different Orders of the Church. Up to his seventieth year, he sold at high prices the binding magic of love and health as well as prophecies on the probable success of marriages, elections, and gambling. Aurelio moved between the high and low magic, the nobility and the poor with ease and great profit binding the passions of the famous as well as the humble. Most significant is that most of the powerful women of these tales also operated across a wide spectrum of late Renaissance society.

In sum, the book under review can be regarded as a fruitful addition to the study of Venetian society at the end of the Renaissance. Guido Ruggiero’s research is a valuable contribution to the works of Italian scholars on the subject, especially Carlo Ginzburg’s, the less famous Edoardo Grendi’s, and the circle of scholars associated with the journal, Quaderni Storici. The book is obviously influenced by the historical storytelling of Natalie Z. Davis, Robert Darton, David Sabean, and Gene Brucker. In can be recommended to a broad circle of readers from scholars to amateurs.

Department of Russian Philology
Belgorod State Pedagogical University
Belgorod, Russia

Natalia Nevzorova


Western assessments of the current and future status of Russian democracy have tended to rise and fall with each week’s headlines. This new book by Jonathan Steele, the former Moscow bureau chief for The Guardian (London) newspaper, has the signal virtue of emphasizing the continuing impediments to democracy that the Russian past poses for the Russian future. Reviewing the events of the last several tumultuous years, Steele asks: “. . . when the dust settled, what was really new in Russia?” He reaches the pessimistic conclusion that the authoritarian and anti-modern traditions of the Russian past are alive and doing rather well, and have deeply influenced the behavior of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Gaidar, and other political leaders in contemporary Russia.

The book is written in a highly-engaging style, with exciting first-hand accounts of the author’s adventures in covering the unravelling of the Soviet empire, including detailed descriptions of the events of August, 1991, and October, 1993. But those looking for a work that builds upon and engages with existing social science scholarship will be largely disappointed. Steele’s historical discussions are basically derivative, offering nothing that will be new to those familiar with the analyses of Richard Pipes and others who emphasize the distinct features of Russia’s historical development. Steele essentially endorses Pipes’ argument that Russia has always lacked a genuine civil society which could develop independent organizations capable of aggregating and representing diverse social interests. The result has been the perpetuation of dysfunctional social attitudes: passivity, dependency, cynicism, amoral individualism, lack of national identity and pride, and, ultimately, a profound fatalism about the opportunities for change.

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Where Steele's work comes alive, and where he makes his most distinctive contribution, is in his analysis of the last years of the USSR, and the first few years of an independent Russia. Steele is an unremitting critic of Russian President Boris Yeltsin, whom he accuses of perpetuating some of the worst features of Russian authoritarianism. Steele scolds Yeltsin for failing to compromise with the Soviet-era parliament he inherited in 1991, for failing to build a coherent pro-democracy political party, for introducing an extreme form of economic 'shock therapy,' and for pushing through a new constitution that grants excessive power to the presidency.

Steele's most damning accusation has to do with the aftermath of Yeltsin's decision in September, 1993 to dissolve the obstreperous Congress of People's Deputies, originally elected under the Soviet Union in 1990. Steele charges that Yeltsin deliberately withdrew the police cordon around the so-called White House (the seat of the Russian parliament, where its leaders had barricaded themselves). In the resulting chaos, a pro-parliament mob rampaged through the city, occupying the mayor's office and attacking the Ostankino television station. At this juncture, Steele alleges, Russian troops needlessly slaughtered about fifty protestors in a "phony battle" calculated to place the blame for the violence squarely on Vice-President Alexander Rutskoi and his supporters. These maneuvers were all part of a scheme by Yeltsin to find a pretext for what he really wanted to do all along: to take the White House by storm. Thus, Steele all but accuses Yeltsin of masterminding the murder of his political opponents.

Steele's explanation for such behavior is primarily found in Yeltsin's personality—the man has a thirst for personal power and an irrational penchant for confrontation. Thus, opportunities to compromise with the old parliament and with other opponents were squandered through pure willfulness and spite.

Steele also accepts descriptions of former acting Prime Minister and economic advisor Yegor Gaidar as a "neo-Bolshevik," prone towards destructive measures based more on high theory than a pragmatic assessment of reality. Steele argues that Gaidar pursued his radical and misguided economic policies with little regard for their impact on the lives of ordinary Russians, and as a result of Western "political, propagandistic, and intellectual pressure."

On the whole, Steele's book is certainly one of the most convincing indictments of Yeltsin's leadership to have yet appeared, and Yeltsin's ill-fated adventure in Chechnya only confirms the thrust of his analysis. Yet, the reader cannot help but notice an internal tension in the book, one which, if recognized, might have lead to a more charitable view of Yeltsin's role. Steele castigates Yeltsin for failing to push towards Western-style democracy—yet the whole tenor of his analysis is that Russian political culture is barely capable of sustaining democracy. Indeed, his main point is that the "eternal Russia" of servility and passivity remains quite alive in the hearts and minds of today's Russians. Steele even notes that Soviet society was far too atomized, and Russian politics far too oriented around the personalities of individual politicians, to allow the construction of a coherent party system based upon well-defined interest groups.

If this is true, Yeltsin's attempts at providing a strong form of executive governance, and his refusal to stake his future on the formation of a political party dedicated to democratic reform, may have been a quite rational response to a bad situation. One is left wondering whether a different politician, one who followed Steele's strictures, would have produced any significantly better outcome.