

## Culture



**William M. MANDEL, *Soviet But Not Russian — The ‘Other’ Peoples of the Soviet Union*, Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, & B19 Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1985. 375 pages, \$13.50 (paper), \$24.95 (cloth)**

Peter Smollett

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by the author, his protests notwithstanding, portrays South Africa primarily from the white point of view. This can be seen in his consistent use of the term “riots” when referring to black uprisings such as those in Soweto in 1976—perhaps to reinforce his statement that opposition to apartheid is fragmented and disorganized.

That is not to say that the book is totally without value. There can be no doubt that a system as repressive as that in South Africa does psychological damage to *both* the black and white populations, and the book does provide a useful insight into both the distorted world views held by many whites in South Africa and the ways in which their ideas are created and maintained. However, these are the *consequences*, not the *causes* of apartheid. In this sense the people interviewed may be seen as victims of the system. But Crapanzano’s analysis does not deal with the structures of power, and hence there are no major or minor players. Because he ignores this crucial variable, he does not see that the people of “Wyndal” are neither the major victims of apartheid, nor are they its major perpetrators. It is no wonder, then, that they are “waiting”—they have neither the desire to change the system, nor the power to maintain it.

The dust cover of the book tells us that the author has recreated social reality for us “as a novelist might...” The book may be many things, but it is not credible social science. Its questionable methodology, its inadequate analysis, and its highly selective source material do not stand up to the rigours of science. But even more troubling is what the book does to the reader. Not one of us can read this book without being just a little more sympathetic to the justifications for apartheid which run through the book. After all, these people of “Wyndal” are basically nice, ordinary people, *just like you and me*. In the end we are left with the feeling that a solution to the problems of South Africa is not as simple as it might at first seem. Surely it is no accident that the author selected for his last interview “Dora Herzog” telling us that all the blacks want to do is kill whites, and that “it’s the communists” causing unrest inside South Africa. Is my opening analogy really that far from the truth?

William M. MANDEL, *Soviet But Not Russian — The ‘Other’ Peoples of the Soviet Union*, Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, & Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1985. 375 pages, \$13.50 (*paper*), \$24.95 (*cloth*).

By Peter Smollett  
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I often show my classes a lovely short film on the work of an Uzbek plaster carver, Mirmachmud Usmanov from Soviet Uzbekistan. I patiently explain to my students that the Uzbeks are an Asian people in the Soviet Union who are very different from Russians. Later in one semester, a student wrote: “Russians who live in Asia are called Uzbeks.” Oh well, one tries.

The USSR is a multi-national federated state of fifteen distinct nations. In addition, there are dozens of other ethnic groups and sub-groups with varying levels of autonomous governmental structures. Russia is geographically and by population the largest of the fifteen. The other fourteen are not only decidedly non-Russian, only two of them — Byelorussia and the Ukraine — are Slavic. William M. Mandel’s book is an historical, political, social, ethnographic survey of these “other” peoples.

Mandel has been researching, writing and lecturing about the Soviet Union for nearly half a century. He began his career as an economic geographer, but in recent years has considered cultural anthropology to be his guiding discipline. His new book, like his earlier *SOVIET WOMEN*, benefits greatly from his familiarity with Soviet social science research. For twenty years, until his retirement in 1982, he was the translator of six Soviet quarterly scholarly journals, including *SOVIET ANTHROPOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGY* and *SOVIET SOCIOLOGY*.

Much of the book’s content is based on Mandel’s own observations in the USSR, including his observations of changes he has seen on some ten extended visits going back to the year he spent there as a student in the early thirties. Mandel travels with a tape recorder and uses it extensively and informally. The book is peppered with life histories — some fragments, some quite substantial.

Mandel’s book is testimony to the success of Soviet nationalities policy. The only former colonial empire which remains to a large extent politically intact today is the old Russian empire. From the Czarist “prison house of nations”, the Soviets have created a new kind of free association of interdependent nations.

