Revisionism in Retrospect: A Personal View

Sheila Fitzpatrick

Every field has its controversies, generating heat and sometimes light, but it is not always worth rehashing them. In the case of the 1970s revisionism controversy, I think rehashing is worthwhile because there are lessons that the Soviet history field can learn from it. In the first place, it is useful to remind a younger generation how nasty the field could be during the Cold War so that they may count their blessings. In the second place, certain lines of revisionist inquiry were cut off as a result of the political nastiness, and I want to suggest what they were and where they might have gone. I will also argue that there is more of what used to be called “revisionism” around than the new generation probably realizes, though it goes under new labels. Finally, I will give my assessment of revisionism as a trend in Soviet historiography and what it accomplished.

This is a participant’s account, but of course I do not speak for all participants. In fact, I speak only for myself and mainly about my particular corner of the scholarly world, namely, the social history of Stalinist Russia. That largely leaves out important areas of revisionist scholarship—1917, the New Economic Policy (NEP), and the politics of the 1930s—on which others are better qualified to comment, and focuses more on revisionists, to which I belonged, than on those who followed in the 1980s. In writing this essay, I pondered for a long time how to deal with antirevisionist criticism and polemics: they are obviously part of the story, in that they were part of the climate in which revisionists operated, but equally obviously their perspective is not mine, and I did not want to get tangled up in a point-by-point rebuttal. My solution has been to insert representative critiques and comments in boxes throughout the narrative and leave readers to draw their own conclusions.

To me, the revisionists’ views are so outlandish that I wonder what makes them see the past the way they do.

Peter Kenez, “Stalinism as Humdrum Politics,” Russian Review 45, no. 4 (October 1986): 400

with antirevisionist criticism and polemics: they are obviously part of the story, in that they were part of the climate in which revisionists operated, but equally obviously their perspective is not mine, and I did not want to get tangled up in a point-by-point rebuttal. My solution has been to insert representative critiques and comments in boxes throughout the narrative and leave readers to draw their own conclusions.

With thanks to Lynne Viola, Arch Getty, and Jerry Hough for their helpful comments and criticisms.

1. The boxed critiques are, in fact, not fully representative because there is a disproportionate emphasis on those from the last fifteen to twenty years, reflecting deficiencies in my personal record-keeping. My memory is that the (unrepresented) late 1970s was a particularly bad time for attacks on and rumors about revisionists, but also that not all of

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How I Became a Revisionist

Revisionism in Soviet history meant revision of the totalitarian model, and that was something I started on all on my own as a graduate student, reading the American Sovietological literature in the library of St. Antony’s College, Oxford. I had taken from my undergraduate education in Melbourne a dislike of the models that then fascinated political scientists, having the typical historian’s response that they oversimplified and distorted. With regard to the totalitarian model, I thought the suggestion absurd that any political regime could control a society—not just repress it, but successfully plan its development in a desired direction, anticipating all the consequences of political actions—as the totalitarian model suggested. I also found the totalitarian model tremendously value-laden in a Cold War way, which offended my belief that the historian ought to be nonpartisan. Trained in Melbourne as a primary-source historian, it bothered me to find scholars working with so narrow a source base and being so credulous about rumors and legends (as long as they were anti-Soviet). To me it seemed obvious that if you looked only at Pravda and Iosif Stalin’s Works you would form the impression that everything was controlled from the top, for this was an automatic consequence of the source base. I was also struck by the way that this “top-down” picture (though I did not then have that terminology) seemed to reproduce the official Soviet picture of total party control and omniscience, just replacing a positive evaluation with a negative one.

Those were my postulates, but there were lots of things on which I had a comparatively open mind, for example, the degree of Stalin’s personal power. The current convention was to use “the regime,” “the Politburo,” and “Stalin” interchangeably and to collapse all subdivisions (branches of party and government) into a single whole. I was against this and believed it impossible to work out Stalin’s personal contribution without a more concrete sense of who the “they” that did things were. Nor did I originally have any precise sense of what might be going on at the grassroots; I just thought there had to be something. With regard to popular support for Stalinism, it seemed to me unlikely that the regime survived on terror alone, but who supported the regime, who did not, and why, was what I did not know and wanted to find out.

A revisionist perspective turned out to be helpful for two specific puzzling issues that emerged from my dissertation. The first was cultural revolution, a phenomenon I encountered in my research on the late 1920s and paid particular attention to because something of the same name was currently occurring in the People’s Republic of China. At that point there was no scholarly recognition of a general phenomenon or event called cultural revolution, just of a series of repressive actions at the

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end of the 1920s against different cultural and scholarly groups. From my Soviet research and interviews I was aware that what was involved was more complex politics than simple “top down” repression: lots of different people and groups were pushing competing agendas. In other words, I was beginning to see a “from below” pattern — though “below” in this context was comparative rather than absolute (below the top, rather than right at the bottom), so the term was a bit misleading. I was also developing the depressing sense that the odds were stacked against the “good guys,” that is, communist intellectuals like Anatolii Lunacharskii and Nadezhda Krupskaia, who tended to recoil from revolutionary violence and cherished the ideal of popular enlightenment, and that it was the tough, lower-class, anti-intellectual position that was likely to prevail in any internal party fight. That gave me a different (less benign) idea of what “worker” might mean in attitudinal terms than was current among labor historians: Ressentiment, not class solidarity, struck me as the driving emotion of the party’s “proletarian” side.

