

The Shadow of War  
Russia and the USSR, 1941  
to the Present  
Stephen Lovell

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# The Shadow of War

## **The Blackwell History of Russia**

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Stephen Lovell

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# Series Editor's Preface

In this final volume in the Blackwell History of Russia, Stephen Lovell brilliantly exemplifies the aims of the series as a whole. By integrating well-known information with new approaches stimulated by discoveries in previously inaccessible archives, he presents a fresh synthesis, studded with original insight. By opening his analysis in 1941 and taking it beyond the collapse of the USSR 50 years later, he adopts an unconventional chronological framework that allows familiar material to be interpreted in unfamiliar ways. And by telling the story of the emergent Russian Federation from the point of view of a contemporary historian, rather than from the perspective of the political scientists who have hitherto dominated the subject, he crosses not only a significant chronological divide, but also a disciplinary one.

As Lovell explains, one reason why historians have been slow to make the leap into recent decades has lain in a lack of the sorts of evidence on which they customarily rely. It is a striking contribution of his book to reveal how much such evidence is nevertheless now available to the researcher. Another deterrent to contemporary history has been the longstanding obsession with the inter-war years shared by many undergraduate students of “twentieth-century” Europe. It is true that the history of European integration can sometimes seem insipid by comparison with that of the Europe of the dictators. But in Russia there is no reason to think the latter part of the twentieth century uneventful. And the extraordinary developments of 1989–91 and beyond are scarcely comprehensible without an understanding of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years (the latter, it transpires, being far from the “era of stagnation” of popular myth). A further virtue of this attractively written book, therefore, is to bring to a wider readership the fruits of the growing body of scholarship – in Russian and other languages – devoted to the period between 1953 and 1991.

The Utopian fervor with which the party leadership tried to revivify the revolutionary tradition after Stalin's death was matched only by romantic hopes for the regeneration of communism in the late 1980s under Gorbachev – Khrushchev *redivivus* in the eyes of many. However, this is not a book concerned only with ideology and high politics, and Lovell is properly skeptical of the temptation to divide Soviet and post-Soviet history into periods bounded by the tenures of successive political leaders. Stalinist coercion is a crucial part of his account, but he is just as interested in the destabilizing effects of its sudden relaxation. Moreover, now that historians no longer instinctively conceive social activity in Russia solely in terms of resistance to a repressive, centralized state, there is room not only to investigate the more “normal” contours of everyday life – housing, shopping, work, and leisure – but also to consider its kaleidoscopic variety in the thousands of provincial villages and towns that make up the multinational Russian polity. Quite what has defined the boundaries of the “normal” in Russia and the Soviet Union is one of Lovell's major concerns. He has particularly revealing things to say about the formation, by the 1960s, of a distinctive “personal sphere,” whose boundaries were significantly extended after the collapse of the USSR. Religion, gender, and culture (in its widest sense) are all more prominent in the writings of the current generation of scholars than they were in the work of their more materialist predecessors. So they are here. The author's deep immersion in twentieth-century films and print culture gives him an especially acute sense of what makes Russians tick, what makes them laugh, and how far they have come into contact (and conflict) with Western values. This new cultural emphasis is not to say that hard economics can be ignored in an era in which energy resources have been increasingly crucial to the state's balance of trade. However, the key contribution of Lovell's book is not so much to isolate themes for discussion as to explore the connections between them. Economic questions are shown to be inseparable from domestic politics, and both are inextricably linked to the international order shaped by the outcome of the Second World War.

It is that war and its multiple legacies that give Stephen Lovell's book its distinctive interpretative thrust. On the one hand, victory over fascism was crucial to “the re-launch of the Soviet project” in the 1950s and to the maintenance of both “inner” and “outer empires” until the end of the 1980s. On the other hand, the sacrifices made by the Soviet population in the Great Patriotic War cast a shadow over almost every aspect of the USSR for the remainder of its existence, from its command siege-economy to the best-selling war novels of Iurii Bondarev. A sense of geopolitical vulnerability haunts the Kremlin still. The uneasy balance between menace and opportunity bequeathed by the Second World War is set out in the Introduction and developed in a series of thematic chapters that combine the author's nose for telling detail with his aptitude for

aphoristic generalization. The result is a book like no other. Unique in its combination of accessibility and sophistication, it helps us to see 70 years of Russian and Soviet history with a completely fresh eye. There could be no better way to end the series.

Simon Dixon  
UCL SSEES

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MAP 1 Europe after World War II.