

Andrey N. Medushevsky, *Russian Constitutionalism: Historical and Contemporary Development* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 264 pp.

This book is not an easy read. One suspects that the original Russian is a dense if not turgid text, and it is not helped by a very literal translation. At times the English is quite correct, if hardly a stylish delight; for much of the book it is quite awkward, with missing articles, confusing word order, and some quaint words (members of the elite are often described as ‘bigwigs’). Generally the meaning is reasonably clear, but it is hard work.

Is it worth the effort? The book describes Russian constitutionalism – the devising of constitutions and the political structures within which they operate – throughout Russian history. (Many of the constitutional projects described were never implemented.) A somewhat elaborate classification of constitutions is offered (real, nominal and sham being the three main categories), as are comparisons with the constitutions of other countries at various historical times. The author offers a theory of cyclicity: that constitutions and political orders go through a cyclical process of deconstitutionalisation, constitutionalisation and reconstitutionalisation. Any of the types of constitution can be involved in the cycle, although one has the impression that the author does see the stable existence of a ‘real’ constitution, one that provides citizens with true democratic rights, as the ‘end of history’. Another major conceptual concern is the relationship between the form of the constitution and the level of political development and general ‘modernity’ of society. A constitution that pushes too far ahead of society is unlikely to succeed.

It is possible that my receptivity and comprehension of the argument was negatively affected by the style of the text and its translation. I tried to be receptive, since I have a strong interest in the role of institutions, such as constitutions, in both reflecting and driving political development, particularly in countries not seen as highly institutionalised in their politics. Nevertheless I was disappointed, finding the treatment to be rambling and superficial. Although the coverage was very broad and suggested considerable erudition, no particular theme or example was pursued with persistence. There is certainly no data or even discussion of the development of Russian society of a type that would put meat on the author’s sociological approach.

I know little about pre-Soviet Russian constitutionalism, and was interested to read just how regularly political elites pursued constitutional projects and how enthusiastic the writers of new constitutions were in responding (and how often they paid the price of producing a proposal that did need meet with the approval of the tsar). Given that parenthetical comment, it is perhaps not surprising they were rather timid in pandering to Russia's 'special', that is, authoritarian characteristics. Despite the interest in the constitutions of other nations, the perceived need to acknowledge the uniqueness of Russia was very strong among both those ordering and those writing the new constitutions. While this was interesting to a non-specialist in the period, I was frustrated by how little was actually said about the constitutional drafts the author mentioned or the historical context in which they were prepared.

As for the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, of which the reviewer did have some pre-existing knowledge and understanding, this book did not add to either. The coverage of the post-Soviet period brought home to me just how lightly referenced, particularly to the secondary literature, the book is. Although, for example, the author appears to be aware of the debate over parliamentarism versus presidentialism, especially semi-presidentialism, he cites none of the literature. (He does occasionally mention names in the text, but there are rarely citations of their actual work.)

The relatively small number of people working directly in area covered by the book might feel the need to read it and might extract some value from it, but I cannot recommend it to a more general reader wanting to learn about Russian political development and the role of constitutions and constitutionally determined structures within it.

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Atsushi Ogushi, *The Demise of the Soviet Communist Party* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 218 pp.

Atsushi Ogushi's *The Demise of the Soviet Communist Party* is the latest work published by Routledge on behalf of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES), and as such presents another highly-focused,