

Brian Crozier:
The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire
(Vzestup a pád sovětské říše)

Praha: BB/art, 2004, 679 pages, ISBN: 80-7341-349-3.

Brian Crozier is no doubt an inspiring author who has influenced a large number of mainly Anglo-Saxon historians and sovietologists. But as the world goes, distinct and clean-cut personalities' works usually provoke deep controversies and polemics about the appropriateness of their stances and views. *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire*, published in Czech in 2004, is in no way an exception to this rule.

Crozier gained his reputation as a researcher into conflict studies and as founder of London's Institute for the Study of Conflict. From a longer perspective, he has divided his activities into three categories, each by a more or less equal share: The first is the study of conflict, the second is analysis of the Soviet Union and, generally, the communist movement, and, finally, the third area of his interest is biographical writings dealing with important political personalities of the twentieth century. Among others, he has written on Chiang Kai-shek, De Gaulle, and Franco.

In each of these areas he brings his radically conservative and right-wing views to the fore. The very choice of the subjects of his biographies denotes quite a lot about the author, but Crozier's political orientation can unfold itself fully only in the analysis of the Cold War and the phenomenon of communism. This in itself is not detrimental. Quite to the contrary: It has been decades since the conception of historical analysis based on logical positivism went out of fashion. A look at history from an objective or "scientific" viewpoint is not possible. It is commonly accepted that the historical context and the historian's personal attitudes cannot be separated from the work itself. But every interpretation needs some clues or basic historical facts, the validity of which cannot be doubted and on which the interpretation is based. In most cases, Crozier succeeds in keeping to the facts, yet as will be shown below, sometimes his interpretation manipulates facts in a rather arbitrary way.

What is absolutely undeniable is the comprehensiveness of Crozier's work, which is impressive indeed: the whole work, including annexes, amounts to 679 pages. The most rewarding part of the book is divided into seven sections that are further subdivided into relatively short chapters. The first section addresses the birth and imperial aggrandizement of the Soviet Empire; the second depicts the difficult time of 1920s to 1940s. The third part deals above all with the Soviet ascendancy in the Eastern European satellites, and the victory of communists in some Asian countries (China, North Korea), including the Soviet's role in the process. The fourth section serves as an intermezzo, analysing the first eruptions of discontent with Soviet hegemony in Central Europe and the nascent Sino-Soviet rift. The fifth part is the longest, both in terms of pages and in the length of the analysed period, since it focuses on the Soviet successes and failures in gaining new satellites and dominating old ones. The

sixth section looks into the gradual disintegration of the Soviet Empire in the 1980s, and ends with the birth of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The epilogue summarizes the current position of communism and communist parties both in surviving communist countries, and post-communist ones. Nevertheless, the large duration of the period covered might be only partially seen as an excuse for the deficiencies of the book mentioned below.

Let us first linger a while on the key term of the reviewed book, i.e. socialism/communism. Crozier's interpretation corresponds with what the reader might expect on the basis of the author's previous books: "Socialism was and is the substance of all totalitarian attempts of the 20th century, be it in Lenin's Russia, Mussolini's Italy or Hitler's Germany; also in Mao's China, Castro's Cuba and Kim Il-sung's North Korea. Socialism failed in every country which experimented with it, including Great Britain, Sweden and India."¹⁾

Socialism (identified with communism) is thus interpreted very broadly. It even includes the totalitarian systems commonly placed in the other end of political spectrum. This unprecedented flexibility allows the author to claim that after the end of the Cold War, "communist parties have, after a short period of suppression, returned to power in some, yet not in all Stalin's Eastern European satellites".²⁾ According to Crozier, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria are among those countries where communists currently rule (or at least ruled for a part of the 1990s). The corollary is a substantial distortion of reality since the post-communists in Poland and Hungary are unquestionably very different from their totalitarian communist predecessors from the Cold War period.

On the contrary, those who (have) opposed communism (again in its broad definition), are uncritically accepted by Crozier. For instance, the author comments the atrocities committed during Pinochet's dictatorship in the following way: "During the first years of his rule, Pinochet clamped down on revolutionaries, who ruined the country and step by step made it a basis for a communist revolution."³⁾ Equally absurd is his defence of Yeltsin, related to the assault on the Russian Parliament in October 1993. Crozier writes: "[Yeltsin] tried to introduce a *true democracy* and rule of law by means of a new election. Yet, to reach this goal, he could not find another way than to use undemocratic means. He intended to disperse the Parliament, which was about to defend the constitution in order to overthrow a legitimately elected President and re-establish the Soviet will in the country."⁴⁾ (Italics added by the reviewer.)

