

Denis B. Shaw: The Post-Soviet Republics: A Systematic Geography

Harlow, Essex, Longman Scientific and Technical 1995, 173 p.

Any attempt to write a geography of the post-Soviet republics or present-day Russia should be seen as a remarkable and brave act, especially when it aspires to provide a more systematic or broader approach in the study of this vast and rapidly changing area. The changes that all the post-Soviet republics have undergone are so profound that neither geographers nor experts in other fields are sufficiently able to explain their geographical aspects in such a way that would acquire a general and long-term validity.

The main problem is due to the speed of change, another is the lack of adequate statistical data for all of the new states. Yet another factor is the unpredictability of the further development in the political, economic and social spheres. The economic collapse affecting all post-Soviet republics has brought about profound changes in the geographical pattern of all activities and severed many important relations. As a result, the map of the former territory of the USSR has changed dramatically. Statistical data from 1992 and 1993 show that whole industrial branches collapsed in some of the new states, so it can be presumed that on a regional level these changes will be even more profound and regional disparities deeper.

The book is divided into ten chapters in more or less logical sequence. To a certain extent it is possible to perceive it as an anthology of individual articles. Denis Shaw as editor contributed five of the chapters: (1) *The post-Soviet republics: environmental and human heritage*; (2) *Ethnic relations and federalism in the Soviet era*; (8) *Urban development*; (10) *Fifteen successor states: fifteen and more futures?*; and was co-author of (4) *Industrial policy and location* with Robert N. North, who was author of (5) *Transport*. The other contributors are Graham Smith with (3) *Ethnic relations in the new states*; R. A. French with (6) *Demographic and social problems*; Judith Pallot with (7) *Agricultural and rural development*; and Michael J. Bradshaw with

(9) *Foreign trade and inter-republican relations*.

The introduction to the first chapter is a brief account dealing with the geo-political heritage of the world's largest state, which, in fact, describes the history of the expansion of the Russian empire. Unfortunately the essential geo-political aspects of the disintegration process of the USSR are not discussed. The natural rather than environmental conditions are described from the viewpoint of their determining effect on the development of the society and economy.

Unconventionally, this part also deals with the economic backwardness of the former USSR and Russia, which is considered the result of disadvantageous natural conditions and geographical position. In this context, the presented data rather paradoxically document the progressive narrowing of disparities in economic and industrial performance between the USSR and the USA in the period after 1913. However, it must be stated that in the case of the USSR data on industrial production, particularly GNP, are very unreliable.

Logically, special attention is given to ethnic relations, which are presented in two chapters. The first of these deals with the history of the multi-ethnic state and the dominant role of the Russians within it, the foundation of the Federation, a comparison of the approaches of Lenin and Stalin to the ethnic question, and finally addressing the roots of the present inter-ethnic problems and violations. The second of the chapters devoted to ethnic relations concentrates on the complex problems connected to the disintegration of the USSR, to the explosion of nationalism, and relations between Russians and the other nationalities. However, the part concerned with extensive ethnically motivated migration lacks any comment on the impact of migration on changes in the ethnic structure of many republics. These chapters are characterised by the presentation of ethnic relations in the broader geo-political and cultural context and a more systemic approach to the problem than is common in Czech textbooks.

The fourth section dealing with industrial policy and location contains analytical and critical evaluation of the development of in-

dustrial policies during the Soviet era and their results and geographical impacts. Figures on the production of selected industrial products in 1913, 1940, 1955, 1975, and 1986 provide valuable information. Unfortunately, the most recent data presented here, are, considering the latest development, rather dated.

The authors correctly point out in contradiction to Soviet propaganda (in several of the chapters) the lack of self-sufficiency of some of the economic regions (rayons), and the fact that these complexes had never actually been complex structures. Notable by its absence is information on the armaments industry, which was the largest branch of the Soviet economy.

The fifth chapter on transport well illustrates changes in the use of all kinds of transport. Numerous figures show the development of transport networks and their uneven spatial coverage and density. The demographic situation before the dissolution of the USSR is briefly analysed in the sixth chapter. An approach that stresses the political, cultural and social consequences, as well as the basic prerequisites of demographic differentiation is the most valuable part of this.

Besides information on agricultural policy, the seventh chapter contains interesting and useful information on environmental aspects of agricultural production (for example, the degradation of arable land), and, in particular, an extensive passage dealing with the development of agriculture after the USSR fell apart and the development of agriculture reforms – including the advance of private farming.

In less traditional order comes the chapter on urban development and the situation of Russian and post-Soviet cities. This contains minimal statistical data and concentrates on evaluating changes in urban life under the conditions of deep and painful transformation of society in its economic, political, administrative and social aspects.

The following chapter deals with the inter-republic and foreign trade of the new post-Soviet states. However, the main part of this describes the development of Soviet foreign trade in the 1970s and 1980s, with a smaller part devoted to the foreign trade of the post-Soviet republics in the first year of their inde-

pendence. Useful information here shows the development of foreign economic collaboration, joint ventures and free economic zones. In the final chapter Shaw gives a brief geographical outline of all fifteen successor states and sketches their likely future development.

I feel that the title of the book fails to reflect its content. The main body of the book is concerned with the whole of the former USSR and much of the information describes the period prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the attempt to present a comprehensive picture of development in all spheres of human activity and society, and the connection with the current difficulties faced by all post-Soviet republics, all chapters dwell heavily on the history (which is nevertheless valuable information in itself).

As the book was written in 1994, it might have been possible to incorporate some of the later data from various sources, at least for Russia and the Baltic states. This goes for information on demographic processes, when Russia and other European post-Soviet republics have recently been experiencing demographic development unprecedented in modern history.

The most important contribution of this book lies in its conception stressing a more profound and systematic explanation of causes of the current state and development of politics, society, economy and their geographical patterns and disparities evolving among the successor states. It differs from other textbooks that have been published in the Czech Republic which have been traditionally oriented towards geographical description without any ambition for a broader approach. Another important feature is the provision of numerous tables and statistical data covering a long historical time-span, sometimes going back to 1913.

On the negative side, the graphic quality of the figures is not very good, some of the maps have only negligible information value, and there are often missing names, which holds true for figures on climate conditions and transport, where the names of important junctions and oil and gas fields are sometimes omitted. A significant defect is the improper usage of shading on maps, and at times some of them are very difficult to make out.

Nevertheless, in conclusion, this book provides the essential spatial and developmental background necessary to understand the present-day problems of the region. It focuses on the transition from command to market economies, and the associated ethnic, political, and social developments, and also considers the far-reaching consequences of such changes in terms of political alignment, economic restructuring, and territorial adjustment. The

enormous significance of such changes are examined in their significance for Europe and, more generally, for the future of international relations. Given the dearth of geographical publications, and especially textbooks, on Russia and other post-Soviet republics, here is a book which provides a good source of information in this field.

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