The second issue was a mysterious thing called proletarskoe vydvizhenie (proletarian promotion), which I kept encountering in my work on education policy. I really struggled with this concept, initially trying to work out whether the people called “proletarian” were actually working-class, or whether (as the scholarly literature said) this was simply a synonym for “party.” Even when I decided that at least part of the meaning of “proletarian” was working-class (or, more broadly, lower-class), I was still uncertain what was going on. It was not until after I came to America in the early 1970s that I got the idea that proletarskoe vydvizhenie as an educational policy meant affirmative action. The idea that this was a non-Marxist way of fulfilling the Marxist promise of proletarian rule (making workers masters), and that that sense of a promise fulfilled was important for the legitimacy of the Soviet regime, crystallized only in the second half of the 1970s, as I was finishing Education and Social Mobility. I was very taken with the neatness of this idea, which I (as well as my Marxist revisionist colleagues) understood as an anti-Marxist intervention in the historiography. It was a surprise to me when nonrevisionists read this as a justification of Stalinism and the Soviet system.

My induction as a revisionist came from Steve Cohen, who noticed my dissertation book, The Commissariat of Enlightenment, because of its attention to enlightenment policies, its focus on government rather than party, and its interest in bureaucratic conflicts and the variety of opinion within

Revisionism was not just a matter of historical methodology. Its subtext was advocacy for the enduring legitimacy, founded on “social mobility,” of the Soviet regime (Fitzpatrick) or anticipation of eventual “socialism with a human face” (Cohen).


the leadership. Cohen, a political scientist, was one of the originators and organizers of a “revisionist” movement in Sovietology, taking his cue from the new “revisionist” approaches to the analysis of U.S.-Soviet relations stimulated by opposition to the Vietnam war. I thought of him—as well as the separate cohort of Marxist historians who became Sovietological revisionists, whom I encountered later—as New Left, though Cohen tells me this was wrong as far as he was concerned. His political biography of Nikolai Bukharin, one of the first explicitly revisionist publications, told the story of a “good” Bolshevik, whom Cohen presented as a more democratic and less bloodthirsty alternative to Stalin, an approach that was strongly influenced by de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union. Following Nikita Khrushchev’s selective denunciation of Stalin in 1956, Soviet communist intellectuals were in search of a viable communist past, be it the revolution and “original Bolshevism” (Cohen’s term), “Leninist legality” (leninskaia zakonnost’), or Bukharin and the mixed economy of NEP. The de-Stalinizing Leninist revival was epitomized by Roy Medvedev’s Let History Judge, translated into English at the beginning of the 1970s and widely read in the United States.

The skeptical child of Australian Old Left parents, I was not New Left or any other kind of Left myself, but the milieu was familiar and not congenial to me, and I liked Cohen’s idea of revising Sovietology (which in my mind meant rescuing it from its Cold War bias, not recasting it to suit another political agenda). Jerry Hough—like Cohen, a political scientist/Sovietologist with revisionist interests, but not New Left—was the other influence on my early years in America. I found his article “The So-

5. E-mail from Cohen to the author dated 17 March 2008. As I was still quite ignorant of American politics and had been too focused on the Soviet Union to have taken much notice of the 1960s counterculture and student revolution, I certainly do not vouch for the accuracy of my perceptions of political and ideological affiliation. Accurate or not, however, they were important in my intellectual biography, which is why I include them.
7. Bukharin was still proscribed in the Soviet Union, despite de-Stalinization and the efforts undertaken by his widow and others to have him rehabilitated, but there was considerable interest among Soviet economists in the “NEP alternative” associated with his name: see Moshe Lewin, Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates: From Bukharin to the Modern Reformers (Princeton, 1974).
9. We married in 1975 and divorced in 1984. The marriage and the controversy over Jerry’s “revisionist” revision of Fainsod’s classic How Russia Is Ruled, a year before my also controversial Education and Social Mobility, was one of the reasons for my quick rise to notoriety as a revisionist. See Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, How the Soviet Union Is Governed (Cambridge, Mass., 1979). It worked the other way, too, as the boxed quotation from Martin Peretz suggests, with Hough being tarred by association with me.
Viet Experience and the Measurement of Power" a complete eye-opener and still think it one of the best things ever written about Soviet politics. Hough was much more interested in theoretical debate than I was and knew much more about American social science—though what he did not recognize at that time was how America-centric and value-laden it was in practice, as opposed to principle. Assuming that social science concepts like “interest groups” and “participation” were really, as claimed, universal and not just specific to American democracy, he thought it would facilitate comparative understanding to use them to analyze the Soviet Union; this was to get him into a lot of trouble.

Revisionism on NEP and the 1930s

In the fall of 1972, I came to the United States, and Cohen asked me to participate in a panel at the forthcoming national convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies on the viability of NEP. This was an important issue for Cohen, who wanted to contest the view that Stalinism was an inevitable product of Leninism and the revolution; my task was to make this argument with respect to cultural policy. I did not yet know much about the NEP period, but since my dissertation research (up to 1921) had shown Vladimir Lenin and Lunacharskii to be committed enlighteners, I assumed this argument would work. As I began to do research on the 1920s, however, I started to have doubts. The more I read, the more it appeared to me that the “enlightenment” policies on culture that Lunacharskii was trying to implement during NEP, and that Lenin had generally approved, were actually proving unviable, despite their support from many of the intellectuals in the party leadership, because the lower-class, “hard line” majority of the Communist Party—Stalin’s constituency, as I came to see them—disliked them.

