



A History of Modern Russia: From Nicholas II to Vladimir Putin

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Russia had an extraordinary twentieth century, undergoing upheaval and transformation. Updating his acclaimed *History of Twentieth-Century Russia* through 2002, Robert Service provides a panoramic perspective on a country whose Soviet past encompassed revolution, civil war, mass terror, and two world wars. He shows how seven decades of communist rule, which penetrated every aspect of Soviet life, continue to influence Russia today. This new edition also discusses continuing economic and social difficulties at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the military campaign in Chechnya, and Russia's reduced role on the world stage.

A History of Modern Russia: From Nicholas II to Vladimir Putin Details

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From Reader Review A History of Modern Russia: From Nicholas II to Vladimir Putin for online ebook

Vandita says

If you wanted to read one book on Modern Russian History without getting bogged down with hundreds of pages of explanations on communism and ideological details, this is it. Robert Service, an Oxford prof specialising in Russian History and author of many biographies of Russian Tsars and Communist leaders, has written a comprehensive but fast paced (each chapter on an era or theme of max 20 pages) book which in 550 odd pages covers the ground from 1914 to 1990. I liked the objective way in which it is written unlike most Western Historians who write on Russia with a huge political and ideological axe to grind. Robert Service lets the facts do the talking and conclusions are foregone but do not seem to be imposed on the reader. The overthrow of Nicholas II, Lenin days, degenerating into horror of Stalin's 'Terror and days of purge', Cold period of Khrushchev followed by dreadiness of Breznev, International optimism under Gorbachov coupled with despair with the transition to market economy for Russians, collapse of one of the greatest empires of the world overnight in 1991, cementing nexus of politicians and Oligarchs under Yelstin is well captured in this book. One negative is that though the sub title says 'Nicholas II to Vladimir Putin', it really does not cover the last 15 years under Putin that much. Perhaps the history written in 1997 has not really been updated.. Putin's Russia will be material for yet another worthy book by R Service. Recommended.

Guy Salvidge says

Interesting content, tedious delivery.

Benjamin Eskola says

(This is a review of the second edition, extended up to 2002.)

Service's biggest problem boils down to his lack of self-awareness. He has a number of unexamined assumptions about what constitutes a correct way of managing an economy and a government, and thus applies these without justification. Of course, there are plenty of things to criticize the USSR for, but, for example, while the arbitrary nature of the legal system might be something most people would agree is bad, on the other hand one might reasonable wonder if there are not valid debates to be had over the size of the state sector of the economy (Service repeatedly refers to it as "hypertrophied"). To take another example, in the conclusion he presents 'free' elections as held in the 1990s as being an unquestionably positive step, even while admitting that, in practice, these elections where deeply flawed. One might wonder why a flawed democratic process that pretends to be "liberal" is fundamentally better than, or even any different to, a flawed democratic process that does not. Perhaps what one pretends to be is more important than what one actually does?

Another tendency that irritates me is his constant assumption that, unlike all the Soviet leaders and officials discussed in the book, he (Service) has interpreted Lenin (and, to a lesser extent Marx) correctly.

All in all, this is not the worst history of the Soviet Union. While his liberal and anti-communist sympathies are clear throughout, Service for the most part refrains from moralizing and rejects the most exaggerated nonsense claims that have been made about the scale of the USSR's problems; for example, he recognizes that the famines of the 1930s were not somehow orchestrated by Stalin. (He also avoids the self-importance of Figs, who seemed to think he was doing Soviet leaders a favour by accusing them of *only* mass-murder, rather than genocide, and that the biggest flaw of post-Soviet leaders has been not to run the country as he would have.) He's also better on the Cold War than some other histories have been, and so while Carr (for example) is better on the early years of the Soviet Union (1917–27), Service is the best I've read on Stalin and the post-Stalin period (which admittedly isn't saying much). The post-Soviet era is covered increasingly briefly, with Putin's election in 1999 being almost the final event of note despite the book claiming to cover up to 2002; it also suffers, to be fair, from the most significant parts of Putin's leadership having taken place after this edition was published (and so I'll give the third edition the benefit of the doubt in this regard).

Bryan says

A very well presented exploration of the October Revolution and the legacy it wrought throughout the remainder of the 20th century. The book's strength lies in the Lenin and Stalin eras in describing the authoritarian methods employed to deprive citizens of their economic autonomy, the history of the Eastern Front of WWII, and in ultimately setting the stage for the Cold War. The book becomes slightly sparser in content afterwards and focused on the internal machinations of the communist party as it attempts at stabilization and reform ultimately undermined the system that had been inherited. Well worth reading for important historical context and for detailed examples of the underlying faults of planned economies.

Martin says

Finally a historian who keeps things factual and doesn't pass moral judgement.

Alan Ressler says

I couldn't help but feel a heavy undercurrent in favor of western modes of "democratization" and economic policy throughout the entire work, but then again, the Soviet Order (at least in my opinion) was cumbersome and highly authoritarian throughout its existence, regardless of the perspective in which you choose to view its methodology. There's a definite difference between ideological orientation and actual implementation of policy. While I more or less sympathize with the "communist" cause, I do not agree with the Leninist/Bolshevik principles which pervaded the Soviet regime.

I feel like this was an overall compelling, albeit sometimes tedious read. A lot of attention was payed to minute details but it helped to paint a wider understanding of this very essential period in Russian history. Not recommended for beginners to historical non-fiction...

