

Review for Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble.com of *Rediscovering Fire: Basic Lessons from the Soviet Experiment* (2010) by Guinevere Liberty Nell

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I like this book a lot for many reasons (and not only because I was lucky enough to be able to review a couple of chapters of the book while Ms. Nell was still working on it over the last year or so). *Rediscovering Fire* is a wonderful read with a very witty and engaging literary style, while at the same time showing the author has a deep understanding of the Soviet Experiment and its leading intellectual lights, political figures, and specifics on the ‘experiment’ itself as it played out in its different guises over the USSR’s 70 year-plus lifespan.

In summary the book has a main thesis, that being that the law of supply and demand cannot be overturned despite the iron will of central planners. The economic experience of the Soviet Union does indeed provide a good “historical laboratory” (Nell’s words) from which the lessons of history can be wisely gained and fruitfully applied to current (and timeless) debates over economic policy.

Chapters cover the economic basics ( competition, economic dynamics, the primacy of profit and loss in resource production and distribution, the role of the entrepreneur, price controls, centralized monetary policy, regulation, democracy and freedom, corporatism) and these topics themselves make the book an excellent summary of economic fundamentals. The chapters for each of these topics follow the same outline – a solid methodological and literary approach - an introduction to the topic, the socialist argument for intervention, the soviet experience (and failures) with this interventionism and the lessons learned from these failures for current economic debate, all followed by copious chapter endnotes, themselves showing the work of a writer dedicated to her topic. Each chapter is fully-

contained, and therefore the reader can choose what interests them the most and begin there if they wish. (I recommend the chapter on monetary policy).

Contemporary Soviet economic-theoretical works are generously excerpted along with commonsensical yet insightful analyses of these often utopian writings. Nell does not dismiss these writers in an off-hand manner but engages with them fully and respectfully, showing again a full understanding of the 'experiment' itself and its intellectual (Marxist-Leninist, and later Stalinist and post-Stalin) underpinnings.

The book is easy reading for those new to economics yet contains enough scholarly insight and critique (drawing from writers as diverse as Alchian, Boettke, Bukharin, Ebeling, Engels, Garrett, von Hayek, Horwitz, Kantorovich, Keynes, Kirzner, Kornai, Lange, Lenin, Marx, J.S. Mill, von Mises, Adam Smith, Trotsky, Tugwell and Wootton) to fully capture the imagination of economists, economic historians and historians of economic thought, not least those unfamiliar in full detail of Soviet history.

Leaving economic fundamentals aside (and I agree with and fully enjoy Nell's historical lessons and insights for today, other, less free-market, economists may not enjoy the historical lessons as much as I do, though will very much enjoy Nell's expositions on Soviet-Marxist economics), for this reader who worked in the foreign aid industry in the ex-USSR, the Soviet history alone makes the book a welcome addition to the literature and a must-read.

I wish there were more cartoons (there are a few) and more excerpts from contemporary Russian literature (is not the best art produced under political and economic repression?, or, perhaps, under the hopes of a better world?), but alas in the real world of scarce resources, one cannot, of course, have everything. Highly recommended.