Gerald M. Easter. *Reconstructing the State: Personal Networks and Elite Identity in Soviet Russia.* New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xiii + 221 pp. $54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-66085-3.

Reviewed by Nellie H. Ohr (McLean, Virginia)

Published on H-Russia (November, 2000)

Old Boys, Bureaucrats and the Rise and Fall of the Soviet State

Old Boys, Bureaucrats and the Rise and Fall of the Soviet State

"The Soviet Russian state. . . was a far cry from a rational-legal bureaucratic state. Beneath the formal facade of the monolithic party and the planned economy existed an informal world of cliques, factions, networks and druzhina [fighting brotherhood]. Power and status within the state elite derived as much from the workings of these informal groupings as they did from the formal lines of command" (p. 173)

Gerald Easter, a political scientist at Boston College, explores the relationship between formal organizations and informal network ties in the Soviet state. His detailed case study from the 1920s and 1930s should interest anyone who studies Soviet politics of that era. Others will want to read his lucid and engaging conclusions on the causes of the rise and fall of the Soviet state and on state-building in general.

As a case study, he analyzes a group of people who played a vital role in the Soviet state in the 1920s and 1930s. These were, in Easter's term, the Provincial komitetchiki": a cohort of Communist Party leaders who led committees of the revolutionary underground before 1917, who served together in the Civil War, and who worked as regional Party heads in the first decades of Soviet rule. They were linked by old ties of comradeship from the Civil War, and by a proud corporate identity, initially as fighters for the proletarian cause and later as economic managers.

These networks literally built the new Soviet state infrastructure. Personal contacts among these Party officials in regional capitals and with their comrades in Moscow enabled these Provincial Komitetchiki to extend the state's reach throughout the country's vast territory. At the same time, they enabled the men to avoid control by central authorities. Easter demonstrates this through a case study of the Transcaucasian regional network, which included Sergei Kirov and Sergo Ordzhonikidze (pp. 82-88).

By the 1930s, however, conflicts over Stalin's forced industrialization program showed that this cohort was developing a corporate consciousness and a sense of its own interests as distinct from those of Moscow. A high point in this trend, Easter argues, was the attempted "palace coup" of 1934, when several Provincial Komitetchiki participated in an attempt to replace Stalin with Kirov at the head of the Party (pp. 142, 165). In response, central leaders "concocted their own plan to redefine the constraints of power to their own advantage" (p. 143). In the mid-1930s "central leaders systematically worked to decouple informal network ties from formal positions of power and to undermine the status image of the Provincial Komitetchiki...thus setting the stage for a direct confrontation that ultimately led not just to the political removal, but to the physical destruction of the Provincial Komitetchiki" in 1937-38 (p. 141). As a result, Easter argues, "a regime type emerged that more closely resembled Stalin's vision of a bureaucratic absolutist state than the regional elite's protocorporatist

state" (p. 17, 165).

In his cogent conclusion – the most tightly written part of the book – Easter summarizes the historical case study and applies his model to the Soviet experience as a whole and to other examples of state-building. Despite Stalin's despotism, a personalistic " 'patrimonial' system of infrastructural power" existed throughout the Soviet era (p. 166). While the particular balance of forces between Moscow and the regional elites varied, constraints on state power did exist and were "rooted in the informal 'forces from within' " (p. 168) By the 1980s the network-based infrastructure was fundamentally different from that of the 1920s, however, and in fact contributed to the downfall of the Soviet system. This was because the networks of local officials under Brezhnev and Gorbachev were focused "inward," remaining geographically and psychologically isolated from other networks. When Gorbachev tried to uproot this "patrimonial" system and was unable to build a "bureaucratic" system to replace it, "The state was left without its underlying, informal administrative support structure" and could not enforce Gorbachev's reforms in the regions. "In this way the diffusion of power along informal lines was a precondition of state collapse. From this perspective it can be argued that the Soviet state eventually fell apart along the same lines upon which it had been built six decades earlier" (p. 170).

Generalizing from the Soviet case, Easter argues that "when this intersection [between formal organizations and informal network ties] exhibited an 'outward' structure the state's administrative capacity was strengthened, but when it exhibited an 'inward' structure it was weakened" (p. 172).

Putting his case study in a larger perspective of postcolonial statebuilding, Easter argues against the received wisdom that state-building requires building up rational bureaucratic states at the expense of "patrimonial" personalistic power. Indeed, he cites research showing that in both Israel and China, for example, "outwardly structured network ties were a necessary element of successful state building" (p. 172).

