William Zimmerman’s *Ruling Russia* is an ambitious effort to analyze the historical evolution of the Soviet/Russian political system, starting in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. It centers around a fundamental question: “Is Russia, was it, or will it ever be a normal country?” (p. 1). Zimmerman acknowledges that different interpretations of “normal”—to some it meant stability and security, to others it meant something similar to the West—arose in different time periods. Distinguishing among democratic, competitive authoritarian, “full” authoritarian, and totalitarian systems, Zimmerman seeks to demonstrate not only that the Soviet/Russian system has evolved and experienced all of these regime types (with the democratic period in the 1990s the shortest-lived), but that one can employ “normal” social science concepts to explain what has at times been portrayed as a unique and exceptional case.

The book analyzes both leadership and state-society dynamics from the time of Lenin through Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012. Zimmerman draws attention to the changing composition of the “selectorate,” the institution or group empowered to choose the leadership and hold it accountable. While under high Stalinism in the late 1930s the selectorate diminished in size to a single person (Stalin), Zimmerman demonstrates that for much of Soviet history the selectorate was larger and that oligarchic norms and intra-elite divisions were commonplace. Zimmerman rejects viewing the Soviet regime through a monolithic, deterministic, ideological lens. By examining how leaders and institutions respond to changing circumstances, he demonstrates that ideological imperatives, such as egalitarianism or rejection of nationalism, could be dispensed with. Instead, the focus is on critical junctures in Soviet/post-Soviet history, during which the regime type was modified and the leadership found itself—or managed to put itself—in a more or less constrained position. For most of the Soviet period, however, Zimmerman suggests that the Soviet Union best approximated a “full” (normal) authoritarian system. This was most clear in the aftermath of Stalin, for once terror, the “linchpin” of the totalitarian system, was removed, a more “textured social system” emerged that allowed some institutionalized groups to express political views and excluded some spheres (e.g. the family) from strict state control (p. 147). Gorbachev attempted to expand, albeit in an unclear and contradictory manner, the selectorate, trying to square the circle in which the system would become more democratic but he (if not the Party itself) would remain in
control. Yeltsin, at least in the early 1990s, managed to establish some rudimentary elements of democracy upon the ruins of the Soviet system. This has now been undone by Putin, whose machinations are progressively bringing Russia closer to a “full” authoritarian system as opposed to the “competitive authoritarian” regime he inherited in 2000. However, one could argue that Putin’s regime—characterized by controls over the media, graft, occasional coercion against political opponents—is a rather “normal,” authoritarian regime, focusing (as did Brezhnev) on stability and security.

Zimmerman is a political scientist, but much of the book is historical. Almost half is devoted to the immediate post-revolutionary period and the Stalin period. Gorbachev and Yeltsin each rate a chapter; Putin gets two. Zimmerman makes liberal use of secondary sources written by eminent Western scholars (e.g. Merle Fainsod, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Robert Tucker, Timothy Colton), as well as employing more obscure Soviet sources to good effect. While much of the general narrative conforms to standard treatments of Soviet history (e.g. Stalin’s control over personnel was central to his rise, Gorbachev’s reforms emerge out of a sense of systemic crisis), there are also nuggets of information and arguments that may be new to many readers. Some, such as the fact that some Soviet leaders in the 1930s encouraged production of ketchup and “good beer” (p. 108) to encourage a consumer lifestyle, make for interesting trivia. Others have more import. For example, Zimmerman details the “Lominadze-Syrtsov affair” of 1930 to argue that during this time the Soviet leadership was not that different from a typical junta and tantalizingly suggests (albeit briefly) a counterfactual history in which Stalin’s power diminishes. Similar thought experiments or musings occur throughout the book, including what might have emerged had Gorbachev’s opponents not launched the ill-fated coup in 1991. These observations reinforce the notion that there was indeterminacy in the evolution of the Soviet system.

Zimmerman wrote this book in 2013, in the aftermath of Putin’s return to the presidency and a new round of protests by thousands of Russians demanding greater freedoms. One could argue that the 2011–2012 electoral cycle may have marked another critical juncture. Zimmerman makes much of these events, seeing them as a possible harbinger for change in a more democratic direction. He “sticks his neck out” (p. 290) to envision the immediate future of Russia, and sees “signs of political life” (p. 308). My own reading is that Zimmerman really wants to be optimistic based on what he admits was the surprise of mobilization against Putin in 2011–2012. However, he ultimately concedes that Russia still lacks basic democratic building blocks (e.g. a credible opposition party), and employs public opinion data to point to the weakness of a broader “democratic political culture” among Russians. Thus, barring some