11. I came on a one-year appointment in the Slavic Department at the University of Texas at Austin: it was a last-minute fill-in invitation that I accepted out of curiosity, with no firm intention to stay in the United States. I went on to a fellowship at the (then) Russian Institute at Columbia and remained in New York in untenured positions at St. John’s University and Columbia for about six years before getting my first tenured position (by coincidence, at the University of Texas again, this time in the history department) in 1980.
12. This was the argument I made in my AAASS paper, “The ‘Soft’ Line on Culture and Its Enemies: Soviet Cultural Policy, 1922–1927,” Slavic Review 33, no. 2 (June 1974):
I was not displeased with this conclusion, which I saw as an interesting discovery, but Cohen was.

Our disagreements became sharper at the Bellagio conference on Stalinism in 1974, at which my effort at reconceptualization turned out to be quite different from what the organizers (Robert C. Tucker and Cohen) had in mind. My conference paper, contesting the view that orthodoxy in various cultural fields were dictated by the party leadership and proposing instead that they came from within the professions concerned, was heavily criticized; and I, for my part, was very critical of Cohen’s arguments for a sharp discontinuity between Leninism and Stalinism and the democratic (in a western sense) potential of “original Bolshevism.” After the Bellagio conference, Leszek Kolakowski (also a participant) wrote his satire on revisionist Sovietologists, for the first time raising the issues of moral judgment and the Nazi analogy (“if the Nazis had won, we would have had a revisionist scholarship pointing out Hitler’s good sides”). I liked Kolakowski and thought the satire funny at the time (later, this line of criticism started to pall): although I took it to be directed against me, it did not seem relevant to what I was actually doing. I had not yet lost my innocent belief that for historians (Kolakowski was a philosopher, after all, and Tucker and Cohen political scientists) it was self-evident that the historian’s task was to understand, not to prosecute or bear witness against evil. The upshot of all this was that I withdrew my Bellagio piece from the volume. This was the point at which Cohen and I parted intellectual company: I thought he was not all the recent trends in history-writing are admirable. . . . Some younger social and institutional historians of the Stalinist 1930s, for example, tend to emphasize what they consider to have been modernizing or otherwise progressive developments . . . , while minimizing or obscuring the colossal human tragedies and material losses. . . . It is too early to judge whether this unfortunate trend in the new scholarship derives from an overreaction to the revelatory zeal of cold-war Sovietology, the highly focused nature of social historical research, or an unstated political desire to rehabilitate the entire Stalin era.

Stephen F. Cohen, Rethinking the Soviet Experience (New York, 1985), 33


14. “New York Times: Editorial of May 8, 1975: A Variation Imagined by Leszek Kolakowski,” Survey (London) 21, no. 4 (Autumn 1975): 87–89. The spoof “editorial” welcomes the new reassessment of the “brighter and more positive sides” of Nazism thirty years after the German victory in World War II, noting inter alia, how “the Europeans gained enormously in mobility. . . . Who can deny that demographic mobility is one of the best-tested signs of social progress? . . . As for Mr Hitler himself, what a simplified image of him we are left with after years of cold-war propaganda!”

whitewashing "original Bolshevism," and he thought I was whitewashing Stalinism.\(^\text{16}\)

Cohen was not the only person to dislike the way my scholarship was going. I ran into serious trouble with two of my lines of thought. The first concerned cultural revolution, a development of my "soft line" argument on NEP that showed, in effect, the "hard" line in culture to be triumphant, not just because of support from above, but also because of enthusiasm from below (implicitly casting doubt on the "only from above" assumptions of the totalitarian model).\(^\text{17}\) The second was on working-class upward mobility, which was partly the result of state "affirmative action" programs, which I discussed in the context of Soviet elite formation and treated as a source of regime legitimacy because it created a class of beneficiaries, the \textit{vydvizhentsy}.\(^\text{18}\) Both these ideas irritated those whom we (no doubt annoyingly) called "traditional" Sovietologists, meaning anyone who was not a revisionist; and the latter aggravated Marxist revisionists as well, since they preferred to think of workers as class-conscious proletarians rather than as people eager to climb out of their class. In fact, it is difficult to think of anyone who did like my ideas about the \textit{vydvizhentsy} in the late 1970s, with the exception of Robert V. (Bill) Daniels, personally unknown to me then: I still remember my astonishment and gratitude when he wrote out of the blue from Vermont to tell me so.

The existence of Marxist revisionism in American Soviet studies (as represented by Ronald Grigor Suny and others of the 1917 revisionism cohort) was an oddly late discovery for me: for some years after my arrival in the United States I thought that, when people talked about Marxist revisionists (including me in that category), it was just a Cold War smear tactic. (This can only be explained in terms of my ignorance of American academia, not having gone to graduate school here, and my curious detachment from what is now called "the sixties.”) Marxism, like the related issue of left-wing politics, was a problem for me, and looking back, I see how badly I handled it. Growing up as a child of the Old Left in a context where that affiliation was unpopular had instilled in me the belief that it

\(^{16}\) Stephen F. Cohen, \textit{Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917} (New York, 1985), 33. The accompanying note (170) identifies me as the main offender, along with George Yaney, Arch Getty, and Hough.


