Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies

journal homepage: https://www.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/HRPS/index

BOOK REVIEW

Contemporary Russia as a Feudal Society: A New Perspective of the Post-Soviet Era by Vladimir Shlapentokh, London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007.

Yanuar Sumarlan

Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, Thailand

Email: yanuar.sum@mahidol.ac.th

James R. Rumpia

Center for Public Policy and Human Rights Studies, Fakultas Hukum, Universitas Lampung, Indonesia

Email: jamesreinaldor@gmail.com

Article History

Received: 6-Jun-2022

Revised: 29-Jun-2022

Accepted: 29-Jun-2022

Introduction

What has happened in post-Soviet Russia that its leader behaves in such a violent manner lately? One of the glimpses that appear rather convincingly from the realm of the political-economic realm is Shlapentokh's Contemporary Russia as a Feudal Society: A New Perspective on the Post-Soviet Era. This book appeared almost immediately after the first signs of 're-feudalization' of post-Soviet Russia popped up in 2006. Vladislav Surkov's (a key

ISSN (Online): 2697-3804

Kremlin ideologue) words that Russia is a "sovereign democracy" was refuted by Dmitrii Medvedev (first deputy chairman of the government) in June 2006, who claimed the adjective "sovereign" was redundant. This book offers a quantum leap beyond this 'little debate' by proving and concluding that post-Soviet Russia is an epitome of a "feudal model" (page 3).

Shlapentokh pulls an interesting analogy between what happened in post-Soviet Russia and what happened in feudalistic medieval Europe. The major features of feudal Europe were similar to those of post-Soviet Russia. The central administration must cooperate with powerful actors, including regional leaders, corporations, and wealthy individuals, as well as churches and other major social actors; in exchange for legitimacy—a commodity provided only by the central administration—various social actors supply the supreme leader with troops, money, and support in the election process (pages 25-26). Vassal relations as the basis of feudalism go back to the works of March Bloch (1961) and other Annales School, who claimed that such relations are a direct consequence of the weakness of the central state and the dependence of the king on feudal lords and other "big actors" (to protect against disorder in the absence of a strong central state (page 26). Elements of feudalism in Russia had appeared in the Kyiv State in the ninth century when the king was only seen as a senior among other warriors, as told by Russian chroniclers in the twelfth century (as reported by Likhachev et al. 1950).

This book review is divided into the introduction, book division, the argument, premises, the data, and the ending.

Book Division

The author set the book into 11 chapters to represent the whole process of the re-feudalization of Russia after the crises at the end of the twenty-first century. The first two chapters offer the opening salvo against the failure of the integrative-system approach to understanding Russia as used by the scholars of post-Soviet Russian Studies. Set a literature review on contemporary Russia, the two first chapters stand as a theoretical discussion of

the feudal model as the model to analyze post-Soviet Russia. Then chapter 3 examines the weakness of the central administration (as the key element of the feudal model) and its main social consequences, such as crime, corruption, and political instability. (The lawlessness in post-Soviet Russia shows a clear break with the Soviet past and a strong resemblance to Western European societies of the Middle Ages.)

Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 analyze the roles of three major social actors in contemporary Russia, i.e., oligarchs, the president, and governors. Chapter 4 begins by looking at the impact of oligarchs' large financial resources on political outcomes, which had been absent during the Soviet period. Chapter 5 analyzes the feudal or oligarchic ideology that justifies the feudal elements in society and legitimizes the roles of those who challenge the central administration. Chapter 6 shows the Russian presidents' "domain" (or their personal control over state resources). As shown by Yeltsin and Putin regimes, the use of presidential power to accumulate personal wealth was commonplace in post-Soviet Russia. (During the Middle Ages, kings and other leaders used their personal wealth to retain and expand their political power.) Chapters 7 and 8 reveal the tenuous relations between the center (Moscow) and the provinces. Like in both Middle Ages Europe and contemporary Russia, disputes between local power centers and the central administration were common. Typically, the central administration was unable or unwilling to interfere in regional politics—thus, local barons were allowed to dominate life in the regions while amassing vast fortunes for themselves and their close-knit social and political circles (to be the link between the Middle Ages and contemporary Russia.