In essence, the policy, as Mandel explains it, has been one of self-determination and *encouragement* of independent national development, while at the same time creating conditions and programs that made it advantageous for the peoples of these nations to maintain association with the new revolutionary Russia. Forging such a union was no simple task. The book is rich in historic detail regarding the pre-revolutionary roots of ancient hatreds. The Armenians, for instance, controlled most of the commerce in agricultural Georgia. The five Central Asian Republics were originally a mix of settled and nomadic people who were constantly — even after the revolution — at war with each other, and with the unfortunate Russian peasants to whom the Czar granted land stolen from nomadic herders.

What Mandel thoroughly documents, and it *can* be documented, is the almost total disappearance of these long standing national hatreds. Old attitudes may survive in a few people's heads, but discriminatory *practice* — actual oppression — has gone. Pogroms, lynchings, warfare disappeared over half a century ago. What Mandel found was an extraordinarily high level of inter-ethnic good will, friendship, comaraderie... and, increasingly, inter-marriage.

Intensive programmes of affirmative action (not on paper, but in practice) have in one or two generations raised the health, educational, scientific and cultural standards of formerly oppressed nationalities, including tribal peoples, to equal or even exceed those of Russians. These programmes have not produced the opposition from the formerly dominant population that much more limited affirmative action programmes have received in the U.S. and Canada. The reason for this success is no mystery. The socialist reorganization of economic life has totally eliminated unemployment. As Mandel writes: "No one need protect his job by convincing himself that he has more right to it than someone of different appearance or language or religion or gender." (p. 15)

From the earliest years, the new Bolshevik government displayed great tact and wisdom in the respect they paid to local traditions. The first constitution of Bokhara after the revolution specified "No published laws of the republic may contradict the foundations of Islam." (p. 138) However, that tolerance has not extended to traditions that oppress or exploit people or that are blatantly inhumane. Mandel quotes an Uzbek woman, Ikbalkhon Tokhtokhodjayeva, a Doctor of Laws and for years Uzbekistan's vice-minister of Education: "My mother gave birth to me in 1928, and, with me in her arms, marched to the great square,

side by side with my father, and discarded that parandja." (p. 140) (the stifling, blinding horsehair veil). She was fortunate. She was supported and accompanied by her husband. Many women in those days were in fact murdered by their husbands or other male relatives for discarding the parandja. Today, of the 30,000 scientists and professional scholars in Uzbekistan, 12,500 are women. This is in a place where two generations ago women were literally chattel, and child marriage was the usual local "tradition"; where capitalism was not the issue but, as Lenin said at the time "... a struggle against the survival of medievalism is the issue." (p. 72)

Traditional scholarship and journalism describe a pattern of suppression of national cultures in the USSR and a pattern of "Russification". All of the evidence presented by Mandel indicates the opposite, and the book as a whole serves as a refutation of these charges. For example, nation building for many Soviet peoples began only after the revolution, and has been deliberately fostered by the government. Many of the Soviet Union's most widely read and translated writers work in languages whose alphabets were first created since the 1920s. Incidentally, many of these peoples, pre-literate before the revolution, have produced quite a number of the USSR's ethnographers.

Although Russian is the *lingua franca* for the Union as a whole and is taught as a second language in all schools throughout the USSR, the local language is deliberately maintained as the primary language of government and education. Mandel further points out that the government, party, academic, educational and artistic leadership in each republic is in the hands of the indigenous population. This is a matter of policy, and it is so even in those areas where the original indigenous population has become a minority as in Kirghizia or in the Chukchi national area.

Regarding living standards, Mandel indicates that there is some regional disparity in the Soviet Union, but not what one would expect if this were a colonial situation. The highest standard of living is not in Russia, but in the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — those "captive nations" that every US president routinely promises to liberate.

In addition to the chapters dealing with each of the 15 main republics, Mandel devotes part of one to the northern indigenous peoples of Siberia. Canadians would particularly wish that this section were a bit fuller, as the lessons and comparisons with the fate of Canadian Native peoples are striking. It is worth noting that Mandel is a rarity among US writers. His book contains a

respectable number of references to Canadian realities, and he is obviously quite consciously writing for both the US and Canadian audiences.

