

BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Iurii Pavlovich Sharapov. *Pervaiia "ottepel'": Nepovskaia Rossiia v 1921-1928 gg: voprosy ideologii i kul'tury*. [The first "thaw": Russia under NEP, 1921-1928: Questions of ideology and culture]. Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 2006. 368 pp. ISBN: 5-805-50161-9.

In *Pervaiia "ottepel'"*, the late Russian historian Iu. P. Sharapov (1920-2005), upon his own forthright admission, offers a Marxist view of the events of the 1920s. Organizationally, the book is divided into three parts: ideology, culture and portraits of important personalities of the NEP era. The author does not attempt to treat the topics systematically but instead discusses the most important literature published in Russia about the topics. A proponent of historicism, he judges the authors he discusses according to its principles. Sharapov's own work would have fit well into the Soviet historiography of the *perestroika* era. He does not draw on any literature that was not published in Russian and he uses archival material only in exceptional cases. In keeping with the traditions of Soviet historiography before the collapse, Sharapov portrays "Vladimir Ilyich" as infallible and cites Lenin on nearly every page.

Part one begins with the conflicts associated with the introduction of the NEP. Sharapov asks whether the transition to the NEP constituted a betrayal of the socialist project by the Bolsheviks. Praising Lenin's foresight, the author proceeds to examine the fate of Leninism. Next, Sharapov describes the succession struggles and the methods Stalin used to oust his rivals. Further, Sharapov discusses the strained relationship between the government and the Church. Here he focuses primarily on the confiscation of Church properties in 1922. Rejecting the Western hypothesis that the Bolsheviks used this opportunity to weaken the Church, Sharapov claims instead that Church property was seized in order to aid the starving population. The author's argument in chapter 4 on "ideological intolerance" is particularly interesting. After devoting nearly 40 pages to describing Bolshevik intolerance of ideological dissent and showcasing Lenin's role in suppression of dissent, he nevertheless finds it possible to designate the NEP era as Russia's "first thaw" (p. 146).

In part two, Sharapov lauds Bolshevik achievements in secondary education and praises the scientific successes of the regime. Inexplicably, he has found a place in this section for a meticulous list of the works that Lenin read. Part two concludes with Sharapov's discussion of the creation of a new type of literature. Here he provides a stirring account of the quarrels surrounding the *Proletcult* movement, which is marred only by his characteristically tedious adulation of Lenin.

The closing portraits of Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Lunacharsky and Bogdanov are typical of the style of the entire book. Lenin, as the perfect luminary, outshines all other protagonists. While Sharapov finds some positive things to say about outcasts of the Brezhnev era, he also finds ample occasions on which to deride them, in particular Trotsky. For example, when describing Trotsky's removal from his post as military commissar, he emphasizes that Trotsky had to be carried out of his study on a chair (p. 322, note 4). In addition, Sharapov repeatedly refers the views of the

former war commissar as “anti-Leninist.” His assessment of Trotsky differs markedly from his view of Bukharin, who he describes not only as a worthy follower of Lenin but also as the only serious alternative to Stalin during the NEP era. Moreover, Sharapov shows his regard for Bukharin by frequently citing him. The description of Bogdanov, the leader of the Proletcult movement, is particularly interesting. An expert on the sometimes overlooked theorist, Sharapov earlier published a book about Bogdanov’s ideological relationship with Lenin, the title of which, *Lenin and Bogdanov: From Collaboration to Contrast*, summarizes the way in which Sharapov depicts Bogdanov here, as both a universal genius and an “extreme left-wing” politician and thinker. A final confirmation of Sharapov’s mostly unreformed Soviet perspective is that for him Stalin is inseparably associated with the victory over German aggression.

In his conclusion Sharapov reiterates his thesis about the “first thaw”. In his view, the lesson of NEP for modern Russia is that it is possible to use the lever of a market economy (p. 320) on the road to socialism. It is characteristic of his style that, when discussing contemporary (democratic) Russia, he uses the term “ideological and cultural front” (p. 350).

Had Sharapov written *Pervaia “ottepel’”* when the Soviet Union still existed, it would have constituted a considerable achievement. Today, however, more than sixteen years after the collapse of the USSR, it in no way measures up to the standards expected of modern research. It is only of value for those readers who wish to gain an overview of the literature on the NEP era from a traditional Marxist-Leninist standpoint.

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