The final chapters 9, 10 and 11 focus on the specific characteristics of contemporary Russia that resemble those of Middle Ages Europe. Chapter 9 exposes the precariousness of private property in post-Soviet Russia. Chapter 10 shows the topic of personal relations (in contrast to the rationalized bureaucratic relations of ideal-type democracies) in Russian politics and economic matters. The last chapter of the book describes private protection agencies, which are also known as *krysha* or roof, as important aspects of Russian society. The weak state in the post-Soviet period allowed the protection of big businesses and powerful individuals at the hands of private (legal or criminal) organizations. The conclusion

offers a succinct summary of the book's major points and arguments that the feudal model, as shown in the Russian case, can be used as a fruitful analytical tool for understanding many contemporary societies.

The Argument

Shlapentokh writes bluntly, "All descriptions of Russian society in negative terms have flaws" (page 15). Furthermore, Parsons' Holistic Vision of the World or the integrative-system approach has been pursuing the "theory of everything" and wondering in fantasy realms of higher dimensions with little or no connection with reality (Horgan, 2006). Parsons' grand theory of society adhered to a universalistic and holistic vision of the world (Parsons, 1951; 1971). With this spirit of the holistic approach, social scientists tend to assume that any given society can be politically classified as either democratic or authoritarian. Mainstream economists believe the neoclassical model is a good approximation for the description of the market economy, just as sociologists believe in the "cultural model" through which social values are generated (like prices) through the spontaneous activities of the public (page 17). The advocates of the neoclassical model shared the expression of Robert Solo of "singular approach" to describe the Western economy as a system based on perfect competition with prices as the only regulator (Solo, 2000). These economists often underestimate the impact of bureaucracy and the state on economic processes (page 17). They ignore the role of various economic organizations with their own patterns of economic behavior, such as corporations that negotiate over prices and use the privileges that come from rent-seeking activities (page 17). The integrative-system approach has led many scholars to conclude that totalitarianism which once existed in the USSR, can only be replaced by democratic order as if this transition is the only possible prognosis of things to come (page 18).

For Shlapentokh, the disarray in the literature on contemporary Russia reflects a deep fragmentation in all dimensions, i.e., ideological, political, social, economic, ethnic, and cultural (page 18). The main argument of this book is that the dominance of the integrative-system approach explains why numerous theories have failed to explain the changes in post-

Soviet Russia. Thus, the book offers an alternative approach to the study of post-Soviet Russia through rejection of the integrative approach and adopting a segmented analysis. Thus, society will not be treated as a single system but as a conglomeration of social segments— liberal, authoritarian/totalitarian, and feudal— that enjoy a significant degree of power and independence that changes over time under different social conditions (page 18).

Premises

The first premise offered by the author is that the optimistic camp in describing Russia, which believes that Russia has no choice but to move forward full-fledged liberal model, has never considered what Russia would become if such an optimistic trend took hold (page 10). This group believes that Russia has no choice but to move forward with a liberal model, focusing on the obstacles to reaching this goal (page 10). Colton and McFaul suggested that "flawed though it may be, democracy is still a superior system to the alternative" (Herspring, 2003).

The second premise on the efficacy of using the segmented approach to analyze societies in the world earlier and today is that "similar patterns of behavior can be found in any society, in the past or present" (page 20). Even Weber (1978) wrote that the same historical phenomenon may in one aspect feudal, in another patrimonial, in another bureaucratic, and in still another charismatic." The third premise used in this syllogism is Simmel's observation that the relative role of each type of social organization varies and the patterns of behavior change; their specific combination defines the specific character of each society (1971). The fourth premise is built up by observation of many thinkers from Perry Anderson (1974), Kenneth Waltz (1979), Vladimir Lenin (1951), A. Martynov (2006), and Richard Sakwa (2004). Building a Marxist terminology, Anderson (1974), for example, developed a view similar to the segmented approach: he suggested that each society represents a combination of different modes of production, not only one as any orthodox Marxists would insist.

The final conclusion of these premises is an indication that there is a better approach to explain what happens in any society at the social, political, economic, cultural, etc. levels. This approach is the segmented approach. Sakwa's book (2004) suggested that in the post-

communist epoch, Russia developed as if three different "orders" had been superimposed upon each other: the statist, patrimonial, and liberal democratic orders. To finish this conclusion, Shlapentokh decides to anchor the analysis of post-Soviet Russia on the older 'feudal' model of Medieval Europe that shows some characteristics of contemporary Russia: criminal protection of private businesses (page 30) and common descriptions among intellectuals of Russia as "feudal society" (page 31).