Chris Lira says

My knowledge of imperial Russia is very good; my knowledge of revolutionary Russia good; after that though, it's a bit sparse. So I picked up this book to fill those gaps from Stalin on. It definitely did the job there, and I found the material on Kruschv and Brezhnev particularly interesting. There are a few "Britishisms" in the writing that threw me for a loop, but some quick Internet searches explained what the author was trying to convey.

Deepak K says

Very informative - dwelling into the merits and issues of the Communist government that was formed in Russia, starting from the falls of the Tsar to the fall of communism. A must-read for those who are interested in the modern Russian state.

Jason Wilson says

Very good overview . Fair on strengths and weaknesses of systems And leaders .

Chambermusic79 says

This is one of the best history books I have ever read. As a general review of Russian history in the 20th century, it faces no simple task: on the one hand, the sheer bulk of events is overwhelming; on the other hand, summaries often risk being too fast-paced and shallow. Service has found the perfect balance. He always sounds well-informed, but he never bores the reader with unnecessary details: he uses facts and data to build up his points, and from time to time he spices up the narrative with verbal flare. What I liked the most is his ability to disentangle sociological factors: his analysis has an impressive clockwork quality and his judgements sound always balanced to me. I loved every single page of this book, and I strongly recommend it not only to Soviet history buffs but also to any general reader.

Lauren Albert says

A good introduction to the subject. I did find myself confused at times because Service will be saying all the things that improved under someone and then suddenly say how bad things were. Now, while this is not necessarily contradictory, his tone seems to change. For a minute, it seems like he is doing a revisionist look and then he is back to the usual. I can't really put my finger on it.

Mikey B. says

A splendid book on a remarkable country. What a history that country had in the twentieth century and what repercussions it had on the entire world! It is hard to think of another country – including the United States – that had more of an impact on world politics.

Robert Service covers it all superbly. He points out that Lenin was no moralist or humanitarian. It was Lenin who coined the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” which meant NO to democracy, NO to elections; and as the term implies a dictatorship by an authoritarian state. The secret police was integral in Lenin’s agenda.

Mr. Service also points out that Russia (Soviet Union) was always a dual society. The top levels had only limited knowledge of what occurred away from the centre. At the bottom, reports and statistics were embellished to accord with the desires of the upper ruling stratas. This made corruption endemic at all layers of society – for the lower classes it would be the only way to survive.

Khrushchev is portrayed as a partial reformer. It must be remembered that both Khrushchev and Brezhnev continued the repression in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev had the moral courage to stop this.

The only drawback is that little is mentioned on the invasion of Afghanistan and the role it played in the demise and fracturing of the Soviet Union.

Jacob says

A rather comprehensive retelling of 20th and 21st century Russian history. The book covers the period from Tsar Nicholas II's reign to Vladimir Putin's hegemony over Russian politics in the 21st century. Well written and concise, perhaps too concise at times, it was a breeze to read and provides the reader with fairly in-depth overview of the 20th century through the lens of Russian history. It is very accessible and a good introduction to Russian history for any scholar, enthusiast or amateur historian.

However; accessibility necessitates brevity and that is the book's only pitfall. It does not engage into the deep analysis of the reasons behind the events it describes that one might expect from a serious academic work. Some might say this is a good thing, it makes the reader think and come up with their own conclusions, but historians' interpretations are important in the study of history and this book lacks that crucial element. Nevertheless, I would still recommend this book as an introduction to anyone seeking to study Russian history of the 20th century. It provides a balanced and informative insight into the continuity of Russian politics and society throughout the 20th century.

Lorren Eldridge says

Extremely readable for non-fiction, and unlike many "popular" non-fiction titles it actually includes the footnotes with sources. Would benefit from a more structured bibliography, though.

Adrian says

Having previously read Robert Service's *Lenin, and Comrades*, I had already begun to consider Service as the most scholarly authority on modern Russia, and this expertly written volume cements my opinion of him. The work is neither too long, but perhaps, at over 570 pages, it is perhaps too short as it leaves the reader wanting more.

Covering the entire 20th Century and the first decade of the 21st, Service leaves no stone unturned. All the major personalities and forces for change are included, and certain parts that may be a cause for digression, such as WWII, are kept within an appropriate length for a broad ranged study.

Robert Service, while notably a scholar not known to place faith in the communist ideology, is nonetheless sensitive to the different opinions of the various segments of the population who are nostalgic for the days of old. A central problem Service identifies is corruption, that became endemic under the Brezhnev era with complacent, irresponsible management, and supplementing of income from other, often illegitimate, sources. Service reveals that by the time of the Brezhnev era, a deep cynicism was inbedded in the leadership that had scant regard for the actual ideals of communism, and instead sought little more than to preserve their hold on power. Such logic was behind the selection of the deathly ill Chernenko in the Kremlin succession of 1984, merely as a means to forestall a shakeup of the Soviet hierarchy.

Service gives coverage to the Perestroika era, which is similar to his study in *Comrades*, but perhaps with more detail. From the breakup of the USSR he covers the power struggles, and uncertainty of the Yeltsin era, and take the readers up to and including the succession of Medvedev and the 2008 5 day war in Georgia. Service is praising of Russia's achivements in the post Soviet era, and is reasonably optimistic of Russia's future. One cannot discern as to whether Service is a Russophile, though this reader, if asked, would say not. However, Services lack of cultural preference perhaps gives the work a greater sense of objectivity.

As a reader who has read various studies of Russian history, both within education and at leisure, this ranks as one of the best, and certainly the best comprehensive study. Recommended for both experienced Russia hands, or those with a Russia curiosity.
