

Somme toute, de plus en plus d'Autrichiens réalisent que l'accessibilité à une éducation de niveau supérieur devient un facteur crucial de mobilité sociale dans une société moderne. Dans la même veine, ce processus de modernisation remet parfois en question des certitudes. À cet égard, les débats à propos de l'admissibilité (ou non) des étudiantes et de la pertinence (ou non) de l'étude du latin et, davantage, du grec sont fort révélateurs.

Enfin, État multinational à une époque où le nationalisme—idéologie dominante—joue le rôle de force centrifuge, l'Autriche et son système d'éducation n'échappent pas aux lourdes conséquences de cette primauté du culturel. Du reste, les éléments nationalistes eux-mêmes saisissent bien le lien qui existe entre le succès d'un projet spécifique—la quête de l'indépendance politique—et le développement d'un réseau intégré d'écoles, de collèges et d'universités. En d'autres termes, il importe de produire des élites en quantités suffisantes si l'on veut construire une solide nation tchèque.

Si le style de l'auteur n'a rien de trop captivant, il a le mérite d'avoir consulté avec grand soin une impressionnante documentation: ses sources sont en langues tchèque, allemande, française et anglaise; en outre, Cohen apporte de multiples chiffres et tableaux à l'appui d'une thèse—la réforme du système scolaire en tant que reflet de la transformation de la société autrichienne d'alors—qui n'est pas vraiment neuve, comme en font foi les nombreux parallèles qu'il établit avec la situation qui prévaut alors en Europe, particulièrement en Allemagne.

*J.-Guy Lalande*  
*St. Francis Xavier University*

Dennis Soltys, *Education for Decline: Soviet Vocational and Technical Schooling from Khrushchev to Gorbachev*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. Pp. x, 222.

Since the demise of communism dozens of studies examining the period of "mature socialism" (from the tenure of Nikita Khrushchev in 1953 to the end of the Gorbachev era) have assessed, from different perspectives, the reasons for the steady and long decline of the Soviet Union. In his examination of the Soviet vocational training system during this period, Dennis Soltys shows how inadequate planning measures and bureaucratic sloth weakened the USSR's ability to produce trained specialists capable of keeping the country competitive with the rest of the world. He frames his study around the questions of adaptation and change in vocational education to fit changing economic needs. Emphasizing education policies and institutions, Soltys finds significant continuity in the style of policy-making and

management of vocational training from Khrushchev's landmark education reforms in 1958 to measures introduced by Gorbachev in 1988–89. This entire period was characterized by poor planning, institutional fragmentation, and a reluctance on the part of high-level officials to embrace progressive training programmes. In short, the vocational training system experienced all the problems endemic to the top-heavy Party-state apparatus.

Impulsive reformer Nikita Khrushchev's foreign policy gambits and schemes to reorganize agriculture and industry eventually incurred the wrath of established power interests in the Party-state apparatus, leading to his fall from power in October 1964. One of Khrushchev's more notable accomplishments was a 1958 scheme to infuse the Soviet secondary school system with a progressive technical training system. His ambitious reforms, designed to produce technically literate students who could enter higher education and the workplace as qualified specialists, never bore fruit. The author puts much of the blame for this on Khrushchev's successor Leonid Brezhnev, who kept power through consensus-style management while discouraging innovation. Brezhnev's inability to reform the education system led to deteriorating of academic standards and waning interest among students. By the 1980s only one-third of all secondary school students graduated with technical degrees, and only a small proportion of these had the applied skills necessary for a diversified and competitive economy.

Brezhnev's successor Iury Andropov acknowledged that the USSR was lagging behind the West in technical skills. But Soltys suggests the Soviet leadership was unable to extricate itself from a myopic, ideologically-driven view of the world. Even though Andropov put increased labour productivity at the top of his 1984 reforms, continued reliance on the State Planning Agency (Gosplan) to set rigid guidelines for schools made it all but impossible to embrace changing technologies and production techniques. These problems continued to hamper vocational education well into the Gorbachev period. In 1988–89 legislation was drafted giving industrial enterprises control over professional-technical schools and granting local governments more control over schools. But the financial crisis of the last years of the USSR, combined with the refusal of officials to surrender their policy-making authority, left these initiatives unfulfilled as well.

Soltys concludes by echoing the views of Western political scientists who believe the entire Brezhnev–Gorbachev era was “marked by economic decline,” and that “Gorbachevism” represented conservatism rather than radical reform. From the perspective of education policy reform (or lack thereof), his study shows Gorbachev as unable to escape awkward planning apparatus and decision-making processes in secondary and higher education, but does not sustain the larger argument. Soltys gives inadequate space to Gorbachev's own ideas on education, and fails to provide sufficient political and social

background to put education reforms into perspective. Although he wished to preserve the socialist system, the architect of *perestroika* was also prepared to undertake major reconstruction. Gorbachev began with radical ideas for political and economic reform but eventually found himself overwhelmed by polarized forces within the country. Assessment of Gorbachev's education policies, unsuccessful as they were, could have been put more effectively in this light.

*Education for Decline* does provide an excellent overview of the structural inefficiencies of the Soviet planning apparatus in the area of vocational training, and links this discussion effectively with the theme of the USSR as a declining economic power. Nevertheless, the book would have been enriched by perspectives beyond the structural-administrative one. Soltys consults a variety of sources in his study, including previous work by Western analysts, Soviet planning and education periodicals, and interviews with education specialists and policy-makers, but curiously does not consult archival documents in his discussion of policy decisions at the top level. Most importantly, the personal and professional experiences of teachers and of the students who went through the system are missing. The author notes at several points how underpaid, overworked teachers suffered from lack of freedom in the classroom. But there is little indication how, under these unsatisfactory conditions, teachers and students managed to function. This dimension of the education experience in the Soviet Union is critical, for it would tell us how individuals learned to deal with intricacies of the Soviet polity and how the latter shaped their attitudes as professionals in the workplace.

Finally, Soltys's conclusions about continuities in vocational education policies might have been buttressed by carrying his study a few years into the post-Soviet period. One suspects the problems he recounts did not magically disappear with the death of communism. Still, the efforts of the current Russian government to improve vocational training merit discussion.

These caveats aside, Dennis Soltys has provided a highly effective analysis of one of the basic structural flaws of the Soviet economy and planning system during the years of "mature socialism." His work is a welcome addition to our efforts to understand how the Soviet Union functioned, and how it eventually failed.

*Peter Konecny*  
*Carleton University*