The Data

The chapters progress as a segmented approach to explain post-Soviet Russia in (not) every segment. One of the missing parts of this book is that the author picks only what he thinks as matter and important to the segment-per-segment analysis. The beginning indication of the feudal characters of post-Soviet Russia is set in chapter 3: Weakness of the state. The first dimension of state weakness arises from the inability of the ruler, or the ruling class, to protect the regime against political rivals. The second dimension of weakness appears in the ruler's inability to implement laws and directives in his territory (page 36). For example, the rule of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999) was similar to the rule of the French kings immediately after the collapse of the empire of Charles the Great in the early ninth century—during Yeltsin's administration, the two major actors in post-Soviet Russia (oligarchs and governors) openly challenged the central administration (page 36). Although Putin gained the power to protect himself against any rival in the country, the regime remained inefficient in many ways and was unable to control all the regions and major social actors. Those with a social science background would understand that the reasons for the state's weakness can be multiplied beyond the fact that the ruler is not able to implement laws and directives alone.

The causes of state weakness are at least two. The weakness derives from a lack of unity among elites or from the increase in corruption (page 36). The leader and the ruling elite, torn by internal struggle, are unable to run the country efficiently. Similarly, the central administration simply loses resources to subjugate or convince the regional power holders

to obey the commands above and establish order in their sectors. During perestroika, for example, the central administration became weaker as a result of the reforms that undermined the dominant role of the Communist Party and the state (page 37).

The second cause of weakness lies in corruption (page 37). Corruption was certainly a leading cause of the weakness of Yeltsin's regime; he acted like a king whose main goal was to stay in power by all means necessary while enriching himself and his family (page 37). When the level of order in society was precarious, many historians, from de Coulanges and Bloch to Hanawalt and Gauvard, described societies in the Middle Ages as chaotic, disorderly and dangerous (page 38). Finckenauer and Voronin (in The Threat of Russian Organized Crime, 2001) wrote that in the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world became the target of a new global crime threat from criminal organizations and criminal activities over the borders of Russia and other former Soviet republics such as Ukraine (page 38).

Once the low level of organized crime in Soviet society faced the weakening of the state, party, and official ideologies (along with the legalization of private property and the lack of control over privatization, the eruption of crime and corruption appeared (page 39). After 1991, criminal organizations mushroomed in the country; by 1995, 14,000 criminal organizations operated in Russia, compared to 50 in 1988 (page 39). In 2006, the minister of internal affairs Rashid Nurgaliev reported that criminal groups controlled the ' fuel, metallurgy, lumber and fish industries" (page 39). Criminal organizations not only served businesses as " violence managing agencies" (Volkov, 1999) but also became deeply enmeshed in the business itself. The effects of these corrupt practices are great. The rampant bribes, for example, reduced the number of criminals sentenced for their deeds (page 44). Putin appointed people with notorious corrupt activities, such as former governor of the Far East province Evgenii Nazdratenko as a member of his government and Nazir Khapsirokov to the Prosecutor General's Office/deputy to the head of the presidential administration (page 48).

Naturally, just like the poor justice in the Medieval Ages when noblemen were criminals with impunity and bribery/extortion of judges, the system of justice in post-Soviet Russia was extremely inefficient (page 50).

The next chapter, 4, goes down to the details of the segment where oligarchs and

bureaucrats are actually practicing their corrupt practices: the purchase of political power, rent-seeking activities, and "feudal wars." In post-Soviet Russia, money played a key role in the political process; the rich spread corruption in society and diminished the efficiency of the central state (page 56). Corporations and other major social actors bribe officials, from the head of state to local judges and police officers, using cash and gifts such as shares of company stocks, apartments, and high-class entertainment (page 56). In this 'rent-seeking', individuals or groups devote their scarce resources to pursuing the monopoly rights granted by the government. In post-Soviet Russia, illegal incomes from bribes soon surpassed the legal salaries of bureaucrats by many times (page 60).

The story of Khodorkovsky's fortune illustrates how the Kremlin created its vassals. Khodorkovsky gained wealth through the Menatep Bank and close ties to the government (page 64). As an adviser to the prime minister of the Russian Federation (Ivan Silaiev) in 1990-1991, deputy in the Ministry of Fuel and Energy in 1992 and 1998-1999, Khodorkovsky was chosen by officials as the holder of accounts from various ministries and from the Moscow City government. Able to manipulate funds from various sources in times of high inflation for big gains, by 1995, Khodorkovsky (biography is available on www.mediapoliis.com) became one of the wealthiest people in Russia without the slightest contribution to the economy. The fate of big corporations depended on their economic efficiency but on the privileges they received in the form of budget money, the illegal or semilegal acquisition of state property, and the redistribution of property (page 65).

