

**Book Review/Kitap Tanıtımı**

**Sheila Fitzpatrick, The Shortest History of the Soviet Union, Exeter, UK: Old Street Publication, 2022**

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Readers new to Soviet Union and communist authoritarian and totalitarian regime studies can do no better than selecting one of the Australian academic Sheila Fitzpatrick's books. She is the author of *The Russian Revolution* (1982), an excellent and insightful introductory text on the subject, and the longer and more focused text *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (1999). Both of these explain the complex history of the establishment and development of the Marxist-Leninist state in a way that is detailed and very easy to understand. Her recent book, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* (2022), adds to her works and has been produced nearly thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union state in 1991. This means it draws

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on the author's previous works and the latest thinking about the past. Key to understanding this book is that it provides readers with a good overview of the key historical events, circumstances, personalities, and policies that explain what the seventy-year history of the Soviet Union was about and why. It does so without confusing the reader; this is achieved because of Fitzpatrick's ability to be succinct and write clearly.

Fitzpatrick argues that history derives from the unexpected, not the inevitable. She writes that alternate outcomes are possible: *'My view is that there are few inevitabilities in human history as there are in the individual lives that compose it. Things could always have turned out differently but for accidental encounters and global cataclysms, deaths, divorces and pandemics'* (p. 5). Indeed, the Soviet communists, motivated by Marxism-Leninism, believed they had a scientific roadmap for constructing a utopian society. Accidental and spontaneous events were not part of the preordained historical stages towards full communism. Yet, unexpected events and turns in the road marked the Soviet Union's history, and its Marxist-Leninist ideology had to fit around reality occasionally. For example, the Russian Revolution of 1917 happened in a mainly agricultural and uneducated society; the world's working classes supported nationalism, not class consciousness, during the wars of 1914 to 1918 and 1939 to 1945. Nevertheless, no one predicted the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Examining the Soviet Union from the perspective of a historical anthropologist, Fitzpatrick considers both the principles and the practice of Soviet socialism leading up to and including the 1980s and its demise.

*The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* is structured chronologically around eight chapters. The book contains maps, primary sources like photographs, cartoon images, propaganda posters, a further reading section of secondary sources and a helpful Index.

Chapter One outlines and defines the making of the Soviet Union. It covers the 'backwardness' of the Imperial Russian society, the late-Imperial Russian's participation in the 1914-1918 War, its military defeats, governmental liberal reforms, the mobilisation of socialist and communist parties (the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks) and their values of modernity, rationality and progress, Lenin and the 1917 Revolution, and the civil war against the reactionary White Russian, and the control of

the communist government over most of the former-Imperial Russian territory.

Chapter Two studies the Lenin years and the Party leadership struggle between Stalin and Trotsky after his death. The years covered are 1920 to 1924, and this chapter explains the creation of the one-party state, the militarisation of society, the building of a socialist state (in opposition to Marx's notion of a post-revolutionary 'withering away of the state'), and economic and nationalisation developments. Chapter Three explains Stalin's policies and his impact on the Soviet citizens. The chapter's theme is socio-cultural and economic transformation from the late 1920s through the 1930s. The topics reviewed include industrialisation and five-year plans, agricultural collectivisation, and cultural revolution. In making the Soviet people, equal opportunity programmes enabled women, youths, and minorities. Also examined are the purges, prison camps and famines. Chapter Four reviews the Second World War (the Great Patriotic War of 1941 to 1945). It considers the use of nationalism and religion by Moscow, uniting citizens against Germany, and post-war legacies.

Chapter Five discusses the Soviet Union under Khrushchev's leadership. Topics explore Stalin's death, the choice of a collective leadership or continuing with a single leader, de-Stalinisation, domestic reforms and foreign affairs.

The chapter on Brezhnev (Six) relates to his leadership and policies on society, improving social conditions (anti-alcohol campaigns), economics, international affairs and relations with the West, life in the republics and dissidents.

Chapter Seven tells the story of the fall of the Soviet Union, explaining Gorbachev's reforms, relations with the United States, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Eastern European satellites and the Soviet Union. Finally, the conclusion evaluates the 1980s Soviet Union (as a high point in the regime's history), whether or not it was an empire and imperialist, the shock of post-1991 privatisation policies, the desire of the Russians and others for stability and a welfare state, and Putin's rule in contemporary Russia.

One weakness of Fitzpatrick's book is that, because of its limited pages, it cannot delve into the complexities and nuances of the multicultural and multinational federal union, and how Moscow handled, for example, majority-Muslim Central Asia somewhat differently to Russia, how Russia was more developed than the Asian periphery, and how national cultures were coopted and subordinated by Moscow, leaving Central Asians with a sense of loss of identity, circa the 1980s. For instance, Moscow's cotton monoculture negatively impacted Uzbekistan's natural environment and rivers, while Kazakhstan was the site of nuclear bomb tests and contamination.

Fitzpatrick's *The Shortest History* is the ideal introductory text for first-year university students – of twentieth-century history and international politics, authoritarianism, totalitarianism and communism, or colonialism studies – and journalists seeking to understand the general sweep of Soviet history. The reader will not get bogged down in the breadth and depth of Soviet historiography, yet they will come away better informed. Also, general readers will enjoy reading the book because Fitzpatrick summarises Soviet history and concepts in a written style that is accessible, straightforward, and, in places, elegant.