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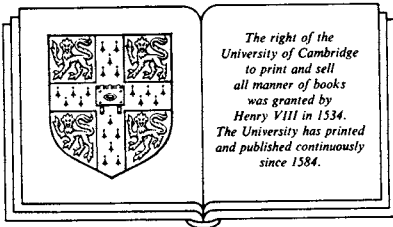
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AN ALGEBRA OF SOVIET POWER

Elite circulation in the Belorussian
Republic 1966–86

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Preface

This book probably got started in Moscow some eight years ago. Its immediate occasion was yet another bout of insomnia, induced this time not by one of the usual offenders – heartaches, backaches and financial woes – but by the insistence of a single nagging question which I found myself helpless to avoid: How does this system work? Moments on the street, in the office, in the cafeteria taught me what I had learned and not learned through years in the classroom and the library, namely, that, although I might know a number of things about the Soviet Union, when it came to its basic ‘laws of motion’ I was drawing a blank. I simply had not developed concepts that could make sense of the confusing variety of experiences that I was undergoing. I lacked a method that was adequate to the task.

While this book is by no means an attempt to address in full the fundamentals of the Soviet order, it does have a few ambitions along these lines. Accordingly, one of its aims is to take method seriously. By ‘method’ I have in mind no more than a particular way of looking at the world that specifies *ex ante* how we might compose what would otherwise be a welter of discordant perceptions into a comprehensible system of ideas and facts. By this measure, of course, we are always relying on method, whether we are reading a newspaper or writing a book on Soviet elites. My point is simply to acknowledge this reliance and, in so doing, to take it, again, seriously.

In my view, such an orientation toward method neither implies that the object of analysis disappears behind abstractions, nor that it represents a mere vessel to be fashioned and refashioned in order to accommodate some purely methodological exercise. If anything, the reverse is true. Method might be regarded as the vessel and its utility consists precisely in its capacity to contain the object of our interest. Further, we can no more divorce the object from the method which constitutes it than we can the perception from the perceiver. Method

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functions in such a way as to link the object of our interest to our interest in the object. Through it, we organize our data according to the categories that we provide for them. Method is our eyes.

This book undertakes a structural study of elite circulation in the Belorussian Republic of the USSR over the years 1966–86. The idea of structure as used here should not be confused with that of formal organizational relations, although the two at times may coincide. Instead, the concept of structure represents an analytic orientation away from viewing the fundamental features of the social world as reducible to individuals and toward a perspective in which the relations among them, ordered or ‘structured’ in particular ways, become the primary focus of attention. As such, this study, while looking at the Belorussian political elite, is little concerned to describe those individuals who have held power. For good or ill, the reader will not find presented here the sort of data – namely, the personal attributes of individual officeholders – ordinarily encountered in studies of Soviet elites. Stranger still, this is a book about an elite in one of the national republics of the USSR that includes no data on the respective nationalities of the elite’s members. The reason for these omissions is simple enough. Rather than a description of the personnel who have held power, the purpose of this study is to describe the personnel system itself as a set of power relations and to inquire into the matter of how it is structured. As a consequence, the candidates for the role of structuring factors which have been identified in more conventional works on Soviet elites – central control, regional influences, and patronage relations – appear in a rather unconventional light. They are not regarded as operating directly on individual actors but on the set of relations that bind the actors into a system.

The narrative is designed to move from the macro- to the micro-level. It thereby introduces individual actors, who appear more and more frequently as the discussion proceeds, in the context of those relations in which their actions are embedded. Chapter 1 sets out in some detail the methodology which the book follows and develops a model for elite analysis congruent with this orientation by contrasting it to the model that has been commonly employed in the field. Appended to the end of this chapter is a brief description of this study’s site, the Belorussian Republic, which outlines the salient historical factors bearing upon the analysis of the Belorussian elite in the contemporary period.

Chapter 2 is an exercise in elite stratification. Here, the idea of relations is used to construct a hierarchy of offices in the Republic

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required for subsequent stages of analysis. Specifically, the relations among offices is translated as the mobility of the actors who move among them. The offices themselves are then ranked according to their respective distances from an uppermost stratum of positions, with 'distance' measured by the mobility patterns of their incumbents. When a specified probability exists that the holder of a given office can enter some position ranked in a stratum somewhere above him, then the office which he occupies is ranked at one remove from (one stratum below) the stratum which he has a certain probability of reaching.

With a hierarchical ranking of offices in place, ensuing chapters take up the heart of the empirical analysis, viz., the influences of centralization, regionalism and patronage on the circulation of elites in the system. Chapter 3, which tests for the centralizing effect, introduces into Soviet elite studies the method of vacancy chain analysis. This method abstracts from individuals, their attributes and the jobs that they hold at a particular time in order to determine, in this instance, whether the mobility patterns of the actors are systematically shaped by the influence of the centralized *nomenklatura*. In the same way that the foregoing chapter distinguishes between the nominal rank of an office and its rank as determined by the probability for upward mobility empirically associated with it, this approach distinguishes between nominal (the formal appointments mechanism) and effective centralization and finds that the latter is of remarkably little consequence in shaping the circulation process.

Chapter 4 replaces the framework of hierarchically ordered strata of positions with the category of region and repeats the analysis. It finds that a regionally based model of mobility is able to predict the movement of personnel in the system with a considerable degree of accuracy. Certain characteristics of the system when viewed in regional terms, however, cannot be explained without recourse to the stratified model of positions and the personal connections among the actors that link them together into patronage groups.

Patronage is the topic of Chapter 5. With the results of the foregoing vacancy chain analyses of macro-level characteristics of the personnel system as a frame of reference, the discussion shifts at this point toward the micro-level and focuses the vacancy approach on individual actors whose mobility patterns evince mutual linkages that suggest the presence of patronage ties. The data are subjected to two techniques for discerning patronage affiliations and the patronage groupings thereby identified become categories for carrying the

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investigation further along the route of micro-level analysis in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 6 examines the influence of patronage ties on three sets of events within the system. It seeks to determine, first, whether affiliation with a given patronage group accounts for differential rates of mobility in the system for those entering through various recruitment channels. Secondly, it inquires into the career chances of a particular sub-group of actors, women, in order to determine whether these are affected by the respective patronage groups with which various female politicians have been associated. Finally, it takes up the matter of what might be called 'negative sanctions' – officially voiced criticism, reprimands and publicly announced dismissals from office – and asks whether patronage ties account for the rates at which negative sanctions have been deployed and the effects which they have had.

Chapter 7 discusses the political succession that took place in Belorussia over the latter years of this study. Here, the factional affiliations based on patronage ties are found to be the salient factor in structuring the competition for office and in shaping the eventual outcome. Moreover, since the succession in Belorussia began some two years before the Brezhnev succession in Moscow, this episode in many respects appears as a diminutive forerunner of the events that subsequently transpired in the Soviet capital. Although the Brezhnev succession ultimately determined certain aspects of the succession in Belorussia, the analysis here shows that the personnel system in the Republic cannot accurately be regarded as a collection of mere effects which issue from some primary cause located in the Kremlin. Rather, the process of elite circulation in Belorussia, taken in this case as leadership replacement, has its own structure and moves largely according to its own rhythms. In the end, these indigenous factors have proven to be the decisive ones in accounting for the transfer of power from one group to another. Or so it would seem, at least, when we follow a method that privileges the forest over the tree, that enables us to see actors in their relational aspect and to study these relations in their own right.

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