

BOOK REVIEWS

Knight, Amy W. *The KGB: Police and Politics in the Soviet Union*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1988.

The winds of change in the Soviet Union have been blowing from the most unlikely directions. Certainly few institutions seemed as impervious to the doctrines of *perestroika* and *glasnost* as the KGB, yet the past year has seen a series of events that challenges many conventional concepts of the security police. Not only has harsh public criticism been voiced by such prominent figures as a former Olympic athlete and an earlier head of the Azerbaijani security forces, but the KGB itself has issued the first official figures documenting the deaths of 780,000 persons whom Stalin had declared enemies of the state. Perhaps most striking of all, the present head of the KGB, Valdimir Kryuchkov, has proposed that the newly-elected Supreme Soviet exercise full authority over his agency through an oversight commission constructed in the manner of the two U.S. congressional committees.

Fortunately Amy Knight, a recognized senior specialist in Soviet affairs at the Library of Congress, has written the sort of book that gives an invaluable perspective on the unfolding drama in the Soviet Union and the critical role of the KGB. Of the many volumes produced by Western Sovietologists, only a handful have given serious attention to this vast institution, and fewer still have focused on its domestic functions, preferring instead to concentrate on foreign espionage and intelligence activities. By utilizing an extensive range of Soviet and Western sources, the author has sought to trace the evolution of the political police as an "essential institution" in the Soviet regime and explain its complex role as a "bureaucratic actor" in the policymaking process.

Many insightful points emerge from this analysis. Although exhibiting some traits in common with its czarist predecessor, the Bolshevik political police system cast aside all pretence of bourgeois legality to expand its jurisdictional scope and increase the severity of its methods. After taking-up an offensive role against the peasantry during the forced collectivization of agriculture and establishing itself as the overseer of the entire penal network, the political police managed to survive Stalin's purges — even though many leading cadres were "cleansed" — and find new opportunities with the advent of war. The decisive moment in its development, according to Knight, came with Stalin's death and the "Beria affair," for never again would the party allow the political police to re-emerge as the dominant institution in the Soviet system. That, however, did not mean a lessening of its prestige — as seen in the strong cult of the "Cheka" that surfaced in the late 1960s — or a neutral position in subsequent struggles over the succession in leadership.

By carefully examining published Soviet sources to establish the structure and functions of the KGB, Knight has truly broken new ground. According to her findings, the security police enjoy more operational autonomy than other Soviet institutions, just as its official functions will vary widely depending upon political circumstances. In her detailed breakdown of career patterns and party involvement, she points out that many KGB republic chairmen have been chosen from the dominant ethnic group of the region — thus rejecting the common notion of complete Russian hegemony, while job security appears to come at the price of upward mobility. She also stresses a well developed esprit de corps, which is accompanied by an acute sensitivity to its own image as a “moral guardian” and “benevolent institution” rather than a “repressive police force.” Since the party and the KGB reached a *modus vivendi* during the Brezhnev reign that has served both institutions well, it seems unlikely to the author that Gorbachev will alter that relationship unless he is bent on total reform. Clearly the appointment of his ally Kryuchkov to head the KGB — which occurred shortly after the book’s publication — reinforces that line of reasoning, as the institution seems more determined than ever to find new, sophisticated methods of ensuring political stability.

The most impressive aspect of this study lies in its attempt to avoid “mirror imaging” and understand the KGB on its own terms. That the security forces combine domestic surveillance with foreign intelligence and counterintelligence, Knight rightly concludes, makes it qualitatively different from Western organizations. Occasionally one might prefer a difference in emphasis — Lenin’s attitude toward the Cheka was considerably less ambivalent than is conveyed here — or want to add a further consideration — Sakharov’s imprisonment apparently aroused much displeasure among senior KGB foreign intelligence officials; but these are only minor rejoinders to a work that through meticulous research and clear prose sets a high standard for future intelligence and security studies.

Moreover, at a time when daily events in the communist world are showing how utterly misconceived and misdirected most recent products of Western Sovietology have been, Knight’s achievement appears all the more noteworthy. To be sure, much of her discussion, particularly the middle sections of the book, relies on many techniques derived from the social sciences, but never does she become a captive of this methodology. Indeed, her overriding goal is not the construction of a new totalitarian model or theory about the relationship of intelligence and policymaking. Rather, as she states at the outset, it is to help answer the fundamental question of whether the Gorbachev era will result in a true reform of the Soviet system or represent another phase in the cycle of repression and relaxation so characteristic of the past. For anyone seriously pondering that issue, this book is an indispensable aid.

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