How oligarchs gain power can be explained by the exchange of wealth for political positions that perpetuate the oligarchs' economic and political power (page 66). Examples of oligarchs who bought political power are Boris Berezovskii and Vladimir Potanin; the most famous cases included Roman Abramovich (Chelsea FC owner), who became the governor of the remote region of Chukotka in 2000) (pages 66-67). Nevertheless, the conflicts between the government and some oligarchs began in March 1997 with the arrival of Boris Nemtsov to the Kremlin who together with Chubais persuaded Yeltsin to curb the rent-giving activity of the bureaucracy and the arbitrariness of oligarchs like Gusinskii and Berezovskii (page 68). When Putin rose to power, the Kremlin offensive against Khodorovsky became symbolic of

this conflict, especially when the latter announced his interest in entering politics in 2003 (page 69). Calling Russia a society based on slave ownership, Khodorovsky claimed that oligarchs' ability to unite economic and political power would turn Russia into a happy country (page 69). With three advantages (state apparatus, Khodorovsky's Jewish background, and support for the US's policy), Putin finally arrested Khodorovsky in July 2003 (page 69). The relationship between oligarchs and the central administration changes over time; sometimes, the oligarchs could almost impose their will on the Kremlin. At the other times, they retreated to faithful vassals (page 73).

Chapter 5 explains deeper into the oligarchic ideology and its opposition to the liberal and totalitarian ideologies. The contemporary oligarchic ideology or 'corporate ideology' recognizes several elements of the liberal ideology, including the role of the market, private property, and political freedoms (page 74). Supporters of the oligarchic ideology justify the corruption and violation of laws by oligarchs and major corporations (page 74). The oligarchic ideology that somewhat overlaps with the libertarian ideology is hostile toward the state (in particular, the totalitarian state) even if it promotes the use of the state machine for achieving corporate interests and for the rent-seeking activity (page 76). Refusing to discuss the state as an important agency for establishing and enforcing the rules of the new economic system (in fighting monopolies and enforcing laws), the oligarchic ideology never sees the state as a promoter of science, education, and technological progress, and the arts (page 76). This anti-state attitude is epitomized by Larisa Piiasheva (eloquent theorist of privatization during perestroika), who stands as the most consistent foe of the state (page 76). Piiasheva (1989) theorized that with economic progress, "social expenditures should dwindle," and people should pay for education as well as medicine and health care directly. One of the pillars of the oligarchic ideology is the hatred of social equality and the cultivation of greed (page 79). The next chapter 6 sheds light on the different segments of Russian society: the domain where the "crown" is frolicking. If in the Middle Ages, the division between the private property of the leader (the royal domain) and the property of other lords and the nation's assets was vague, the same situation applies in post-Soviet Russia. In societies with strong feudal elements, the domain serves three main purposes: (1) to guarantee "the family's"

wealth and the leader after leaving office, (2) to provide the leader with the resources for maintaining power/ getting reelected, and (3) to allow the leader to give officials and legislators with various privileges like apartments, hospitals, trips to vacation resorts (page 85). Although the cases of removal of a leader in an independent totalitarian society such as the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, or North Korea are quite rare, the change of rulers in Soviet satellites was more common as Moscow could replace any leader at any time (page 86). Only Kruschev was forced to resign after a political struggle reached the top rank at that time. Without help from social actors outside the Kremlin, Stalin, Kruschev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev could accomplish tasks to solidify the leadership position (page 86).

When Yeltsin rose to power, he found ways to fill his pockets with the famous slogan "enrichessez-vous" (enrich yourself) (from Guizot, a minister under the French king Louis Philippe in 1830). One of the techniques was to sell state property at a negligible price to oligarchs who would pay the family back in company stock, real estate abroad, and cash (page 89). The other case included the auctions of major oil companies in 1995-1997, including Yukos (page 89). The actual size of Yeltsin and his family's assets is unknown because Putin, an heir of Yeltsin, promised not to reveal anything about this; Putin's first edict was devoted to Yeltsin's immunity and well-being of Yeltsin's family. Moskovskii Komsomolets, a Moscow newspaper known for impertinence, wrote that Yeltsin had created the country's most prestigious and corrupt commercial firm (page 89).