In contrast to those who view Soviet history as moving in response to forces "from above" (Stalin) or "from below" (the masses), Easter allies himself with those scholars who see forces at work "from within" the system. While his emphasis on patron-client ties and other personal relationships is not new, Easter distinguishes himself from those scholars – ranging from Merle Fainsod to J. Arch Getty – who view these informal networks primarily as a hindrance to efficient governance. Easter's study builds, rather, on the work of T. H. Rigby and Graeme Gill, who view personal networks as central to the workings of the system. He points out that even these scholars failed to explain how personal networks could have contributed to state-building initially and then be brutally decimated during the Great Terror. Easter's work attempts to answer these and other questions. He summarizes the "three innovations" of his work: "(1) elite identity as a source of autonomy of regional leaders, (2) alternative types of personal networks [in addition to patron-client relationships], and (3) personal networks as a means of facilitating state capacity" (p. 29).

The intertwining of personal relationships with official structures in the Soviet Union is central to other phenomena explored by economists, sociologists and historians. Examples include the "second economy," described by Gregory Grossman and others; the ramifications of *blat* or "pull," explored most recently in Alena Ledeneva's *Russia's Economy of Favors* (Cambridge, 1998); and the effects of "social capital," which dozens of scholars have addressed, for example in a 1997 conference at the Kennan Institute entitled "Civil Society, Social Capital and Development in Eurasia." Recent studies by historians also reveal the centrality of personal networks. Barbara B. Walker at the University of Nevado in Reno, working on literary circles, shows the political ramifications of personal links spanning the Revolution. Walker's magisterial review essay on personalized political and economic ties in recent Soviet historiography will be forthcoming in April 2001 in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. My own work on collective farm and rural soviet officials in the mid-1930s argues for a concept of "local politics" in the sense of a struggle among networks to control resources, information and power (Nellie H. Ohr, "Clans, Brigades and Mafias: Politics and Family in Rural Western Russia, 1933-1937," book manuscript). While my own work focuses on competition and conflict, Easter has chosen to highlight the cohesion within the networks of Provincial Apparatchiki, acknowledging but not focusing on areas of conflict such as institutional and regional rivalries and power struggles among networks.

Easter deals with many subjects that remain controversial. While he cannot fully substantiate his version of key events in the 1930s, he bravely and gracefully fits them into his overarching conceptual framework.

One example is the attempted "palace coup" of 1934. Basing his account on memoirs written late in life by

Nikita Khrushchev, Anastas Mikoian and Viacheslav Molotov, Easter admits that facts on this episode are sketchy. Interpretations will continue to vary on what actually occurred and what it meant. Easter's attempt to fit this episode into his scenario of a rise in corporate consciousness is thought-provoking. He argues that the backgrounds of the alleged conspirators back up his points about center-regional conflict and personal network ties (p. 142). Similarly, in his analysis of the March 1937 Party Congress as a flash-point in the center-periphery struggle (pp.150s), he argues that the statements made by some Provincial Komitetchiki at the congress revealed their self-image and aspirations. While appealing, this interpretation can also be disputed: public statements made in the 1930s are more likely to have been calculated strategies for political advantage or survival.

In speaking of the "systematic" attempts by central leaders to weaken the Provincial Apparatchiki, Easter seems to ally himself with those scholars who say Stalin planned a crescendo of attacks on elites, beginning in 1934 and culminating in the Great Terror of 1937-38. However, he does not enter into debates on the personal role of Stalin, and his brief sketch of measures taken by "central leaders," which relies on secondary sources, does not exclude the possibility of ad hoc decision-making. [Debates on the Terror can be sampled in J. Arch Getty and Roberta Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1993)].

As a historian, I have some quibbles with Easter's use of sources. For example, his analysis of the self-image of the Provincial Apparatchiki relies heavily on a set of questionnaires filled out by many of these men as they applied to enter the Society of Old Bolsheviks (pp. 40s-50s). He does not specify the date and circumstances in which they filled out the questionnaire, but these would have helped the reader identify the political and rhetorical micro-climate in which his subjects molded their self-presentation. In another example, some of the tables illustrating network ties among Provincial Komitetchiki are poorly labeled and documented. The tables on pp. 81 and 99 consist of arrays of 1's and 0's, presumably to show personal links among particular people. However, the meaning of these numerals, and how he derived them, are unclear. More perspective on these sources would have helped the reader evaluate his historical judgments.

Despite these flaws, this book is a valuable window onto the "underworld of personalistic relations" (p.174) that formed an integral part of the fabric of the Soviet state.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia

Citation: Nellie H. Ohr. Review of Easter, Gerald M., *Reconstructing the State: Personal Networks and Elite Identity in Soviet Russia.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. November, 2000.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4714