

*Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*  
by Stephen Kotkin

**About the book**

- Magnitogorsk used as a case study demonstrating the search for socialism and the problems encountered in pursuit of that goal: the creation of a new “Soviet” man, a new economic structure, and an industrialized civilization.
- In context with the historiography of the subject. Synthesizes elements from both revisionist and totalitarianist interpretations, retaining an active view of the subject but at the same time acknowledging the significance of Bolshevik ideology.
- The history of the USSR needs to be reincorporated into European history, not excluded as a bizarre anomaly. He draws a continuity from the Enlightenment.

**Main Ideas and Arguments:**

- Focuses on the Stalinist designs for the model socialist city and the utopian vision of planned economy and society that drove the attempt.
- Emphasizes the productive features of Stalinism, insisting on the importance of their successes despite the gross inefficiency and planning issues they encountered.
- The relationship between the Bolshevik state and the Soviet subject. (ex: according to him, the Bolsheviks had a “broad agenda for what was meant to happen at Magnetic Mountain.”)
- Theme of consistent and predictable official policy and unpredictable and chaotic results.
- Argument that despite the troubles and hardships and obvious problems, people really did have faith in the socialist system because they perceived progress from tsarist times and security from the evils of capitalism.

**Examples:**

- General, interconnected problems with a planned economy. Managerial corruption, lack of accountability, menacing growth of bureaucracy and culture of blame-shifting. (Myshkin, Magnitogorsk director, accused of keeping a double set of books)
- The peopling of Magnitostroi can be read as a case study in the Bolshevik leadership’s crude methods of administrative rule, and in the resourcefulness of individuals when confronted with difficult choices. Most people lived in filthy, overcrowded barracks, and many left due to dissatisfaction.
- Class issues: fears of the “peasantization” of urban life.
- The Berzka enclave and elitist tendencies in the supposedly socialist utopian city.
- Argument that the Great Depression contributed to maintaining faith in the socialist system in the face of their inability to carry out their intentions.

### Discussion Questions:

- Discuss the significance of the fact that outside consultants, in some cases capitalists, were brought in to help the process of building Magnetic Mountain. Examples include Haven, McKee, and May.
- Concerning the themes of isolation and the illusion of constructing new from nothing.
- Kotkin argues that Stalinism was not a reversal from the previous, more culturally lenient time, but that it was a continuation of progressive ideology. How does the idea of continuity vs utopianism tie into the problems faced by the leaders at Magnitogorsk?



The top of Magnetic Mountain.



Mountain on the eastern slope of the Southern Urals on the left (Asian) side of the Ural River. Located in the city of Magnitogorsk, Chelyabinskaya Oblast'.



Young worker at Magnitogorsk. (source: <http://fototelegraf.ru/?p=7886>)



33. The factory administration building.



1. Tent city, with Magnetic Mountain in the background, winter 1930.



9. Blast furnace no. 2, nicknamed Komsomolskaia.