\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fitzpatrick.png}
\caption{Fitzpatrick and some of her colleagues . . . are—or were—distinctly people of the Left. Involved in the criticism of their work—almost always beneath the surface—has been a certain amount of animus left over from the wars of the 1960s.}
\label{fig:fitzpatrick}
\end{figure}
was contemptible and cowardly to make public denial of Marxist or left-wing sympathies, whether or not one had them (just as it would have been to deny being Jewish if that, instead of the Left, had been my tribe). So when people accused me of being a Marxist or leftist, it was a matter of pride with me not to deny it, even though I did not consider myself to be either. This was confusing to people on both sides of the political fence.\textsuperscript{19} For those on the Left, there was the puzzle of why, if I was on the Left too, I kept disagreeing with them—and doing so, moreover, with a sharpness that no doubt arose from my private resentment at being misclassified. The sharpness was in evidence in the 1988 exchange in \textit{Slavic Review} about my article, “The Bolsheviks’ Dilemma,” when Suny protested that I had gone on a “personal crusade” against Marxist class analysis, while I accused him of having ideological blinkers.\textsuperscript{20}

Revisionists were still an embattled minority in the first half of the 1980s, despite the emergence of a new cohort of younger social and political historians including Lynne Viola and Arch Getty, and tempers were short. One of the things that united revisionists was an interest in investigating support “from below” for the regime; and underlying this interest was the expectation that such support, once identified, might change our understanding of key episodes of the 1930s (collectivization, the Great Purges), and indeed of the whole political dynamics of Stalinism. I had found such support (to my own satisfaction, at least) with the vydvizhentsy and the activists of cultural revolution, just as the 1917 revisionists had done with regard to workers and the Bolshevik revolution. In both these cases, it looked as if “from below” radicalism might have been driving the politicians further than they might otherwise have gone. But when we turned to collectivization and the Great Purges, that hypothesis did not seem to work. To be sure, Viola identified some urban working-class support for collectivization and found that lower levels of the party apparat were sometimes more radical than the Politburo,\textsuperscript{21} but nobody was coming up with evidence of significant \textit{peasant} support, which surely would have been a key factor if collectivization had been to any significant degree a “from below” initiative.\textsuperscript{22} The same was true of the Great Purges,

\textsuperscript{19} In this connection, I have to apologize belatedly to Richard Pipes, to whom I was jokingly introduced in London in the 1970s as an “activist of the New Left,” for not correcting this piece of disinformation.

\textsuperscript{20} Reprinted in Fitzpatrick, \textit{Cultural Front}. The original publication of the article, with comments from Suny and Daniel Orlovsky and a response from me, appeared in \textit{Slavic Review} 47, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 599–626 (Suny’s quoted comment on 614, mine on 624).


\textsuperscript{22} This was puzzling, as there certainly were peasants who identified with Soviet power in the 1920s. After pondering this for many years, I finally came up with the paradoxical solution that, once collectivization was underway, young “Soviet-minded” peasants tended to leave the village because of the new job opportunities opening up in the towns:
where Getty and Roberta Manning had demonstrated disorganization at the lower levels of government and in the party, but none of us had found a real social explanation for this phenomena or even a good hypothesis of what such an explanation might look like. I was frustrated by this situation, particularly by my own inability to make any headway on the “big” questions of Stalinism via the “from below” approach. Impatient to get on with something new, I once again found myself out of step with fellow revisionists.

How far out of step was evident in the debate that followed publication of my article “New Perspectives on Stalinism,” solicited by the editor of Russian Review (Daniel Field) and published in 1986. Most of the article was harmless enough, setting forth my thoughts about how we might approach writing a social history of the Stalin period, but it had its provocative side, including the opening statement that, far from writing a manifesto on behalf of the “New Cohort” of social historians, I was offering ideas about future directions with which they would probably disagree, and the concluding section, which argued that, since the new social history had not generated a radically new understanding of the political dynamics of Stalinism, we would now do better to concentrate on classic social history issues such as mobility, stratification, and group conflict in the hope of coming up with a new picture of social dynamics.

Russian Review published the article along with four commentaries (by Stephen Cohen, Alfred Meyer, Geoff Ely, and Peter Kenez) that assailed me, as I felt, from every possible direction. I replied with a ringing declaration of my commitment both to iconoclasm and “so-called objective scholarship,” by which I meant not skewing my data for political or ideological reasons. For good measure (irritated by Cohen’s assertion that I was writing a “‘New Cohort’ manifesto,” despite my explicit denial), I

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added some rather gratuitous slaps at fellow revisionists, asserting that, while “I did not like the totalitarian-model orthodoxy that I saw in American Soviet studies fifteen years ago, . . . I would not have liked it any better had it been a Marxist orthodoxy,” and that, having “lately . . . seen signs of a revisionist orthodoxy, partly based on my work, gaining ground with the younger generation, I do not much like it either.”

Not surprisingly, this produced angry responses from Manning, Viola, and other “new cohort” members asserting that, if they belonged to any school, it certainly was not mine.26 A sense of betrayal came through clearly in this exchange, prompting Stephen Kotkin to remark unkindly a decade later that I had led the revisionists into the wilderness and abandoned them there.27 Of course, I felt somewhat abandoned myself, with the young revisionists joining everyone else in beating up on me; for some reason I did not see how hefty a provocation I had offered in my “Afterword.” Perhaps, too, I was a little priggish, especially for a self-proclaimed iconoclast, in my righteous claim to be following my data wherever they led me. (Not that I am taking it back . . .)

