Edward Cohn


*The High Title of a Communist* by Edward Cohn is a welcome new book on a rather neglected topic of the Communist party in the post-wwii period. It deals with three main themes: the impact of the Great Patriotic War on Soviet society, the continuity between late Stalinism and Khrushchev’s Thaw, and the role of the Communist Party’s disciplinary practices in shaping post-war social and political norms.

The monograph carries on a recent trend in the scholarship by focusing on the continuity between the late Stalinist period and the Khrushchev era. The chosen chronological framework of 1945 to 1964 shapes the argument of the book, while by singling out WWII as the principal watershed in Soviet history it continues the trend set by scholars such as Stephen Lovell in ‘The Shadow of War’ or works by Geoffrey Hosking before that.¹

There are welcome comparisons with the rest of post-wwii Europe, particularly in Chapter 2, which discusses the Communist Party policy towards communists who lived in occupied territories. Similarly, post-war attitudes to gender are treated from a broad comparative perspective, as are changing attitudes to corruption discussed below.

Most of the monograph, however, is focused on much narrower disciplinary practices in the Communists Party during this period. There is a detailed breakdown of the hierarchy of party punishments, illustrated by a number of individual cases, plenty of quantitative data on party membership and expulsion rates.

The core argument is the transformation of the Communist Party from a revolutionary party into a party of power closely linked to the Soviet administrative apparatus (p. 17). This is not a new argument, for example, Leon Trotsky’s critique of Stalin went along similar lines, but Cohn argues that the final transformation happened precisely in the period under consideration. This was due to several factors, such as the death of old communists in the war, a greater influx of new members (e.g. 20% growth in 1945–53 and 60% growth in 1953–64, from 6.9 to 11 million members), as well as the party’s increasingly middle class membership; *sluzhachshie* (the Soviet term for white collar workers) already constituted 46.7% of membership in 1945 (p. 21).

The evolution of Party attitudes towards political beliefs and activities of its members is discussed in Chapter 3. In keeping with the main narrative of evolution, as opposed to a radical break under Khrushchev, Cohn argues that already after 1945 there was considerably less interest in political loyalty of party members, as the party no longer prioritized investigation of social origins or the political orthodoxy of the rank and file: “unless they were Jewish, rank and file Communists were less likely to be expelled because of their political views or social class than at any time since the revolution” (p. 84). Instead, education, training and nationality became important factors in determining party membership. In fact, this change is traced to the Eighteenth Party Congress of 1939, which signaled an end to mass purges and a broader acceptance of white collar workers into the party, for example, by eliminating a bias in membership admission requirements based on social background which had privileged the working class (p. 13).

One aspect of the party evolution in the post-war period that could have been given more detailed analysis was the Nineteenth Party Congress, particularly the re-launch of party revivalism. As Yoram Gorlizki argued, this in many ways laid the groundwork for Khrushchev era’s focus on the Communist party as the stimulant to other social and economic institutions and reforms. Given its focus on the continuity between late Stalin and Khrushchev, a discussion of the party revivalism would further strengthen Cohn’s overall argument.

One of the distinct features of the Khrushchev period was the rehabilitation of Stalin’s victims. Cohn draws attention to an important distinction between a legal rehabilitation by the state, and a separate process of readmission into the Communist Party. Despite large scale legal rehabilitations of Stalin’s victims, very few of them were allowed to become Party members again. The Committee of Party Control (the КПК, the highest disciplinary body in the КПСС) restored to the party 5,000 purge victims in 1956–60, with further 30,000 reinstated or posthumously rehabilitated by lower level party committees. As Cohn notes, rehabilitation was biased toward former high-ranking officials with some 70% of rehabilitated communists being ‘leading workers’, as members of номенклатура were known (p. 97).

The low number of re-instated ordinary communists is explained by the fact that most of individual rehabilitation initiative had to come from below, while facing substantial bureaucratic hurdles. In keeping with the traditional criticism of Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization as being selective for political reasons, Cohn notes there was virtually no one rehabilitated who had been expelled prior to 1937, the start of the Great Purge.

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