


Book Review: Transition Economies: Transformation, Development and Society in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union by Aleksandr V. Gevorkyan

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*In **Transition Economies: Transformation, Development and Society in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union**, Aleksandr V. Gevorkyan summarises the major economic and many social indicators of the changes which have taken place in the 29 European and Central Asian countries of what was formerly known as the Soviet bloc. The book will prove a useful resource for students of transformation seeking detailed knowledge of the recent economic history of the European post-socialist states, writes **David Lane**.*

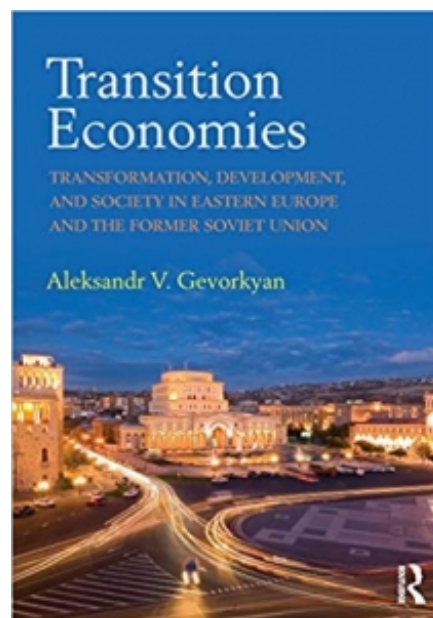
***Transition Economies: Transformation, Development and Society in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union.* Aleksandr V. Gevorkyan. Routledge. 2018.**

Find this book: 

Transition Economies, authored by Aleksandr V. Gevorkyan, has an ambitious coverage. It takes a 'holistic historical view of the post-socialist transformations' (xiv). In doing so, it summarises the major economic and many social indicators of the changes which have taken place in the 29 European and Central Asian countries of what was previously called the Soviet bloc (it does not cover China or other post-socialist countries).

Transition Economies has four parts: Part One offers two introductory chapters; Part Two, after an introduction on Russia before the October Revolution, focuses on the formation of the planned economy in the USSR and the spread of the socialist economy to Eastern Europe after World War II. Part Three considers the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s and the move to a market economy. Part Four outlines the major outcomes in terms of income inequalities and migration. The final part of the book sums up the significance of the changes and possible futures.

Transition Economies, described as a 'research monograph' (xvi), is intended for researchers in economic history, macroeconomic development and social policy, as well as for policymakers and students in these fields. Its strength lies in summarising an enormous



amount of statistical information concerning post-socialist developments in this area; typically, the book lists in graphs and tables the effects of transformation as recorded principally in work produced by the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Conference Board Total Economy Database.



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While the author emphasises the importance of taking account of the diversity of the transformation in the 29 states, the Soviet Union and Russia figure prominently in the text. The content contains both very basic introductory discussions as well as dense information on the economic effects of transformation. While the idea of linking to the previous periods of Soviet transformation fits in with the method of considering the totality of the Soviet experience, the content of the earlier chapters on nineteenth-century development and the problems of planning are forgotten by the time that we actually study the transformation process of the 1990s.

The work brings out clearly the disasters of the first ten years of transformation: the dominant role of the Washington Consensus as an ideological background to policy and the subsequent destabilising developments. The author also points to incipient problems in the planned economies, which stimulated the internal reform movements culminating in perestroika under the final Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Disentangling the inherent problems of the planned economy – in particular the difficulties of the planning mechanism in an advanced economy – from the social and political desires for a market system based on freedom of choice would have been a very useful exercise. The author in some places

seems to suggest, following János Kornai and Ludwig von Mises, that the state-coordinated economy was destined to fail. There is no consideration, however, of whether, or how, the planning system could have been improved.

Ample detail is shown of the catastrophic social effects of marketisation and destatisation in all the post-socialist countries. As Gevorkyan puts it: 'the period between 1990 and 2000 would prove to be one of the most disastrous in peacetime history in terms of self-inflicted economic and social pains' (120). While stressing the heterogeneity of the post-communist countries and differences between them, Gevorkyan describes the commonality of poverty, income inequality and labour migration. There are many useful charts and diagrams, although these sometimes overburden the text, and a good detailed bibliography for readers wishing to follow up various points.

Gevorkyan, while damning of the first ten years of transformation, is rather more positive about developments since 2000, though he is non-committal about the future. *Transition Economies* will prove a useful source for many students of transformation seeking detailed knowledge of the recent economic history of the European post-socialist states.

David Lane is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and currently Emeritus Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge University; he was previously Professor of Sociology at the University of Birmingham. He has written extensively on the USSR and state socialism, Marxism and socialism. Recent publications include: *Changing Regional Alliances for China and the West* (with Guichang Zhu) (2018); *Elites and Identity in the Transformation of State Socialism* (2014); and *The Capitalist Transformation of State Socialism* (2014).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.