Cold War Attacks

All through the 1980s, I was dissatisfied with my own and other people’s progress in understanding the Great Purges. The political background noise on this topic was so overwhelming that it severely inhibited thought. On the one hand, there was the constant clamor for revisionists to address the question of the purges, no matter what their particular area of research, on the assumption that this was the only important (permissible?) topic. On the other hand, there was the inadequacy of the available sources, which for a historian of my type (both attached to sources and uninterested in repeating what other people had already said) was discouraging. It was even more discouraging that the clamor was not for new

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26. Eleven more responses (from Daniel Brower, Bill Chase, Robert Conquest, Arch Getty, Jerry Hough, Hiroaki Kuromiya, Roberta Manning, Alec Nove, Gabor Rittersporn, Robert C. Tucker, and Lynne Viola), almost all more or less sharply critical of my original article from left or right, were published in Russian Review 46, no. 4 (October 1987).

research and new ideas but rather for public endorsement by revisionists of the conventional view that the purges were a bad thing and that Stalin and the Soviet system were responsible for them. I agreed, of course, that the purges were a bad thing and that “the system” was no doubt responsible for them (though that sounded a bit like a tautology), but I was at that time agnostic on the degree of Stalin’s responsibility, given the murkiness of the available evidence. Also, I did not like being told what to think and what to work on and tended to react in a contrarian manner.28

In the early 1980s, the pressure to discuss the purges at every public occasion was so intense, and the likelihood of excited attacks from audience members (if not other panelists) so great, that it seemed almost pointless to have such discussions. My interest in Soviet “self-criticism” probably stems from these experiences, which I regarded as samokritika American style. The ritual, like its Soviet counterpart, demanded self-abasement and did not tolerate any attempt to explain what you were actually getting at. It did not even accommodate factual correction (I remember vainly trying to explain to Wolfgang Leonhard at Yale that an argument he particularly disliked had been made by Getty, not by me) because all revisionists, like all Soviet Oppositionists, were essentially the same thing. Getty was, of course, the main target of the attack on the purges, and he bore this with remarkable calm and good humor. But my little study of telephone directories as a data source on purge losses produced howls of outrage (recalled later with bemusement by Daniel Field) when I delivered it at Harvard in the late 1970s, and it was fifteen years before I could publish it.29

28. In retrospect, I can see that this had intellectual as well as other costs. If I had not so stubbornly stood my ground on the argument of the Bellagio paper (later “Cultural Orthodoxies under Stalin”), resisting pressure to consider the impact of the purges on culture because my subject was input from the professions in the creation of orthodoxies, I might have noticed that the reason orthodoxies were necessary in the first place probably had something to do with terror.

29. It finally appeared as “The Impact of the Great Purges on Soviet Elites: A Case Study from Moscow and Leningrad Telephone Directories of the 1930s,” in J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning, eds., Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives (New York, 1993). Soviet as well as American censorship practices were to blame: the Harvard audience had criticized the methodology of my random sampling, as well as the conclusions and the idea of doing such a study in the first place, but when I went back to Moscow and reordered the 1937 and 1939 Moscow telephone directories in order to redo the sampling, the Lenin Library (the only library that had these directories) refused to provide them. When, years later, the Lenin Library finally accepted my request and I was able to use the approved sampling technique, the count turned out almost exactly the same.
One of the really damaging assertions made about revisionist work on the Great Purges was that it was the equivalent of Holocaust denial. I first encountered this view in a review of a book of mine by Leonard Schapiro (someone for whom I had respect and affection from my time in England) and was astonished: as far as I knew, none of the Sovietological revisionists had ever even thought of intervening in Holocaust debates. This became a common antirevisionist argument (or smear), particularly in connection with the controversy around the number of Stalin's victims, in which skepticism about the high numbers being bruited about was taken as a wish to minimize or deny (hence, the analogy with Holocaust denial). Stephen Wheatcroft took the brunt of this attack, along with Hough, whom Robert Conquest called "the David Irving of Stalinism."31

As a group, the revisionists were trying to pioneer an inquiry into the social history of the Stalin period and were particularly interested in impulses that came "from below" and affected politics at the top. In the 1970s and 1980s, that meant mainly investigating social support for assertions made about revisionist work was the equivalent of Holocaust denial.

Dr. Fitzpatrick . . . seems to equate any kind of condemnation by historians of Soviet reality with lack of objectivity. But things have come to a pretty pass if a historian who expresses any criticism of a régime which has sent millions of innocent men, women and children to die by execution or in a labour camp is to be accused of lack of impartiality. Does the same principle apply to Nazi Germany? Is the murder of six million Jews to be assessed in terms of National Socialist overall social policy, without hint of disapproval?

Leonard Schapiro, in Times Literary Supplement, 18 March 1983

The lesson of the week is to choose your dictator wisely. What you say about Hitler in chilly Bavaria may put you in a prison cell. But say the same thing about Stalin in sunny California and your reward, my boy, will be a comfortable tenure in Soviet studies.