The USSR is a society significantly free of racism. This is certainly a result of the conscious anti-racist policies of the regime, but Mandel notes that racism was not generally used as an ideological prop by the Russian Empire. An ideology that conceived of subject peoples as naturally inferior was of course developed. But unlike the colonies of other European powers, the Russian colonies were not predominantly non-white, and therefore inferiority did not become linked to color. Mandel quotes Russian writings of the nineteenth century describing the backwardness and natural inferiority of the very blue-eyed blonde Komi and Mari.

The chapter on Soviet Jews is one of the most valuable. Mandel is frank in his discussion of those problems that do exist and have existed in the past, but he completely demolishes the notion of a persecuted people living within a society of officially sanctioned anti-semitism. The light he sheds on Jewish emigration is completely new, including accounting for regional differences. I have not seen it in print before. I would not attempt to summarize the material in this chapter as it is too rich and complex. It has to be read.

The book is not an ethnography, but it has a sufficient amount of ethnographic information to make it of interest to the specialized reader. Mandel is a keen observer of significant details. He notes that at an Armenian banquet he attended the Tamada (toastmaster) was a woman and that this is normally most definitely a male role throughout the Caucasus. At the same time, Armenians still maintain extended families and the dowry.

The book has some minor shortcomings that need mentioning. I suspect that they flow primarily from one basic reality. Small presses such as Ramparts and the University of Alberta just can't afford to provide authors with strong editorial support. For example, a good editor would have fought with Mandel over his idiosyncratic use of terminology; i.e., he insists on using his own — apparently invented — term, “full ethnic republics” instead of the Soviets' term “Union Republic”. Granted that his is slightly more self-explanatory, but why not use the correct term, and explain it? A good editor would have picked up small flaws such as his failure to give us the name of the Soviet woman ethnographer whom he describes and quotes at length in two chapters, and would have called his attention to the occasions where he leaves a point tantalizingly hanging in the air and gallops onward. And then there is the matter of the footnote at the end of his discourse on cultural

relativism in which he cites three works. The purpose of the citation (pro or con) is never stated and therefore could be easily — and damagingly — misunderstood. I read the works in question, and found that I could not understand why he was citing them at all — pro or con.

The diligent reader can assemble a useful bibliography by picking through the chapter notes. A compiled bibliography at the end, with some annotation, would have been welcome.

I am sure that the political tone of the book will bring heaps of coals onto his head. However, on this question I stand with Mandel. His use throughout the book of comparisons with U.S. conditions, (e.g. the indigenous peoples of Siberia have sixteen times as many doctors from among their own ranks as American Indians.) has not only a clarifying function but also a political one. In his chapter on Soviet Jews, Mandel is quite frank that his writing is intended as a contribution to a political debate on a subject that occupies a lot of space in the public media.

In this work as in his others, Mandel is clearly *both* a scholar and a political publicist. It is to his credit that he has never seen those two roles as contradictory. Of course, nobody can write about the Soviet Union at this moment in history without producing a work with political consequences. Mandel doesn't pretend to. He passionately cares what his readers know or do not know about the USSR. He does not consider such knowledge to be a matter of trivial concern. It could be a matter of life or death.

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*Serge TCHERKÉZOFF, Le roi nyamwezi, la droite et la gauche. Révision comparative des classifications dualistes, Paris-Cambridge, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme et Cambridge University Press, 1983. 156 pages, figures, diagrammes.*

*Par Jean-Claude Muller  
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Voici un livre très stimulant qui renouvelle les perspectives théoriques de l'analyse des systèmes classificatoires dualistes. On se souviendra qu'à la suite de Hertz et de son très justement célèbre essai sur la prééminence de la main droite, Needham, quelque cinquante ans plus tard, reprit le problème dans un travail sur la main gauche du Mugwe (un prêtre de l'ethnie meru), travail qui culmina en 1973 par l'édition d'un volume collectif sur cette