asserts that “until the time of perestroika, the regime always enjoyed the support (active or passive) of most of the population” (p. 127), but it would have been helpful if he had provided greater evidence for this claim and had taken due account of the role of fear, social mobility, and memories of worse times.

In a brilliant chapter dealing with “The Regime and the Empire,” Shlapentokh notes that “while endowing Russians with the dominant role in the central elite, the empire energetically promoted the national elite in all the provinces, using ‘affirmative action’” (p. 160). Noting the “key role of Jews in the party and state apparatus in the first two decades after 1917” (p. 160), Shlapentokh traces the emergence of an increasingly anti-Semitic policy from the mid-1930s and particularly after World War II. But, he writes,

in spite of the strong anti-Semitic undercurrents in the Soviet Union, the rulers remained quite rational in their dealings with Jews. Even at the peak
of anti-Semitism, the Kremlin used numerous Jewish professionals, who
loyally served the regime even to the point of denying that discrimination
against Jews existed. (p. 162)

The final chapters, discussing systemic reform efforts and their consequences, are the
most convincing part of the book. Far from having been a stable monolith, the Soviet
Union, as shown by Shlapentokh, knew only two periods of relative stability: the final
stage of Stalin’s rule, from 1945 to 1953, and the “period of stagnation” under Leonid
Brezhnev, from 1964 to 1982 (p. 174). The new era opened by Mikhail Gorbachev in
1985 was one of profound change and challenge. Shlapentokh provides an interesting
assessment of various theories about the origin of Gorbachev’s perestroika: the public
discontent theory, the demoralization theory, the privatization plot theory, the dissident
theory, the democratic design theory, the Imperial theory, and the “Western
plot” theory (pp. 180–186). In Shlapentokh’s view, the real cause of perestroika
stemmed from the leadership’s ambition to preserve the military parity between the
USSR and the West, attained in the mid-1970s. By the early 1980s it became evident
that the growing technological gap placed this parity in serious jeopardy. (p. 186)

Breaking the Gorbachev period into discrete phases, Shlapentokh claims that “in
the first two years of his tenure, Gorbachev looked in many respects like an “enlight-
ened Stalinist” (p. 188); that is, a figure who wanted to bolster order and efficiency
in the Soviet Union, but without sacrificing the main components of Communist
rule and Soviet foreign policy. In the second stage of perestroika, according to
Shlapentokh, Gorbachev moved toward real liberalism and even democratization, de-
ivering one blow after another to the totalitarian regime and, ultimately, to the state.
The dissolution of the regime and state was accompanied by the decline of the empire’s
major institutions, such as the army, the secret police, and Communist ideology
(pp. 193–200). Shlapentokh implies that the eventual failure of perestroika was due
mainly to a superficial understanding of the nature of Western society. In reality, it is
more state-centered and less laissez-faire than many of the Soviet/Russian “democrats”
seemed to believe.

This book provides an interesting overview of the Soviet Union, combining the
firsthand experience of a former Soviet citizen and the analytical framework of Ameri-
can political sociology. Despite some dubious points and assertions, overall the book
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