David Brandenberger


David Hoffmann


These studies concentrate on state policy, with some sections on popular response and involvement. Brandenberger’s major contribution is to show that during the Great Terror (a term Hoffmann does not like), even the Communist Party’s propaganda apparatus broke down. The Institute of Marx-Engels-Lenin, responsible for producing propaganda and teaching materials for use by party agitators, found itself “almost paralyzed” in the fall of 1937. Glavlit, in charge of censorship, lost control of its task at the same time. Purges of library holdings went on haphazardly from below as cadres tried to keep up with the latest arrests. These well-documented findings add to recent work on the state and the Terror which show that, planned or not, the arrests severely undermined the ability of the governing apparatus to function.

Brandenberger claims that “hysteria stopped Soviet mass culture in its tracks between 1936 and 1938” (p. 180). This seems correct only insofar as what might be called propaganda culture is concerned; Brandenberger does not mention the work of Richard Stites on popular culture or of earlier writers like Jay Leyda on cinema. Zany, popular films like Volga, Volga!, with the huge star Liubov Orlova, are not discussed. Frederick Starr’s work on jazz in the period is not cited. A rich culture much appreciated by the masses continued through the worst years of the arrests, even as people did become deeply confused about what the police and party apparatus were doing.

Brandenberger focuses on the writing of histories of the Soviet Communist Party and biographies of Stalin. This concentration is useful if not extended to refer to culture in general, and the author’s contribution in this regard is substantial; that the leadership produced or allowed “hysteria” in its own propaganda organs sheds valuable light on the dysfunctionality of the regime during the Terror.

Brandenberger is on less solid ground when he tries to judge the popular mood of the mid- to late ’30s. He writes of the “devastation of popular morale” in 1936–1938 (p. 182), but then remarks that reactions of complete disenchantment were “far from the norm” and finds that Stalin remained a “popular locus of attention” (p. 195). Incidentally, why not just say that Stalin remained popular? An investigation of popular attitudes is not Brandenberger’s main object. A

David Hoffman also writes from the point of view of state policy. His major, highly useful contribution is to show, building on his own earlier work and that of Peter Holquist, that Soviet practices such as manipulation of the popular mood, close surveillance of the masses, and “excisionary violence” were policies also followed by various other European and Asian governments. Hoffmann identifies the era of World War I as critical in the creation of major propaganda and surveillance efforts. Attempts to raise the birth rate occurred in numerous countries as early as the 1870s, so that Soviet rewards for fecundity in the 1930s were hardly new. The tsars expelled whole ethnic groups from certain territories, for example, Crimean Tatars after the war on their peninsula ended in 1856. Here Hoffmann might have mentioned the vast excisionary violence of the U.S. government as it extended its grasp across the middle of North America. It would also have been worth mentioning that governments based upon cities and settled agriculture have disliked nomads and have frequently made violent efforts to force them to settle down. But overall Hoffmann has provided an important service to the field by contextualizing Soviet policies.

Where this approach does not work especially well is in the last chapter, “State Violence.” Here and elsewhere in the book, Turkish genocide against Armenians is discussed, as are mass arrests of “enemies” within the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1914. But most of the chapter covers well-trod ground on Soviet internal violence. Some of the treatment in this section is reminiscent of Merle Fainsod’s 1950s approach to Soviet rule, which sometimes consisted of listing the nastiest decrees and statements he could find, with no treatment of how they were carried out and no suggestion of any popular involvement in state violence. Like Brandenberger, Hoffmann pays limited attention to the dynamics of mass violence in the USSR, relegating ordinary citizens largely to roles as objects, never actors.

Hoffmann argues that Soviet excisionary violence was central to the state’s efforts to reshape society. While many readers will accept that view, it remains doubtful to this reviewer. Unless we wish to claim that every government’s efforts to remove perceived criminals from society constitute reshaping, the argument does not say much. To be sure, exiling kulaks in the late ’20s or removing ethnic Poles from the western borderlands did reshape society where these policies were applied. But the deportations were rooted in temporary conditions and were not reimplemented after 1945. Mass relocations of various populations did occur then, but that was a typical outcome of the war across Europe, as it had been after 1918.