Fitzpatrick, in describing the creation of a new proletarian intelligentsia, is fond of characterizing the process as "affirmative action," and comparing it to American social policy during the 1960s and 1970s. No doubt there are some similarities, but the gain in our understanding is more than offset by what the phrase leaves out in its linking of situations that are too disparate to be so simply compared. This comparison must inevitably have an exculpatory ring.


30. Perhaps in Europe the charge was a little less bizarre, given that a Paris-based Sovietological revisionist, Gabor Rittersporn, did, in fact, on the grounds of intellectual freedom, defend the right of Holocaust deniers to express their views, but I did not know that at the time.


the Bolsheviks; later on (when archival evidence became available), it meant examining resistance. The “support” issue was understood as an attempt to justify Stalinism, and looking back I can see more clearly why people might have thought this. At the time, it made no sense to me: I saw the critics simply as prejudiced or, at best, hidebound by convention.

My upward mobility argument received a lot of criticism because of the suggestion that those who were upwardly mobile believed themselves to be beneficiaries of the revolution and Stalin and were thus loyal. One source of misunderstanding was the erroneous assumption that if I wrote about the vydvizhentsy and said they were the core of a new elite, then I must admire them (my old Soviet friends, non-vydvizhentsy all, were puzzled for the same reason), and if I said the policy that produced them was affirmative action I must admire that policy, too. My use of terms that came from, and were implicitly supposed to be restricted to, American (democratic) society caused a lot of distress, though when I asked what I was supposed to call upward mobility when it occurred in a nondemocratic context, I never got an answer. Another methodological issue that acquired political overtones had to do with seeking to understand the terms in which the world was understood by one’s subjects. I considered this to be one of the primary duties of a historian, whereas many others saw it as an unpardonable exercise in “toute comprendre, c’est tout pardonner.” Viola was another revisionist who was heavily criticized for this (see box), particularly for her use of Soviet terminology (albeit in quotation marks) in her book on the 25,000-ers, which was understood, not as an attempt to convey a Soviet mindset, but as an endorsement of it.33

When I tell my students about the viciousness of the political climate in Sovietology during the Cold War, they look politely skeptical. It is possible that I exaggerate, though it is not a retrospective exaggeration: I know I was stunned and frightened by the viciousness all through the 1970s and quite a long way into the 1980s, and so were other revisionists who were its targets. No doubt my own reaction was all the keener because I was an immigrant to the United States, without even a green card for a number of years, let alone citizenship, and without tenure; I was scared of being denounced to the Immigration and Naturalization Service and kicked out. (This may have more resonance for the current generation if you imagine the situation of a young untenured immigrant specialist on the Middle East whose research is trying to make sense of terrorism.) The main persecutors (our perception) of revisionists were Martin Malia,

33. Viola, Best Sons of the Fatherland.
Revisionism in Retrospect: A Personal View

Richard Pipes, and Conquest. I saw myself as very small and powerless compared to them, and I saw American public opinion as extremely and almost uniformly anti-Soviet and anticommunist. Ironically, this perception would no doubt have been less strong if I had had more to do with the New Left and the antiwar movement.

Reading Pipes's autobiography, however, I see how differently the fight could be understood from the other side. For Pipes, the American world as he first encountered it in the 1940s was pro-Soviet in a woolly, uninformed way; and all through his career as a Sovietologist he kept encountering such attitudes at Harvard and elsewhere. Then along came the New Left Marxist revisionists with their (in his view) ideologically motivated, anti-American, pro-Soviet, pseudo-scholarship; and after a while, incredibly, they started to get good jobs, prosper, and dominate the scholarly debate. I do not dispute that Pipes saw America in this way, but it remains a cause of wonder to me. If only he could have lived in my America, and I in his.

Impact of Attacks on Revisionist Work

For many years I saw myself pursuing my research undeterred and basically unaffected by criticism. This now appears to me to be ludicrously inaccurate. When I came to America at the beginning of the 1970s, I was bumptiously full of ideas and enthusiasm for them and already had quite a solid research base; the work came tumbling out. The attacks of the late 1970s rattled me so much that for a while in the early 1980s I could not even do research, let alone write; the latter condition prevailed more or less throughout the 1980s, though with great difficulty I managed to squeeze out The Russian Revolution (ironically, my bestseller). I remember what a breakthrough it was to get the Vera Dunham Festschrift piece written and see that I had actually managed to say something new for the first time in years. During this period I abandoned a half-completed book on social mobility in the 1920s and 1930s and dropped another one on the politics of industrialization, for which I had done extensive archival


research, with just one article. In short, I lost almost a decade as a fully 
functioning historian, and only got my nerve back at the end of the 1980s, 
when a change in personal circumstances and a job move gave me a boost, 
and I was able to follow the new line of thought that produced “Ascribing 
Class.”

