

Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, Ed. Black Inc, Columbia, 2022, 256 p.

The shortest History of the Soviet Union, written by Sheila Fitzpatrick, was published in the year of 2022, at the Black Inc. Books publishing house. The author is an illustrious historian of Austrian origins, whose main subjects of research include the history of the Soviet Union and of modern Russia. She is the leader of the revisionist school of history, applying in her works the perspective of *history from below*. She is also a Professor at the Australian Catholic University of Melbourne, Honorary Professor at Sidney University and Merituous Professor at Chicago University.

The present work integrates 256 pages and is divided in seven chapters that present the history of the Soviet Union, starting with how it was founded after the First World War and until its fall, in 1991.

Sheila Fitzpatrick's approach is born from numerous years of experience in the research of the Soviet Union. She intended and managed to create a well-structured synthesis of the history of the U.S.S.R., allowing both young historians and amateurs to enrich their knowledge on the subject. We must mention however that this book comes in the context of a larger series planned by the publishing house of Black Inc., which focuses on such succinct, short works. Professor Fitzpatrick's book comes as the sixth in the series. We can also mention that a short text on the history of today's Russia comes at a great time, taking into consideration the Russian aggression in Ukraine, in 2022.

Right from the introductory chapter, the author suggests a scientific approach. She intends through this book to deny the existence of an inevitability of events, inevitability many would take for granted. To be more precise, even though the work is titled as *the shortest history*, it is intended to help understand how all events are random, impossible to truly predict – death, pandemics, natural hazards etc. can all generate a major change in human history, an applicable thesis on the history of the Soviet Union as well.

Like this, we reach the exposition of the soviet tragicomedy. It is the story of those who dedicated themselves to subjugating nature and economy to the human species, at least theoretically. The Bolsheviki were the most surprised by their own rise to power in October 1917, as according to Marxist theory the Russian society was not ready for a communist state. Marx's theory of historical materialism states that societies pass through six stages: primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism and finally a global and stateless communism. Russia did not even reach capitalism.

Moreover, Sheila Fitzpatrick starts from the double question *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*⁷. She sets aside the second part of the question, but she does not intend to offer a typical philosophical or political science answer for the first part either. Her approach is that of a Historical Anthropologist, like she herself declares. That is why she tries to show us how instead of a textbook socialism, the Soviet Union was witness to a more realist Socialism, adapted to historical events, *a really existing socialism*. Of course, what followed Socialism was often disputed in historiography. The Soviet Union left behind a complex situation that exceeded the simple division of states and nation of Eastern Europe. Like Katherine Verdery exemplifies in her article from 1994, *Beyond the Nation in Eastern Europe*, the situation created by the U.S.S.R. on such a vast territory was a transcendence of the ethnic and national *statu quo*, each nation now having more profound connections to each other. This state was even more accentuated when it comes to examples such as Romania-Moldova or Ukraine-Russia, where the time spent under the same flag offers both parts arguments for and against reunification.

Getting back to our subject, Fitzpatrick tries in the beginning to succinctly decode the Bolshevik and later Socialist mentality which in theory argued how the new state was different than the Tsarist Empire, but in reality, was more similar than not. This irony is revealed to us in the best way possible by the author – through dark humor jokes told in the times long past of the Soviet era. An example from the pages of the book is *What is the difference between capitalism and socialism? / Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man, and socialism is its replacement by its opposite*⁸. This type of irony is present throughout the entire text, an element that makes its perusal so much more pleasant.

An important aspect of this work is the time in which it was published. Shortly after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict of 2022 Fitzpatrick brings the public this book, allowing a clearer understanding of the long-term origins of the event and of the two states' relation. Two nations, with two different people and cultures, differences between them existed from before 1917 and they materialized even then, through the actions of the Ukrainian peasant army of Nestor Makhno, who fought against both the Whites and the Reds.

The book continues in the same spirit with an overview of the first five-year plan of Stalin, with the hunger that followed and with a theory forwarded by the nowadays Ukrainian government – they argue how Stalin planned specifically the killing of Ukrainians in those years. The

⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, Black Inc, Columbia, 2022, p. 11

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 10

event is called *Holodomor* and it is perceived as an important step in the identity separation of Ukrain from the Core of U.S.S.R.⁹. Even though Fitzpatrick argues that similar events took place in other regions such as Kazakhstan, she seems to support the theory in which the killing of Ukrainians was intended by Stalin. There are opposing views in historiography, such as Stephen Kotkin. In his second volume of Stalin's biography, *Stalin: Volume II: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941* (2017), he brings forward the argument that because such events took place in more than one region, it cannot be said that Stalin targeted Ukrainians on purpose.

This is only one case of many in the book where the Historical-Anthropological perspective of the revisionist school is visible. Even though the reduced dimension of the book determines Fitzpatrick to focus on the *history from above* of the leaders of the Soviet Union and of the main historical events, she does capture the social history that gravitates said events too.

The book goes over the creation of U.S.S.R., over the epochs of Lenin, Stalin, of the Second World War and of the fall of the Soviet Union. In the end, as a form of conclusions, she offers an even shorter account of the events that took place in Russia, in the last three decades.

What proves that the book is not destined necessarily to experienced scholars of this field, but to those who wish to step for the first time on the territory of soviet history is the list of papers and books meant for further reading. At its beginning, Fitzpatrick declares that she does not offer the entire bibliography used for this work. We can perceive this as an intention to help the neophytes of this field to begin their own journey in the research of soviet history.

The ample portrait of the U.S.S.R. is completed in the mind of the reader by a plethora of images, photographs, portraits, caricatures and so on, with the purpose of offering more colour to the soviet landscape the book offers. With this in mind, Fitzpatrick enlarges our understanding of the soviet leaders by offering us some of their quotes and sayings, proportionally spread over the entirety of the seven chapters. For example, we are presented Trotsky's opinion vis-à-vis his colleague, Stalin, describing him as a *cruel man, a creature of bureaucracy*. Useful for inexperienced historians and amateurs is the use of artistic works that add to the image we are presented. Such an example is the mentioning of the 2017 movie *The Death of Stalin*, directed by Armando Iannucci, where the tragicomedy of his death is ironically depicted.

Taking all of these into consideration, it is my opinion that the present book portrays itself as a key of understanding not only of soviet

⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union*, Ed. Black Inc, Columbia, 2022, p. 75

history, but also of the mentality and vision of Professor Sheila Fitzpatrick on the subjects previously mentioned. A life of work dedicated to this field of research allowed her to differentiate this paper from similar texts, as she manages to attract readers by using an accessible language and a succinct way of giving the facts. By also giving enough unique details and aspects about the subject at hand she makes this a truly enjoyable lecture. Last but not least the present Russian-Ukrainian altercation comes as an additional reason to read Fitzpatrick's synthesis in order to gain a clearer understanding.

TUDOR MUREȘAN

Faculty of History and Philosophy, "Babeș-Bolyai" University Cluj-Napoca

E-mail: tudor.muressan@gmail.com