

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Soviet Constitutional Crisis: From De-Stalinization to Disintegration.** By Robert Sharlet. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992. xii + 191 pp. \$ 49.95 ISBN 1-56324-063-7

**The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Politburo.** By John Löwenhardt, James R. Ozinga and Erik van Ree. London: UCL Press Limited, 1992. xix + 244 pp. £ 30 HB ISBN 1-85728-015-6

**Executive Power and Soviet Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Soviet State.** Edited by Eugene Huskey. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992. xiv + 282 pp. \$ 49.95 ISBN 1-56324-059-9

Two of the books reviewed here are by authors who have returned to subjects on which they have done distinguished work earlier. The third is a collection of essays by well-known specialists on politics and law in the former Soviet Union. It may be noted that all three books have the word "Soviet" in their titles, but also speak of "disintegration", "fall", and "decline", which testifies to the dizzying course of events with which the authors have had to contend.

Robert Sharlet produced *The New Soviet Constitution of 1977* in 1978. Its informative introduction, taken up largely with an account of the process by which the 1977 Constitution was adopted, was followed by the text of the Constitution itself, in which the differences between the draft version and the document as finally adopted were shown. Sharlet's present work is a much more ambitious effort. Here he looks at constitutional reform through a much longer time frame, providing brief sketches of the late tsarist and early Soviet periods before focussing on the main subject of analysis.

Some readers may tend to forget that the constitution which served as the basis for the creation of Gorbachev's new state structures was the document adopted in 1977 under Brezhnev. Gorbachev and others sought to create a new basic law, but nothing was achieved before the USSR's demise at the end of 1991. So the main part of the book begins with the Brezhnev Constitution, the subject covered so thoroughly by Sharlet in 1978.

A chapter on "The Andropov-Chernenko Interregnum" deals less with constitutional change (there was little during this period) than with legal and political developments. It concentrates largely on Andropov's harsh treatment of dissidents and efforts to increase labor discipline and on Chernenko's temporizing on these and other issues.

By far the most interesting part of the book is on the Gorbachev period, what Sharlet calls the "Soviet constitutional crisis". Here every law-related issue of consequence during Gorbachev's seven years in power is covered. We get Sharlet's analysis of the many positive developments – the effort to

create a "law-based state", the enhancement of judicial review of official acts, the empowerment of constitutionally-created bodies such as the new parliament. But the author does not stint in discussing the down side of Gorbachev's actions in the legal field – his clumsy handling of the secession issue, the "war of laws", the seeming lawlessness of the OMON troops, Prime Minister Pavlov's attempt at a "constitutional coup", etc. The author believes that Gorbachev's efforts at constitutional reform led him into a political labyrinth: reliance on the development of constitutional supremacy created the conditions for constitutional disorder and ultimately led to Gorbachev's loss of both job and country.

Sharlet's account is both thorough and gracefully written. He is able to turn a phrase effectively, as when he discusses a "muted" Soviet separation of powers, a "work in progress". My only quibble with the book is its rather artificial conclusion, as the author seeks to stretch his analysis to cover the demise of the USSR and the rise of the successor states that took its place. This part, written in conditional tones, has the appearance of having been tacked on and lacks the sureness and analytical quality of the rest of the book. One can understand why the author would want to make his treatise as up-to-date as possible, but the work's focus is on the period prior to the Soviet Union's disintegration, and that is its strength.

John Löwenhardt, the senior author of *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Politburo*, published *The Soviet Politburo* in 1982. That book contained some historical analysis, but the historical section in the 1992 volume is considerably more comprehensive. It provides an examination of Politburo developments under every top leader through Gorbachev. Although the authors worked closely together on the volume, most of the chapters are associated principally with one author. The historical chapters were written largely by van Ree, and the section of Part II on the social, geographic, ethnic and other characteristics of Politburo members was done by Ozinga. Löwenhardt's main contribution is a section called "The Politburo at Work". This analysis, also largely historical in approach, examines an array of matters connected with the functioning of the Politburo, including its relationship to other Party and government organs, most notably the Secretariat and the Defense Council. It also sets forth what is known about procedures and other features of Politburo meetings. All of this is described in detail, employing tabular information where useful. A large part of the information was made available only recently and, as the authors inform the reader in the Introduction, among a number of useful sources was the revived journal *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* (for some reason translated by the authors as *Tidings of the CPSU Central Committee*).

Although the book concludes its analysis before the demise of the USSR (and, with it, the CPSU), it does cover the naming of the last Politburo at the end of the 28th Party Congress in 1990. But how long ago that was in the fast-forward times of that area of the world! The authors tell us that in 1989 the