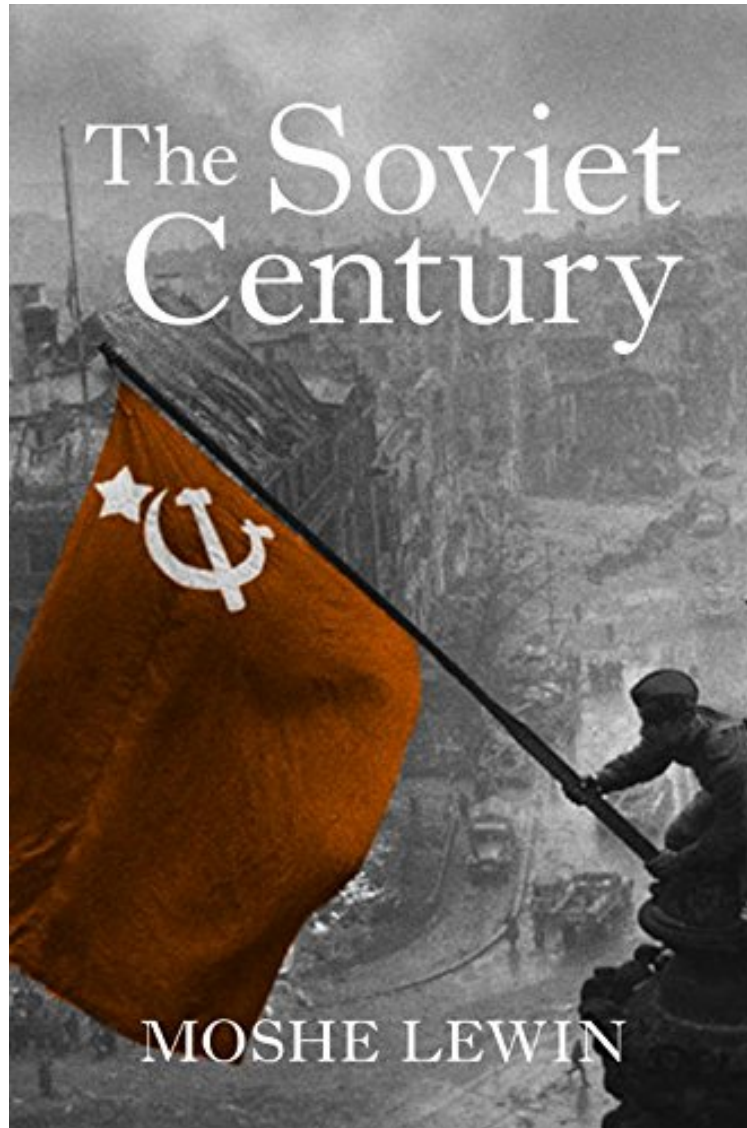


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The Soviet Century

Moshe Lewin

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Moshe Lewin : The Soviet Century before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Soviet Century:

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Unpolished, yet priceless By C. E. R. Mendonça The only problem with Professor Lewin's work is the fact that the author chose not to have a continuously flowing text, as the book unfolds as a series of chapters of uneven length, dealing with case-studies of various issues, mostly about the post-Stalin period of Soviet history. Therefore the book cannot be treated as a reference work for the whole of the period covered. However, there is so much in the book to be offered praise for: firstly, its skillful use of recently available

documents in order to develop original observations about the history of the late URSS; second, its refusal of anti-communist mythologizing; thirdly, its concentration on the internal dilemmas facing Soviet bureaucracy rule as it had to face an ever-increasing crisis of legitimacy, even amid a process of sharp (relative) political liberalization. It's not the best written book on the subject, but it compensates in content what it lacks in style. 18 of 20 people found the following review helpful. An excellent and honest overview

By M. A. Krul Lewin has outdone himself in this overview of the history of the USSR. Some potential readers might perhaps be somewhat dismayed by the fact that this book was published with radical leftist publisher Verso, but have no fears: this is no apologia for totalitarianism. On the contrary, Lewin gives a balanced and very thorough overview of each of the periods of Soviet history, beginning with its Leninist inception and ending with Gorbachov. Most of the book deals with his description of the Stalinist period, and this is also the book's main strength. On the one hand Lewin effortlessly dispels the myths around the gigantic numbers of deaths that have been 'credited' to Stalin by less informed writers such as Conquest and Montefiore; using both statistical records of Chruschov's period (hardly a fan of Stalin) and the most up-to-date Russian research by Khlevniuk and others, he shows that in fact the death toll of Stalin will have been in the millions rather than tens of millions. Nevertheless, that is evil enough, and Lewin has no qualms in showing the horrid, oppressive and stifling side of communism. Not only Stalin gets this deserved treatment, but Brezhnev and similar people equally. Lewin also takes the time to look at the development of various socio-economic factors in Soviet history, such as the too often overlooked effects of rapid urbanization in the 1970s. The only downside of the book will be to some that it pays relatively little attention to World War II, preferring instead to concentrate on the political and social history of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the best in its kind, and far to be preferred over more mainstream works. 24 of 24 people found the following review helpful. Focuses on the key features of the Soviet Union

