Marie Mendras asserts a clear, provocative, and tightly argued thesis: The processes that developed Russia’s powerful authoritarian autocracy created a weak state. The book thematically details the legacy of Russian imperial and Soviet history, the liberalization processes under Gorbachev, their decline that began in 1993, and the power consolidation that weakened the state. Using a narrative framework and well-grounded resources, Mendras forcefully and compellingly demonstrates Russia’s often paradoxical politics and Vladimir Putin’s consolidation of power at the expense of strong state institutions.

The book expertly explores the relationship between Russia’s state and society, and illustrates its historically multi-national conception and contemporary elite driven view. Leaders bloated an already opaque bureaucracy, removed public institutional channels, increased military, FSB, and police forces, decreased information exchange, and dramatically bent the rule of law. These factors not only fostered social mistrust and increased inward and outward fears, but also physically coercive institutions remained robust, while the apparatuses and people necessary to govern a dynamic society and economy were less efficient, absent, or highly corrupt. Nevertheless, Mendras argues that the latter provides extensive individual autonomy and a creeping challenge to state authority. In doing so, the author proactively opposes both the perception that Russia is a strong state and a ‘democracy with adjectives’.

The first chapter illustrates Russians’ historic relationship to various institutions. The author argues that the relationship was often bound by domestic influence, Russian identity, trust, and conceptions of governance and state. Most strikingly, Mendras contends that the Russian state’s primary legacy is its continually re-written history. For example, Tsars fostered an outward looking imperial state conception (p. 21), but the Bolsheviks generated a ‘countryless state’ (p. 32) and Stalin provoked Russian patriotism to help fight World War II (p. 33). Maintaining the legacy and capitalizing on Russian pride, both Yeltsin and Putin denied the imperial multi-national history and evoked nationalism and a revival of the ‘strong nation’ (p. 25). Revealing the often fabricated past,
Mendras not only stresses leaders’ deliberate misdirection and manipulation, but also the vertical influence defining Russia’s state-society relationships.

The section is well argued and highly informative, but leaves the reader wondering, why we would expect a traditionally problematic and at times non-existent state to become strong. While Mendras alludes to possible answers, a direct causal discussion of Russia’s weak state past and its contemporary configuration would likely only bolster her claims.

Moving across time, Mendras divides Russian modern history into three periods: the liberalization begun under Gorbachev (1986–1993), Yeltsin’s violent and anti-democratic behavior and policies (1993–2000), and Putin’s autocratic consolidation from 2000 forward. While the author succinctly moves between methods, she primarily uses inductive processes to tell the story. She demonstrates that the Soviet’s failure to modernize resulted in numerous problems (closed off from the world, disinformation, dysfunctional economy, poorly understood domestic issues, prolonged wars, and a growing technology gap), which prompted Gorbachev’s ‘restrained’ reforms (i.e. Perestroika and Glasnost) and Russia’s greater openness to foreign influence (p. 45–49). Combined with substantial miss-information, reforms excluded local leaders, which generated inadequate policy changes and a desire for elites to maintain power by rallying their respective republics (p. 50–51). By the time Moscow could act through violent or peaceful political channels, the republics were sufficiently mobilized and the Soviet Union’s reconciliation was not possible.

What differentiates Mendras’ account from others is the state focus, which highlights that without its intricate parts – the “unwieldy system of republican, regional and local organization” – the Soviet state did not exist (p. 49). She attributes the absence of violence to Gorbachev’s personal aversions, his desire to maintain perestroika’s progress, and fear that the fight would be at his Moscow door (p. 54), and overlooks, what Valarie Bunce (1999) partially argued, that the absence of the Soviet state likely meant the absence of a monopoly on legitimate coercion. In other words, violence was not an option for Soviet leaders (i.e. Gorbachev), and only the liberal electoral and deliberative republic institutions that defeated the Soviet state remained intact. Consequently, Mendras inadvertently and structurally illustrates Yeltsin’s non-violent democratic rise to power.

While liberal progress continued until 1993, Mendras contends that the long Tsarist and Soviet history generated unusual conceptions of property and trust, which produced poorly prepared elites working in a swiftly changing environment (p. 58–59). She leverages Platonic and Aristotelian political theory to demonstrate that “private property and law are inseparable”, and that the obscure post-Soviet Russian property rights and low trust levels generated