

House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution

Yuri Slezkine (Princeton University Press, 2017), 1104 pp., illustrations, maps

Reviewed by Leslie C.

In *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution*, University of California at Berkeley historian Yuri Slezkine has conjured an 1,100-page multidisciplinary slab of a book that defies easy categorization. To stretch a biblical metaphor, it is a house of many mansions, and in its pages Slezkine does many things. Ostensibly the history of the House of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars—an elaborate, self-contained community for the Soviet *nomenklatura* built on the banks of the Moscow River in an area called the Swamp—the book is also an examination of the familial and social worlds of the revolutionary generation, a study of Bolshevik literature and those who created it, a treatise on Soviet architecture and urban planning, an extended essay on the philosophical underpinnings of the revolution, a cautionary tale of how that revolution consumed the people who spawned it, and much else besides.

Slezkine's work features prominently in numerous "best of 2017" lists, and critics were effusive in their praise of a book they regarded as monumental in scale, tragic in effect, and "Tolstoyan" in vision. While the domestic lives, loves, and obsessions of a generation of Bolshevik revolutionaries may fascinate historians and sociologists, they are not our purpose here. More relevant to this audience is how this author's vision informs our understanding of a still-intransigent adversary.

While Vladimir Putin famously mourned the demise of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, I am inclined to argue that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire should have pride of place. The October Revolution is more than a century distant and the Soviet Union is no more, yet something of them persists in contemporary Russia. Their shades endure in the Russian security services and only the scale is different. There may be no Great Terror or Stalinist purges, but dozens of dissidents and journalists have been harassed, imprisoned, or murdered, as have apostate politicians and intelligence officers who went into exile in the West. Just as the NKVD found Leon Trotsky in Mexico City in 1940, so the

SVR found Aleksandr Litvinenko in London in 2006, and Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury in 2018.

Putin is a Chekist, by background and by ingrained habit, and the Russian intelligence services continue proudly and unapologetically to observe Chekist Day. The parallels between the modern mindset and that of the past are notable. As one House of Government resident noted in the 1930s, "Lenin used to teach us that every Party member should be a Cheka agent—that is, that he should watch and inform." (291) Such thinking was integral to the House of Government's operations, where its managers prioritized "centralization, symmetry, transparency, cleanliness, accountability, and surveillance. All things and people were to be catalogued, and if possible, correlated." (188) Surveillance and correlation are, of course, constant threats to our own contemporary operations against authoritarian states, and more so in an age where the enabling technology is proliferating, and in many places approaching ubiquity.

Violence likewise persists as an integral part of the creed, and as various of Putin's enemies have learned, a threat. Slezkine writes, "The Bolsheviks emerged victorious . . . because their sociology was all-encompassing, their apocalypse inescapable, their leader infallible, their 'address' unquestioned, their record-keeping unmatched, and their commitment to violence by numbers absolute." (161) More specifically, commitment to violence was a sine qua non of the Chekist ethos. On the eve of Stalin's infamous purge of the Red Army, NKVD department head Sergei Mironov, addressing the officers who were to carry it out, said: "You will have to forget about your families, drop everything personal. There will be some whose nerves will prove too weak. Everyone will be tested. This is a battlefield. Any hesitation is tantamount to treason. . . . I am sure we will get it done quickly. . . . Comrades, your life as a true Chekist is about to begin." (759)

If you detected a whiff of religious zeal in the above, I once read that Marxism was a Christian heresy, on its

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face an odd claim given communism's militant atheism and reflexive contempt for organized systems of faith—perhaps not so odd when one realizes that the party's faithful did not welcome the competition. Significantly, for all the wide-ranging erudition of Slezkine's work, the theme that underpins it is the striking similarity of Bolshevism's philosophical structure to that of the millenarian religious sects, and the consequences of that worldview.