By David Schaich For those already familiar with the history of the USSR, Moshe Lewin's "The Soviet Century" is a very exciting book. Instead of offering a comprehensive overview of Soviet history, Lewin focuses on the aspects of the country and its system that have been neglected by previous scholarship. Amazingly, he identifies these phenomena as central to actually understanding the Soviet Union, and blames their neglect on both the unavailability of the relevant documents as well as plain "ideological frenzy" (1). Promising not "to play the role of counsel for the prosecution or for the defence" (274-5), Lewin bases his book almost exclusively on recent Russian-language scholarship dealing with the newly-discovered documents, hinting at a more comprehensive future work that will incorporate English-language scholarship as well. Lewin focuses primarily on the means through which the rulers of the Soviet Union controlled the country and their subordinates. The first of three parts, "A Regime and its Psyche", focuses on Stalin, how he obtained absolute power, and how he protected it through purges, terror and elaborate structures of control over the party and bureaucracy. It begins in the 1920s with the "de-politicization" of the Communist Party, its abandonment of socialism and absorption by the bureaucracy. Lewin explores in great detail the apparatus set up by Stalin to control the Party, especially the NKVD and its "industrial empire" of labor camps (113). He concludes by characterizing Stalin's rule as an "agrarian despotism", a combination of old-style Tsarism with a new focus on industrialization (146). "Focused on the cult of a supreme leader", it was "a despotism that allowed free range to one individual's delirium... and a huge repressive system" (147). The second part of the book, "The 1960s and Beyond: From a New Model to a New Impasse", focuses on the second great neglected aspect of Soviet history, the bureaucracy, which cemented its hold on power after Stalin's death, despite efforts by Khrushchev and some others to put the Party back on top. The result was "bureaucratic absolutism... much more modern than that of the Tsars or Stalin [but of] the same species" (380). Lewin includes in this section a lot of nitty-gritty details of the structure and functioning of various bureaucratic institutions (especially Gosplan and Gosstab), and also profiles some post-Stalinist leaders such as Kosygin, Andropov, Mikoyan, Khrushchev and Gromyko. In addition, he addresses the "avalanche of urbanization" (202) and other social development in these decades. Themes such as urbanization and long-term developments in society are the focus of the third and final part, "The Soviet Century: Russia in Historical Context". This section is in many ways the most interesting, as it addresses thematic issues over the whole of soviet history: backwardness, modernity, urbanization, bureaucracy, demography, etc. Lewin describes "a social and cultural landscape undergoing massive changes" (319) and criticizes other authors for focusing exclusively on the regime and its leaders, as though Soviet society did not exist or were unimportant. Lewin also criticizes those who tend to "Over-Staliniz[e] the whole of Soviet history, by extending it backwards and forwards", and he argues that the changes following Stalin's death "should be acknowledged, and not dismissed with contempt on the grounds that a democratic system offers much more" (324). He distinguishes two different comparisons that can be made: between the Soviet Union and the democratic West, and between Stalinism and the bureaucratic stagnation that followed it, when "improvement in social conditions" (324) led to high levels of development in terms of "demography, education, health, urbanization, [and] the role of science" (373), which were to positively decline during the 1990s. "The Soviet Century", though focusing for the most part on nitty-gritty details of apparatus and bureaucracy, deals with the largest questions of the central nature of the Soviet Union. Thus Lewin can conclude that the sorry story of the Soviet Union "cannot be described as the 'failure of socialism', because socialism was not there in the first place" (308) and that the USSR never actually "represented the alternative to capitalism it sometimes claimed to be" (359). It should be of great interest to all students of the history

and nature of the Soviet Union.

On the centenary of the Russian Revolution, a classic history of the Soviet era, from 1917 to its fall One hundred years after the Russian Revolution the Soviet Union remains the most extraordinary, yet tragic, attempt to create a society beyond capitalism. Yet its history was one that for a long time proved impossible to write. In *The Soviet Century*, Moshe Lewin follows this history in all its complexity, guiding us through the inner workings of a system which is still barely understood. In the process he overturns widely held beliefs about the USSR's leaders, the State-Party system and the powerful Soviet bureaucracy. Departing from a simple linear history, *The Soviet Century* traces all the continuities and ruptures that led from the founding revolution of October 1917 to the final collapse of the late 1980s and early 1990s, passing through the Stalinist dictatorship, the impossible reforms of the Khrushchev years and the glasnost and perestroika policies of Gorbachev.

“Probably no other Western historian of the USSR combines Moshe Lewin’s personal experience of living with Russians from Stalin’s day—as a young wartime soldier—to the post-communist era, with so profound a familiarity with the archives and the literature of the Soviet era. His reflections on the ‘Soviet Century’ are an important contribution to emancipating Soviet history from the ideological heritage of the last century and should be essential reading for all who wish to understand it.” —Eric Hobsbawm “Rich in its insights and original in its perspectives, Moshe Lewin’s superb new book provides a master-class in understanding the structures and intricate workings of the Soviet system.” —Ian Kershaw “The Soviet Century is an original and stimulating survey, packed with insights and information, by an outstanding historian. It will enlighten both specialists and general readers about a crucial aspect of the modern world.” —R. W. Davies “Moshe Lewin ... has written a book of gripping scholarship. In *The Soviet Century* he shows that the world cannot turn its back on Russia's past, and neither Russians nor anyone else should try to do so. As Lewin writes, the Soviet system may be dead and buried but it lives on in Russia's search for a national identity. This search needs to be based on the truth, good or bad, about what happened under Communism. *The Soviet Century* is an excellent place to look for it.” —Mark Harrison “With the benefit of hindsight and new archival sources, he strips the Stalin and subsequent Khrushchev–Brezhnev eras down to their defining nature. Much more than just an acute, resonant echo of the past.” —Foreign Affairs “A pioneer in the historical study of the Soviet Union, Moshe Lewin brought to Soviet historiography his personal experiences, political convictions, and deep analytical insights into the Leninist and Stalinist revolutions ... a master at original conceptualizations of the evolution of the Soviet experiment.” —Ronald Grigor Suny, *History Workshop Journal*

About the Author Moshe Lewin was a hugely respected historian of the Soviet Union. Professor of Soviet Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, his books include *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* and *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia*.