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The Soviet Union through French Eyes, 1945–85

Robert Desjardins

Foreword by Archie Brown

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To my dear parents,
Bernard Desjardins and
Réjane Taillefer

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Foreword

Though the work of a select few French scholars on the Soviet Union is known wherever Russian studies are conducted, citations of French Sovietology are surprisingly sparse in the vast English-language literature on the USSR. Robert Desjardins has therefore performed an immense service by writing a guide to French published work on the Soviet Union (1945–85) in all its diversity and by placing it in its historical and ideological context.

It is a service to the non-French scholar who can draw upon Desjardins's several years of painstaking research and discover by leafing through these pages which parts of the French body of writing on Soviet affairs correspond either to his or her interests or appear to break new ground. It may be a boon also to French readers with a particular interest in the Soviet Union, for nothing like so full or so well-informed an overview of Soviet studies in France exists in the French language.

There are several reasons why this should be so, among them the fact that Soviet studies there have been quite widely scattered and lacking in specialist interdisciplinary institutes. Of equal importance has been the high degree of partisanship and politicisation characteristic of French writing on the Soviet Union which has made it hard to achieve as much scholarly cooperation on a national scale as exists, for example, in the United States, Britain or West Germany. While it is difficult for *anyone* to write an account of French Soviet studies acceptable to all of the contending schools of thought discussed in Desjardins's work, it would be well nigh impossible for an actual participant in the French debates to do so.

The author of this book has the advantage of being an outsider – and at the same time one who shares several of the attributes of an insider. On the one hand, Robert Desjardins provides ample evidence to support the view that the spectator sees more of the game. On the other, as a French Canadian, he has roots in French culture and an easy entrée into French intellectual life. His background at once distances him from the heated controversies he analyses and yet provides him with ready access to the special knowledge of the insider to complement the detachment of the outsider. He has made good use of his conversations and interviews in France as well as of his voluminous reading.

After studying law at the University of Montreal, the Free University of Brussels and the University of Ottawa, Robert Desjardins turned his attention to politics as a graduate student at Oxford University. Having acquired, *inter alia*, a thorough knowledge of the British and North American literature on the Soviet Union, he is in a good position to relate French Sovietology to that body of work without being tempted, as a native English speaker might be, to regard the French writing as no more than an odd deviation from the Anglo-American norm.

That temptation could be a real one. From a British perspective it seems as if at a time when the Soviet system was at its harshest and when the totalitarian paradigm was the dominant one in English-language Sovietology, a surprisingly large proportion of French writers on the Soviet Union saw that country as embodying the very principles of socialist democracy. Then, as late as the 1970s, long after the main features of the Stalin oppression had been assimilated into the Anglo-American consciousness and Sovietological writing, and a majority of British and North American specialists had begun to take note of the developing diversity within the Soviet Union which lay behind a monolithic façade, and were debating what kind of authoritarian (as distinct from totalitarian) state the USSR had become, totalitarian interpretations of the Soviet system gained a new lease of life and many adherents in France.

Robert Desjardins helps to explain how this development came about and at the same time shows convincingly that there is much more to French Soviet studies than such an oversimplifying summary can begin to convey. It is one of his reasonable contentions that even those writings which may strike the English-speaking reader as one-sided and extreme often contain insights which it would be unwise for other Western readers to ignore. Desjardins documents also the remarkable variety of theoretical standpoints to be found in French writing on the Soviet Union, while pointing to shortcomings as well as some achievements in detailed empirical research.

He does not restrict himself only to 'Sovietology' in a narrow sense, but takes account of the whole range of serious writing on the Soviet Union in post-war France with its diversity of political and academic standpoints. As a result, this book can be viewed as a case-study in recent French intellectual history as well as a work of importance for those whose particular interest is in the USSR. Even readers who do not find themselves in agreement with all of Desjardins's own judgements on Soviet developments and prospects and on the

literature he discusses (and I would myself differ from some of them) can hardly fail to find his account illuminating. And after laying down this most comprehensive survey and interpretation of French perspectives on the Soviet Union, we shall have no excuse for not paying due regard to past and future French work in the Soviet field.