A variety of traditions from Islam to Buddhism to Judaism to diverse Protestant denominations and heretical cults retain a millenarian strain, but Slezkine finds the parallels with Christianity most apt. Both it and Marxism foretold and anticipated the end of history, the one with Christ's Kingdom of Heaven, the other with Marx's Utopia on Earth. Slezkine was not the first to notice. Just before the Soviet Union collapsed, the social historian Paul Boyer wrote, "Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, with its vision of a classless utopia emerging from successive cycles of social upheaval and revolutionary violence, is the last great apocalypse of the Western intellectual tradition."^a The first, of course, was the subject of The Revelation of St. John. Derek Leebaert was pithier when he defined the Soviet Union as "a ghastly hybrid of seventeenth century quasi-oriental despotism, nineteenth century messianic radicalism, and twentieth century total war."^b And no less an authority than Robert Conquest detected this tendency, noting, in a dismissal of Marx, that "outside his sect few serious philosophers accepted his philosophy; few economists accepted his economics; few historians accepted his theories of history."^c For Slezkine, the bottom line is this: "The head of the Party was the head of the state, whatever his formal title. The state itself was the Russian empire run by a millenarian sect." (182)

Slezkine rewards the reader's patience by gradually revealing, as the book unfolds, the myriad ways the Bolsheviks resembled such a sect. At root, they were "a fraternal, faith-based group radically opposed to a corrupt world" (552), whose faith resided in Marx's vision of the future, and who shared with Christians the goal of "aligning one's thoughts and desires with eternal truth." (624) The sacred foundations of the Soviet state were the October Revolution and the Civil War—composed of the Civil War proper and War Communism ("the war

on property, market, money, and the division of labor"). These were the "heart of Bolshevism (the transformation of a society into a sect)." (209)

By the 20th century, however, Christianity had in many ways become largely a moral movement. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, were in earnest. "In a millenarian world, whatever is necessary is also desirable, and whatever is desirable is also inevitable." (421) Such was the party's mindset, and its justification for the staggering human cost of collectivization and the destructive face of the five year plans. But the end of the Soviet Union did not necessarily mean the end of this mindset. As the Chekist ghost endures, so too do some aspects of the sect. As Slezkine notes, "Millenarian sects, or sects living on the eve of the apocalypse, are in the grip of a permanent moral panic. The more intense the expectation, the more implacable the enemies; the more implacable the enemies, the greater the need for internal cohesion; the greater the need for internal cohesion, the more urgent the search for scapegoats." (710)

While a tendency to scapegoating is not particular to Russia, it is inherent in millenarianism generally and in Bolshevism specifically. Why? What happens when the prophecy is not fulfilled? Someone, or something, outside of the faith, must be responsible. "For the Bolsheviks, the most popular early explanation . . . was the failure of the world outside Russia to carry out its share of the world revolution. . . . Other commonly cited reasons for the postponement of the end were the recalcitrance of evil . . . the peculiarity of the Russian situation . . . and the tendency of the proletariat to prostitute itself to foreign gods." (272) We can see this not just in Bolshevik dogmatism but also as a manifestation of Russian xenophobia, which existed before the revolution and has clearly survived its demise. It served also as a further justification for violence. As Slezkine writes, "All millenarians who do not burn in the fire of their own making adjust themselves to a life of permanent expectation in a world that has not been fully redeemed. . . . As the new regime settled down to wait, its most immediate tasks were to suppress the enemy, convert the heathen, and discipline the faithful." (273) And with such a statement, Slezkine renders banal the massive apparatus of Soviet repression at home and subversion abroad.

a. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 1992), 45.

b. Derek Leebaert, *The Fifty Year Wound: The True Price of America's Cold War Victory* (Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), xii.

c. Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (W.W. Norton, 2000), 55.

Though this review has focused on certain traits of the Russian experiment with Bolshevism enduring into the 21st century, it is worth remembering that the author used the House of Government as a lens to examine a very broad horizon of Soviet life. And his approach was not without humor. Ironies abound, for example, in the book's portrayal of Bolsheviks at home or on holiday at their dachas or resorts; all are described here, and here we may even get glimpses of humanity, as in one young girl's recollection of Stalin's foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, as a normal person. (551) Similarly notable was Slezkine's observation that Soviet reading preferences did not tend to include Soviet literature: "the Bolsheviks did not realize that by having their children read Tolstoy instead of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin, they were digging the grave of their revolution. The house of socialism—as

a residential building with family apartments—was a contradiction in terms. The problem with Bolshevism was that it was not totalitarian enough." (953) Or, even better, he echoes Robert Conquest when concluding that "One reason for the fragility of Russian Marxism was Marxism. The other was Russia." (955)

If knowing one's enemy is a virtue, then one might approach *The House of Government* with a certain degree of piety. Reading it, and engaging with its myriad themes and subjects, is a commitment, and one recognizes a degree of audacity in the author for attempting such a project. But the book is rich with insight into the mindset and worldview of an adversary that, sadly, remains an adversary even in the wake of the failure of the House's residents to engineer the "End of History."



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