**BOOK REVIEW**

**The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule**, Alex Marshall, (New York: Routledge, 2010), xi+387p

In *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*, Alex Marshall examines the complexities of internal politics in the Caucasus with its pre and post-Soviet episodes. By relying on a wide range of Russian and Soviet sources, in addition to others, Marshall demonstrates the need for an alternative approach to the prevailing anti-Soviet discourse and shows his skillfulness in using a wide range of archival material. Vociferous Western or British scholarship on the Soviet Union, Marshall points out, has been colored by ideological convictions and geopolitical interests. This work should be seen in relation to a different and more nuanced interpretation of the history of the region in that it introduces an honest tinge of admiration for Marxism and the Soviet project. Although many would find this problematic, and there are occasional excesses, this work nevertheless fills an obvious gap in Western scholarship.

The book starts with a chapter on the politics of modernization under the Tsarist Empire followed by two others on the turbulence of the pre-1917 revolution enmeshed, as he describes it, with inter-ethnic upheavals. The following chapter examines the diffusion of the British Empire’s influence to Iran and Azerbaijan between 1919 and 1920. From these early chapters we learn fascinating details about the Tsarist attempts to re-organize the borders and peoples in the Caucasus, the birth of the early nationalist modernization movements, and the rise of Bolshevik power. Tumultuous upheavals, interethnic and ideological clashes sweep through, one after the other. Many efforts at forming unity get crushed under uncompromising divergences and invariably violent counter offensives. In the backdrop of these troubles, Marshall provides detailed analyses of a number of leading personalities who shaped the nationalist movements and later either joined the communists or faded away in the course of history.

The head of an Azeri national modernist party, *Musavat,* Mehmet Rasul-Zade, was one such sophisticated personality, who established the party as a religiously oriented movement in 1912. Samurskii, born as Nazhmutdin Efendiev into a Lesgin community of Dagestan, was another example of a national-Islamist modernist who later joined the communist cadres but could not escape execution during the Stalin era purges. *Dashnaktsutsiun*, the Armenian party founded in 1890 was one of the oldest nationalist movements that aimed to unite Armenians within both the Ottoman and Tsarist Empires. However, it was Kamo, Semon Ter-Petrosian, who played a leading role in the formation of a revolutionary group prior to 1917. He collaborated with two Georgians, Sergo, G. K. Ordzhonikidze, and Stalin, Ioseb Jughashvili. The trio’s influence in the course of early Soviet history would go well beyond their first base in Georgia.

The efforts of the modernist intelligentsia and their competing ethnic dreams finally get silenced while Stalin pursues his brutal political purges and gigantic Soviet industrialization projects throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The Soviets emerge triumphant from the Second World War with the almost total elimination of any political opposition. Tragic human loss under Stalin’s economic and social re-engineering gets some attention in the following three chapters. These are devoted to the collectivization, diaspora politics and purges.

Marshall devotes six chapters to the period beginning with the Soviet power consolidation in 1920s to the end of the Second World War (1945). However, for some inexplicable reason, there is only one chapter covering the period described as ‘the crisis of the Soviet state’ (1953-91). This chapter points out that economic stagnation in the Union was a direct result of the lack of comprehensive industrial policies in the aftermath of Stalin. Gorbachev’s attempts to modernize the economy were ineffective and ill formed. The process only deepened already existing tendencies of irredentism, laxity, and national or ethnic separatism. The tone of the analysis shifts towards a broader set of generalizations rather than dwelling on the specifics of the situation in the Caucasus. The final chapter on the post-Soviet Caucasus (1991-2008) outlines the political conflicts within the Russian Federation and the Chechen wars, emphasizing the need for Russia’s continuing power in the region.

The final arguments of the book express pessimism for the future of the Caucasus. In his concluding remark, as already signaled in the introduction, Marshall asserts that some western scholars and Jihadists alike have undeservedly glorified the Chechen independence wars. According to him, the USA and the EU aim to establish their agenda in the Caucasus and Central Asia through energy politics, democratization agendas and other such means. Marshall’s conviction that an assertive Russia remains the best hope for the successor states of the Soviet Union in the Caucasus and Central Asia is hard to justify on economic grounds. Moreover, the claim that the post Second World War formation of Japanese single party politics is a successful regional example for Russia to emulate is unsubstantiated. Based on my work on oligarchic markets I would suggest that Russian capitalism, guided by the state ownership in the energy sector along with polarized private market structures, has little or no resemblance to Japan’s post-war industrial policy build up. The nature of the Russian political class and their counterparts in oligarchic market structures resembles Kazakhstan more than Japan. Therefore, to what extend Russia, alone, can be a reforming force or inspiration for the region remains to be seen.

Overall, this is an important book but should not be mistaken for a relaxing summer reading. Marshall keeps the reader on her/his toes with a bewildering number of names, overly detailed accounts and takes the reader slowly through the tumultuous years of the modern Caucasus. It is better to digest it chapter by chapter. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule* could have been more reader friendly if it had had a better-organized chapter format. Having no introduction and conclusion to each chapter makes it hard to follow the main purpose and argument of each chapter and the link among them. The real challenge for the reader is to avoid getting lost in detail.

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