

James R. Harris, *The Great Urals: regionalism and the evolution of the Soviet system* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999. Pp. viii + 235. £30.50)

The Urals, the northern upland region demarcating Europe from Asia, was historically rich in coal and iron but hindered by isolation. It played a key role in early Russian industrialisation, then in the growth of Soviet heavy industry in the 1930s and the war economy of the 1940s. It continues to act as a powerful regional bloc in the Russian Federation.

This fascinating book has two themes. First, it rethinks the role of regional interests, leaders, and coalitions in Stalin's dictatorship. Second, it considers the historical continuity of regionalism in Russian history.

The book's core is a case study of the Urals in the interwar Soviet economy, based on central and local archives. In the early years of the command system regional agents were initially appointed to act as local clients of powerful patrons in Moscow. Harris shows how the agents based in the Urals quickly acquired a sense of their own interests which they pursued under a cloak of hidden information. Their *interests* lay in maximising the investment resources at their disposal; they secured these resources from the centre by competitive promotion of the Urals relative to other regions, especially the Donbass, as a site for new development of mining and metallurgy. Their *information* pertained to the true capacity of the Urals region to absorb investment resources and use them to generate a surplus for growth of output. They used their control of information to exaggerate both the local resources which would be complemented by centralised investment and the expected return on the latter. Despite the low-trust environment it became their common interest to form a Urals network and collude with each other against Moscow in this deception. When difficulties emerged the regional leaders concealed underperformance or diverted blame back to the centre or on to other agents outside their network. However, in 1936–7 the shortfalls became too great to conceal, the interest of Moscow in the local strategy of passing the buck became too acute, and the Urals network disintegrated, the regional leaders' strategy rebounding upon them. Harris concludes that this was enough to lend a veneer of plausibility to the charges of sabotage leveled against them in the Great Terror.

The book's more lightweight theme, promoted by its title, is the role of Urals regionalism in Russian history. The first chapter begins in 1700. The last concludes with El'tsyn's dissolution of Edward Rossel's "Urals Republic" in 1993 by way of a roller-coaster tour through Khrushchev's regionalisation of the central bureaucracy, Brezhnev's recentralisation, and regional disintegration under Gorbachev. In his rush the author forgot about framework and lost the chance to discuss the enduring motives for regional autarky (not "autarchy") in a system where trust and personal relations were and remain much more important in enabling transactions than rules and contracts. In short, this reviewer did not feel that the ride added much long-run perspective. It would have been more efficient just to say that "Before and after Stalin the Urals region was very important". This criticism should not detract from the general applause which the author deserves.

The book is elegantly printed with a number of new photographs of people and places from the archives.