A second remarkable feature is Crozier's interpretation of Soviet foreign policy. He starts from the thesis that the Soviet Union was an expansionist dictatorship from its very inception, aiming at global domination. What was the *cause* of the Soviet expansion is, however, a more difficult question. And the author does not seem to know the answer: in several places he decries communist ideology as the driving force behind this expansionism,⁵⁾ elsewhere he speaks about a "realist viewpoint" and "imperial policies of the Soviet Union".⁶⁾ To complicate things even further, Crozier distinguishes imperial and power interests in Chapter 3.⁷⁾

This heterogeneous interpretation of Soviet policy is one of Crozier's major weaknesses. The author thus oscillates between the conviction that the USSR behaved aggressively due to its Marxist-Leninist orientation, and the idea that this orientation was nothing more than a cover-up for the real power interests of a power-hungry empire. To tackle this problem in its substance would require a solution of the dialectical contradiction by a synthesis which would explain how these two sets of variables complement each other. But Crozier does not do so, occasionally using one, and sometimes the other explanation, depending on which fits his argument better. A major (and unanswered) question thus hovers over the whole book: did the Soviet Union behave rationally according to Crozier, in the sense of maximisation of its power, or was the whole history of the Soviet Empire one big error, based on the fallacy of communism?

The third notable element of the work is its concentration on the role of secret services. Crozier's "predominantly conspiratorial vision of history",⁸⁾ as it is labelled by the author of the excellent postface Jiří Kunc, presents the Soviet secret services as the axis of each and every minutely-important activity of the Soviet Union, not only vis-à-vis the USA, but also its communist allies, Western Europe, and the third world. As a by-product, the belief in the omnipresence of the secret services leads the author to an uncritical acceptance of McCarthyism in the United States. In a similar vein, his distinction between paid and unpaid agents of Soviets affords him with the opportunity to consider almost everyone an agent. Let us quote Kunc once more: "[a]nd when you find US State Secretaries on the list of 'unpaid' agents, you will be probably be tempted to put the book away."⁹⁾

The fourth and final critical point concerns the biographical sources used. There is no doubt as to the quality of the literature, the author – especially in the first part – refers to respected expert on Russia Richard Pipes, and another well-known author, Dmitri Volkogonov, is strongly represented as well. But it is impossible to find in the relatively short list of sources (56 items) a single Russian-language book or document. Crozier's quotations are therefore mostly secondary quotations from other authors' works, the exceptions being only the translated documents in the appendix. The assumption that any author of an extensive monograph on the Soviet Empire probably has at least a passive knowledge of the Russian language, is most probably wrong in this case.¹⁰⁾

This deficiency of the book is, however, more than offset by the two-hundred-page appendix, which contains valuable documents from the Soviet and Russian archives. In spite of them being translated several times, they undoubtedly constitute the most interesting part of the book. There is a lot of exciting reading, such as the evolution of the Russian position toward the Katyn question from Stalin's time to Khrushchev's, or the documents about the negotiations between Stalin and Mao, and China's turn from Moscow in the years to follow. For Central European readers, the reaction of the Soviet leadership to emancipative attempts in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia are an exciting read too. Much about the Soviet strategy can be elicited from several documents, which contain information about the financial support of communist parties abroad. The appendix is, therefore, the most compelling motive for a reader interested in Soviet history to read this book.

It is necessary to stress the work of the interpreter and the whole Czech editing of this book, because it tactfully, by means of footnotes and the above mentioned postface, corrected a large number of errors and inaccuracies committed by the author. It is indeed surprising that so many mistakes escaped Crozier's attention. Let us mention just a few of those related to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: the German armies did not leave Prague on 7 May 1945 but two days later,¹¹⁾ the Katyn massacre could not be approved by the Central Committee of Soviet Communist Party,¹²⁾ the KGB unit SMERSh did not exist at the time of Prague Spring,¹³⁾ Mečiar was not a Minister of Interior in the communist times,¹⁴⁾ etc. etc. In this context it is more than symbolical that the author wrongly assumes that the assault on the Winter Palace took place on 6 November, and not a day later.

To conclude, no matter how respected Crozier is for his other books, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire* definitely does not belong among Crozier's masterpieces. It is full of ideological clichés and mistakes, which disqualify the book as a useful source for historical study. More than that, the author's manipulation of facts can be misleading to ordinary readers, who may get a false understanding of one of the most terrible chapters of human history.

Petr Kratochvíl

ENDNOTES

¹⁾ Crozier, B.: *Vzestup a pád sovětské říše*. Praha: BB/art, 2004, p. 440. All quotations here are translated from the Czech version of the book. Similarly, the pages indicate the positions in the Czech edition.

²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

³⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 407–408.

⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, e.g. pp. 32 and 90.

⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 679.

⁹⁾ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁾ This seems to be confirmed by the wild and wrong speculation of the author, who sees a "clear Byelorussian connotation" in the name of the White Russian army. See Kunc's postface in the same volume. Kunc also mentions most of the mistakes listed below.

¹¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹³⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 416.