

Felix Rehschuh, *Aufstieg zur Energiemacht: Der sowjetische Weg ins Erdölzeitalter: 1930-er bis 1950-er Jahre*. Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2018. 373 pp.

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Petroleum is one of the defining resources of technology underpinning much of modern, mechanized human society. Its importance to modern states seems obvious. Many wars have been fought over the control of oil, and many more threaten us in the future. The Soviet Union, which boasted of being the country richest with energy sources, used its vast control of oil as a political and economic weapon during the Cold War. The precipitous decline of oil prices in the 1980s was a contributing factor in the demise of the USSR in 1991.

Felix Rehschuh's fine study of the development of the oil industry in the Soviet Union convincingly shows that the Soviet Union only belatedly arrived as an oil superpower. Once Soviet leaders fully grasped the importance of oil as an energy source and a political and economic weapon, they used it forcefully and strategically to extend their political influence. Rehschuh analyzes the reasons for Moscow's delayed involvement in oil as power.

According to Rehschuh, the legacy left by the Soviet Founding Father, Vladimir Lenin, was a crucial factor. In December 1920 Lenin proclaimed: "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country, since industry cannot be developed without electrification." Soviet leaders identified the source of electricity with coal and hydroelectric power. They viewed petroleum as unwieldy—expensive to prospect, extract, and transport—and preferred what they considered simpler and cheaper sources. They understood oil mainly as a source of war machines such as tanks, airplanes, and warships. Unlike Britain and France, the Soviet Union did not seek to secure foreign oil. Instead, like Germany, the Soviet Union sought to develop synthetic oil (e.g., from coal) as a more dependable and cheaper source of energy. In the early Soviet era, leaders in the Kremlin believed, in any case, that petroleum accounted for less than 1 percent of domestic energy resources available in the country (p. 49). As a result, Soviet propaganda overwhelmingly emphasized the coal and hydropower industries as heroic producers and largely dismissed the oil industry as a "problem child." During the early Soviet period, as during the Tsarist period, oil was exported, providing valuable foreign currency to the Soviet government. The Great Depression led to a collapse of global oil prices and made oil even less attractive to Soviet leaders. With no national plan for oil supply, regional authorities developed energy sufficiency programs. The log of visitors to Joseph Stalin's office indicates that from 1934 to 1938 he met representatives of the oil industry only once, in the summer of 1936 (p. 86). As with other industries, the oil industry was severely disrupted by Stalin's purges and Great Terror.

The threat of war in the late 1930s changed the Soviet view of petroleum, to an extent. The export of oil (crude oil and oil products), which peaked in 1932–1933, had practically ceased by the late 1930s, and the Soviet Union may even have imported oil from abroad. Simultaneously, Soviet officials sought to develop a "second

Baku” in the Volga-Urals region. The “grace time” Stalin bought by concluding a non-aggression pact with Adolf Hitler did not help much because Stalin provided Germany with oil to appease Hitler. It was only in the few months preceding Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union that Stalin began to confront the oil deficit.

The Soviet Union eventually emerged victorious, in part helped by the Allies, especially the United States and its Lend-Lease program. Stalin and his colleagues, who did not seem to have believed at the time that the Soviet Union had enough oil reserves to satisfy its needs, reverted to the old ways of coal and hydroelectric power.

Only in the second half of 1947 did Soviet leaders change their energy strategy when they lost hope of concessions in Iran, and the Cold War began in earnest. Stalin’s secret police chief Lavrentii Beria was mobilized to develop the oil industry. Here, as in other industries, convict labor, including foreign prisoners of war, provided an invaluable labor force. Oil production thus took off in the 1950s, averaging more than a 10 percent increase annually. Regional energy autarky came to be replaced by a massive grid of oil pipelines. Along with petroleum, natural gas became an increasingly attractive source of energy. Demands for oil came not only from the military but from Soviet society, reflected in the motorization of the transport sector. Although the use of private vehicles was still limited, individuals (e.g., Soviet managers and engineers) became increasingly interested in the use of motor vehicles as a sign of privilege and prosperity. Soviet leaders attempted to satisfy these aspirations as a way to ensure the public’s loyalty. They also learned to use petroleum as leverage to keep East European countries out of the influence of the vast economic power of the United States. Rehschuh offers the example of Finland, which fought against the Soviet Union on the side of Nazi Germany during World War II. Finland concluded a truce with the Soviet Union in 1944, and Moscow was keen to keep Finland close by forging economic ties (p. 306). After Stalin’s death, his successors extended this strategic use of economic ties and oil supply to Third World countries struggling to break free of European colonial rule. Thus in the 1950s, oil became a valuable tool of Soviet foreign policy.

In this context, Stalin’s death in 1953 cannot be seen as the real turning point. Stalin’s successors extended what began under Stalin in the late 1940s. In 1956 Nikita Khrushchev finally issued a new slogan, “Oil instead of Coal.”

Rehschuh seems interested not so much in economic and political history as in cultural history. Although he uses posters as illustrations of Soviet policy, he provides no statistical tables or graphs in this book. Stalin, justifiably, plays a central role in the book, but oddly he does not make it into the index, whereas others do, such as Beria, Khrushchev, and Nikolai Baibakov (a legendary figure in the oil industry whom Stalin threatened to shoot in 1942 if he surrendered even a single drop of oil in the Caucasus to the Germans; p. 116).

All in all, however, this is a very readable book on the beginning of the age of oil in the Soviet Union. It is essential to understanding how Soviet leaders came to use oil as a political and economic weapon during the Cold War—and how Russian leaders continue to use it for those purposes today.