Criticism often makes one rethink and improve one’s work. But ad 
hominum criticism that the victims perceive as menacing and vicious does 
not do that; it is more likely to paralyze them and may also succeed in 
making them back off and abandon dangerous lines of inquiry. The revi-
sionists’ investigations into social support are a good example. After Viola 
had been burnt for the 25,000-ers, I for social mobility, and Alex Rabi-
nowitch and other 1917 revisionists for the Bolsheviks’ working-class sup-
port, there was a natural tendency to fear the fire, however staunchly we 
pretended not to. This is how, in retrospect, I explain the fact that social 
support as a line of inquiry more or less stopped in its tracks after a few 
initial publications. All sorts of avenues that had looked promising to revi-
sionists at the beginning were not pursued, the most egregious being the 
support of urban youth for the Soviet project (the “enthusiasm” theme), 
which all revisionists talked about and none systematically investigated. 
(I first noticed the “burnt child fears the fire” syndrome in myself while 
writing my Everyday Stalinism in the late 1990s and involuntarily flinching 
from the topic of youth enthusiasm, even though I believed it belonged 
there.) Nobody investigated the intelligentsia’s support for the regime, 
which I at any rate believe existed in the 1930s, though it was later ren-
dered invisible by a successful PR campaign by the Soviet intelligentsia to 
project dissidence back into the past. Nobody looked at Jewish support, 
or even talked about it: this topic had to wait until the turn of the century 
for Yuri Slezkine. Nor did any revisionist, then or later, ever suggest that 
the Soviet regime retained any reserves of urban working-class support or 
goodwill in the “old” working class after the taming of the trade unions, 
though I think this would almost certainly prove to be the case up to end 
of the 1930s if anyone ever investigated.

36. Three finished chapters of the social mobility book still sit in my files, exactly 
as they were when I left Columbia in 1980. The only thing I published from this was an 
article summarizing the argument, “The Russian Revolution and Social Mobility: A Re-
examination of the Question of Social Support for the Soviet Regime in the 1920s and 
see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ordzhonikidze’s Takeover of Vesenkha: A Case Study in Soviet 


38. Yuri Slezkine, The Jewish Century (Princeton, 2004). I do not mean to suggest 
that this is a “revisionist” approach, as Slezkine has never so identified himself or been so 
perceived by others. But in the broader sense of challenging the conventional wisdom of 
the field, it was certainly revisionist.

39. Although Sarah Davies does not so interpret her Leningrad letter data, focusing 
instead on workers’ resentment of elite privilege, I think the same data can be read as 
confirmation that at least some workers continued to think of the Soviet regime as “ours,”
How unattractive the “social support” line of inquiry had become to revisionists became evident in the 1990s, when formerly secret archives opened and predictably (since the function of “secret” and “completely secret” classifications was to hide what the regime did not want known) revealed masses of data on different forms of resistance and opposition. Revisionist social historians (notably Viola and myself, as well as Jeff Rossman and Sarah Davies from the next generation) jumped on this material, a predictable reaction from “archive rats” but one that nevertheless surely involved an element of relief (finally, a good line of inquiry for revisionists that could not be labeled pro-Soviet!). Of course this was not the only motive, nor even a conscious one. Discovery of James C. Scott’s theoretical work on resistance was a major stimulus; and for me personally, the resistance frame that I settled on for my book Stalin’s Peasants at the end of the 1980s was a welcome solution to the interpretive problem that had perplexed me ever since I realized that the “victims and beneficiaries” hypothesis with which I had initially approached collectivization was not going to work.

Ironically, though, just as we old revisionists were taking refuge in resistance studies, the times were changing. With the Cold War ending, revisionists could probably have written anything they liked about social support without adverse consequences. Indeed one could argue that that is exactly what Kotkin did in his Magnetic Mountain, a programmatically post-revisionist work that presented the acquisition of Soviet values as a popular (rather than regime) project of the 1930s. It was a sign of the times that Kotkin could subtitle his work Stalinism as a Civilization: if I or Getty or Viola had dared to do that in the 1980s it would never have got past the censor (that is, the publishers’ readers) or, if by some fluke it had passed that checkpoint, it would have provoked a storm of outrage at the whitewashing involved in calling Stalinism a “civilization.” Of course Kotkin’s use of the term civilization was not whitewashing (any more than ours would have been), but he was certainly suggesting that Soviet citizens of the 1930s, not just the Soviet regime, had Soviet values, which was in effect an affirmative cultural answer to the revisionists’ social support question. It does not detract from the novelty and originality of this work (and


41. I mean by this that the field of Soviet history was now open to a much broader range of ideas, including revisionist ones—which is not to say that the same was true of the American public or even the intellectual and political weeklies, which, with the exception of the London Review of Books, remained strongly antirevisionist on both sides of the Atlantic, giving pride of place to critics like Pipes, Malia, and Conquest.

42. Stephen Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization (Berkeley, 1995).
the “Stalinist subjectivity” work that followed it) to see the continuities with revisionism—despite the paradox that it was “post-revisionists” who were now making the argument for support, while revisionists beavered away on resistance.

There are important differences between the revisionists’ take and that of their successors: notably, the revisionists were primarily interested in society and behavior and the post-revisionists in discourse and subjectivity. For social historians, the question was where, if it existed, support for the regime was located, the assumption being that populations can be meaningfully broken down into groups like classes and cohorts distinguished by age, sex, nationality, and so on. But if a (more or less universal) discourse is the focus of study, there is no conceptual requirement to specify further which segments of society speak this discourse most fluently and sincerely. That said, I would hazard the suggestion that the core subject of most of the post-revisionist “subjectivity” work is unmarried urban youth, just as the core subject of my Everyday Stalinism could be said to be middle-aged urban men and women with family responsibilities.43

Concluding Thoughts

Revisionism was a Young Turks’ movement of challenge to conventional wisdom in the 1970s with its epicenter in North America and western Europe, particularly Britain. It achieved respectability—some would say dominance—in the professional field toward the end of the 1980s, particularly with respect to its social history component.44 In 1990s, it became less coherent as a movement, partly because the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the archives changed the research environment and introduced new scholarly agendas, and partly for the normal demographic reason: a new cohort of young scholars came along, whose central interest was typically not social but cultural and intellectual history.