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ARCHIE BROWN

Preface

The purpose of this book is to survey and interpret a relatively wide body of specialised French literature which has been devoted to the understanding of the Soviet Union. In reviewing this hitherto relatively neglected body of work, I concentrate on the most interesting and influential analyses and interpretations of French Sovietology. The book, need I say, does not claim to exhaust the entire subject. It is a contribution to that category of writing which has expounded the various approaches and 'conceptual lenses'¹ which have been utilised in Western (mainly Anglo-American) studies of Soviet politics. I have in mind, for instance, the concise but comprehensive appraisal of this scientific and scholarly literature carried out over a decade ago by Archie Brown, in his book *Soviet Politics and Political Science*.²

Anglo-American specialists (to the best of my knowledge) have been generally neglectful of French Sovietological literature. It may well be argued that such unfortunate neglect has deprived them of a wealth of interesting ideas about the Soviet system and of a set of theoretical positions which, however debatable they may be at times, are undoubtedly intellectually stimulating. It is my hope that this book will, perhaps, contribute to an increased awareness of French efforts. I trust it will serve both as a guide to French Sovietology for those whose lack of French prevents them from exploring it for themselves, and as an introduction to that literature for those who possess the language but have not hitherto had the time or motivation to find their bearings in the work of French specialists.

For the purposes of this book, I adopt a broad definition of Sovietology which will include not only the work of Soviet specialists but also the major writings of some French historians, economists, sociologists and political scientists who, although unfamiliar with the Russian language, can be regarded as having made a significant contribution to the understanding of the Soviet Union. I exclude from the scope of the book the study of the Soviet Union's foreign policy and international relations *per se*. None the less, I shall occasionally mention the factors which are perceived as lying behind that country's conduct in the international arena.

The period I cover runs from the mid-1940s until 1985. The choice of 1945 as the starting point of my survey fits in with the rise of the

Soviet Union to international stature, and with the strong need then felt in numerous Western circles for a thorough investigation of the inner workings of the Soviet socio-economic and political structures. As H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse, one of the most prominent French specialists, remarked:

at the end of the war, the U.S.S.R. is, in the eyes of world political leaders and international public opinion, no longer a transient state of an indeterminate nature but a permanent and stable reality . . . The acknowledged stabilisation of the Soviet regime made its study urgent; [the regime's] expansion into Eastern Europe and the budding cold war turned such urgency into an affair of state.³

My introductory chapter aims at shedding light on some elements pertaining to the social, cultural and academic spheres which have, at one time or another, directly influenced the development and orientation of French Sovietology. This field of study has periodically been viewed by specialists as being in a relative state of under-development. The first step of my research consists of taking a look at this question of under-development. In this respect, a brief depiction of the French effort prior to 1945 is offered, in order to provide the necessary historical perspective. The first chapter also attempts to locate French Sovietology within the larger framework of French political science.

Following this general introductory survey I proceed to examine selected interpretations of the Soviet Union. These discussions constitute the major part of the book. Thus, the second chapter considers a number of interpretations which belong to the Marxist tradition. Attention is paid, in particular, to the writings of C. Castoriadis, P. Naville and C. Bettelheim. The following chapter, concerned with totalitarianism and ideology, lays particular stress on the ideas developed by R. Aron, J. Monnerot, C. Lefort and A. Besan  on. The fourth chapter, in addition to a consideration of the work of Carr  re d'Encausse, seeks to provide a description of French theorising about some specific institutional questions such as the role and influence of the army in the Soviet Union. In the brief concluding chapter I devote some attention to the failure to establish in France an important centre for interdisciplinary research on the Soviet Union.

This book draws essentially on research conducted at Oxford University for a postgraduate dissertation. Needless to say, I feel

greatly indebted to my former thesis supervisor Archie Brown, of St Antony's College, without whom this book would never have been possible. His advice and most perceptive comments on the whole manuscript have been of prime importance. I also want to thank Alex Pravda of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, who made a number of constructive suggestions at an earlier stage of the project. I wish to extend my gratitude to a number of French academics and researchers who gave up their valuable time to be interviewed: Jean Bonamour, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, Francis Cohen, Jean-Guy Collignon, Marc Ferro, Michel Heller, Basile Kerblay, Georges Lavau, Lilly Marcou, Marie Mendras, Zdenek Strmiska, Michel Tatu and, lastly, the late Raymond Aron, who was particularly forthcoming and whose modesty made a great impression on me. Finally, the help received from various friends has been much appreciated. Errors and misjudgements are, of course, my own responsibility.

ROBERT DESJARDINS