A Basic Structure of the Soviet Government

This brief appendix provides a simple outline of the complex and changing structure of the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The country was divided into one federated socialist republic (Russian) and fourteen soviet socialist republics (Armenian, Azerbaijan, Byelorussian, Estonian, Georgian, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Latvian, Lithuanian, Moldavian, Tajik, Turkmen, Ukrainian, and Uzbek). Each republic contained stacked (and sometimes confused) subdivisions ranging from smallest to largest in this order: *raion* (districts, areas, subdistricts), *krai* (territory), *okrug* (district), and *oblast'* (region).

The basic structure of the Soviet state had three parts or political bodies—the Communist Party, the bureaucracy, and the legislature (this ignores the mostly toothless judiciary of the Supreme Court). The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the only political party permitted by the constitution, coordinated all the affairs of the economy and society. The pyramid party structure rested on a selection of Soviet citizens (no more than 9 percent of the Soviet people were ever members of the Communist Party), and membership was overwhelmingly made up of professional and often technocratic males (the Party shares this with the current digerati demographic). The party structure stretched upward from the members to local party organizations, to local, district, and regional congresses, to the National Party Congress, to the Central Committee, and finally to the Politburo, which was the governing Party committee of the land. At the head of the Politburo sat—in a fitting encapsulation of the Party's bureaucratic spirit—the general secretary, a position that Stalin granted almost supreme powers after Lenin's death. The general secretary worked in theory alongside the premier (the bureaucracy) and the president of state (the legislature) and oversaw the Secretariat, a second ruling Party committee on a level with the Politburo.

The central structure of the bureaucracy scans simply but proved labyrinthine in practice. At the bottom again were the people, and at the top was the premier, who oversaw the Council of Ministers. Between the citizens and the Council of Ministers fell the internal structures of between twelve and thirty-seven ministries (such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the Ministry of Transport Construction) and the military (the Red Army). During economic reforms, ministries were regularly reorganized, consolidated, and strengthened, and many of them worked across local, district, and national committee subdivisions. This analysis underscores the Soviet bureaucratic divide between civilian ministries and the military (which was a training ground for Party leadership and a sink for the national budget).

Lastly, the legislature was constitutionally appointed in 1918 to oversee economic, social, and security affairs, although in the latter half of the twentieth century its power was largely secondary to the Party and the bureaucracy. Citizen-elected local, district, and regional soviets (or councils) informed the Supreme Soviet, the Presidium, and the president or head of state, whose powers paled in comparison to the premier (head of the bureaucracy) and the general secretary (head of the Party). The Presidium was initially a decision-making body that was a peer with the Council of Ministers (bureaucracy) and the Politburo and Secretariat (Party), although its influence waned with the consolidation and decentralization of power in the Party and bureaucracies under and after Stalin.

These three branches of government were staffed by the *nomenklatura* or elite responsible for higher positions of authority. Formally, the *nomenklatura* occupied a small, elite subset of the already elite Party membership, although in practice it also could include the *intelligentsia* or needed experts who did not have to be Party members (most of the scientists and administrators featured here were members of the Party and often the *intelligentsia*). In the management of the command economy, Party and state hierarchies were separate and overlapping. So although members of the *nomenklatura* could manage a state-owned factory, they also had to have party approval if they were not party members. In such cases, factory directors might report to the local Party secretary as an ordinary Party member, and the Party secretary would report to the director as an employee. In all, this book offers a reminder that in the management of large organizations, especially the Soviet state and economy, the questions of structure and governance are rarely so straightforward as they may appear on paper.