Unlike in Yeltsin's time, Putin's 'family property' played a much smaller role than in the case of Yeltsin (page 91). The most important source of Putin's domain was his personal control over the major oil and gas companies; the gigantic company Gazprom and gas company Sibneft and some other firms were under complete control of Putin and his close circle. Putin expanded his domain not through his family but through his proxies (people from Petersburg, mostly Chekists), who became members of the boards of directors of leading monopolies in oil, gas, electricity, and railway transportation (page 92). As the economic department of a respected Russian newspaper suggested, eight persons (seven Kremlin officials and the president) controlled "the assets of these companies, which were equal to three Russian national budgets, which the owners of the companies were so loyal

that they were ready to give almost everything to the Kremlin (page 92). Yuliia Latynina (2006) suggested that Putin did not confront the country's problem with corruption because he himself was deeply enmeshed in it.

Chapters 7 and 8 explain deeper details on the local barons' practices after the Soviet collapse and under Putin's moderate feudalism. The details are very interesting for the readers to check for themselves.

Chapters 9 and 10 put back the discussion into the conceptual framework that this book relies upon. The precariousness of property in Russia is compared to a similar phenomenon in the Middle Ages. In Russia, the volume of public property was much greater compared to that of Western countries, and the administrative control over the means of production and natural resources was vast (page 137). Midway through the period of perestroika, the destabilization of property relations was seen in three spheres: (1) the demarcation of public property between the center and the provinces, (2) between public and private property, and (3) between the owners of private property (page 136). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, almost all forms of private property could be expropriated by the state, private companies, or individuals (page 142). Chapter 10 exposes the core feature of feudalism: personal relations. The details of this core feature are interesting for those who want to read them.

The Ending

This segment-by-segment exposition of what happens in post-Soviet Russia is very efficient in narrating the reality around the return of feudalism a la Middle Ages back to Russia. However, these layers are only covering the choice of the author to discuss. The cooperation or resistance among the population (with its multiple layers of power relationships is not really discussed in this book. This onion layer-by-layer technique to reveal the realities as every segment has them is quite interesting for the clarity of exposition. Nevertheless, the complexity of the real society called Russia should hide more layers of reality that this method might not be able to reveal. Many works from earlier periods can be used to analyze the abusive lives of local barons or the leader's business life.

Nevertheless, the practice of underworld criminal organizations might be out of reach since most academics or scholars might not have access to such hidden parts of many societies. In the end, the book offers a valuable set of methods to expose layer by layer what happens in society to bring up the conclusion that the overall trend is the re-feudalization of Russia. Perhaps this book is still useful to see that one of the signs of Putin's inability to enforce laws and directives on the former Soviet states (like today's Ukraine) is the fact that the leadership must use military forces to "punish" the country for opening a crack in the united Russian Federation. Overall, this method can be used by students and scholars to analyze more societies.

References

Anderson, P. (1974). *Passage from antiquity to feudalism*. Verso.

Bloch, M. (1961). *Feudal society*. University of Chicago Press.

Coulange, F. de. (1923). *Histoire des institutions politique de lucienne*. Hachette.

Gauvard, C. (1999). Fear of crime in late medieval France. In B. A. Hanawalt, & D. Wallace, *Medieval crime and social control* (pp. 1-48). University of Minnesota Press.

Hanawalt, B. A., & Wallace, D., (Eds.). (1999). *Medieval crime and social control*. University of Minnesota Press.

Herspring, D. (Ed.). (2003). *Putin's Russia: Past imperfect, future uncertain*. Rowman.

Horgan, J. (2006, January 1). *Einstein left the building*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/books/review/einstein-has-left-the-building.html

Latynina, Y., (2006, June 26). *Auktsion kak spetsoperatsiia*. Novaia Gazeta.

Likhachev, D., Romanov, B., & Adrianova-Perrets, V. (Eds.). (1950). Povest' vermennykh let, Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk SSSR.

Lenin, V. (1951). *Sobranie Sochinenii*, 4th Ed., Vol. 32, Moscow: Politiz-dat.

Martynov, A. (2006). *Transformatsiia makrosotsial'nykh system v postsocialisticheskom mire: Metodologicheskii aspect*. Lenand.

Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Free Press.

Parsons, T. (1971). *The system of modern society*. Prentice Hall.

Piiasheva, L. (1989). Kontury radikal'noi sotsial'noi reform. In F. Borodkin, L. Kosals, & P. Ryvkina (Eds.), *Postizheni*. Progress.

Sakwa, R. (2004). *Putin: Russia's choice*. Routledge.

Simmel, G. (1971). *On individuality and social forms: Selected Writings*. University of Chicago Press.

Solo, R. (2000). *Economic organizations and social systems*. University of Michigan Press.

Volkov, V. (1999). Violent entrepreneurship in post-communist Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies 51*(5), 751-754.

Waltz, K. (1976). *The theory of international politics*. Random House.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology.* University of California Press.