It has been said that when conventional wisdom in a field is challenged, people first say the new argument is wrong and then (if the challenge is successful) that it is boring because everyone knows it. That is more or less what happened with revisionism, or at least the parts of it with which I was particularly involved. In this concluding section, I do not want to argue about whether revisionism was right or wrong, because that seems to me a largely meaningless question to ask about any scholarly trend. I would take it for granted that any particular angle of vision (such as revisionism) enables some things to come into sharp focus while making others recede. The more interesting questions to ask are what the angle was and what were the issues and processes that it illuminated. In

43. On my subject as homo oeconomicus, see Jochen Hellbeck, “Speaking Out: Languages of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalinist Russia,” *Kritika* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 77–78. If one thinks of Hellbeck’s implicit subject as young and mine as middle-aged it is not surprising that his people should turn out to be interested in ideology and the future while mine are preoccupied with strategies for coping with economic hardship in the present.

this final section, I will away move from the highly personal story I have told so far and try to assess the particular contribution revisionism made to the writing of Soviet history.

**Power**

The totalitarian model, at least as used in the Soviet field in the 1950s and 1960s, had a strikingly simple approach to power: it was a zero-sum game, something rulers in such a system monopolized and exerted over the population. The revisionist historians’ dichotomy of “from above/from below” was an advance, though its binary character was also a simplification, and there was some ambiguity about how far down in the society “below” implied. Hough’s “Measurement of Power” article, drawing on American social science theory, was a pioneering attempt to think about power in a more complex manner as something “situational and relational.”45 In this article, Hough postulated that “all citizens must have a modicum of direct or indirect influence in certain situations (if nothing else, as rulers anticipate their reactions)” and tried to work out ways of assessing this.46 While supporting the then novel approach of interest-group analysis, Hough noted “that each person has a multiplicity of interests” or “group memberships,” or, to translate that idea into a more contemporary idiom, a multiplicity of social identities.47

The revisionists introduced into Soviet history the notions of bureaucratic and professional interest groups and institutional and center-periphery conflict, and they were particularly successful at demonstrating inputs from middle levels of the administrative hierarchy and professional groups.48 They were alert to what would now be called questions of agency and did their best to introduce rigor into discussions of it. Following Hough’s observation that, if outcomes regularly fail to match leadership intentions, there is at least a possibility that popular preferences are involved, revisionists were good at identifying such mismatches of intentions and outcomes (“unintended consequences”). The inference to be drawn was that where “unintended consequences” abounded, there could be no talk of “total” power.

**Why Things Happen**

In the 1970s, more than at present, historians felt that their task was to explain why things happen. Revisionists were generally skeptical of ideologi-

46. Ibid., 215.
47. Ibid., 210.
cal explanations, reacting against the simple view of ideology (dominant in the scholarship of the day) as a body of codified doctrine derived from canonical texts and imposed by the regime on a passive population. This did not mean that revisionists attached no importance to the way people think: for that, following Tucker's lead, they tended to invoke the concept of political culture. But this was never a major revisionist preoccupation: more energy was devoted to debunking accepted causal explanations springing from "Marxist-Leninist ideology" and proposing alternatives, often various kinds of contingency (in relation to regime policy) or group and individual self-interest (for example, the desire to advance oneself, to avoid trouble, to make a living).

Marxist analyses of why things happen generally involve changes in the economic base or the patterns of class domination. In a Sovietological revisionist context, the second was more important than the first, and the Marxist framework usually invoked was much closer to Trotskyism than to Stalinism, notably to Lev Trotsky's idea of a ruling bureaucracy (recast by Milovan Dijlas as a "new class"). Modernization was also an important revisionist framework, usually formulated in terms of American social science, rather than Marxism. This meant assuming that the Soviet Union was a participant in certain processes observed globally since the industrial revolution: population movement from countryside to town, decreasing fertility and death rates, upward mobility for many as the managerial and white-collar sector expanded, and increasing literacy and education. The much-invoked image of "backwardness" was not incompatible with the modernization premise but simply meant that Russia's position on the continuum of modernizing nations was relatively low. Revisionists generally saw "building socialism," as this concept was understood in the Stalin period, as a form of state-sponsored modernization.

**Political Agendas**

As revisionists perceived the field of scholarship they were entering, two kinds of political bias and two different political agendas prevailed, one on each side of the iron curtain. In the west, the reigning ideology was Cold War anti-Sovietism and the agenda was to show the evil of the Soviet system. In the Soviet Union, the reigning ideology was the Marxist-Leninist version of Hurrah-patriotism, the agenda being to show that the Soviet Communist Party and government had always been right and on the side of history. Not surprisingly, the revisionists were highly critical of both these biases, which led them to take a strong position in favor of "objectivity." Scholarly objectivity was not then the problematic issue it has

since become: in the 1970s and 1980s, most historians would still have accepted the cardinal importance of striving toward it, even as they agreed that it was an unattainable goal.

The issue of the revisionists' own political bias has been a leitmotif of criticism from the Right. New Left Marxist (anti-Vietnam) thinking was indeed present in that generation of American historians in general, but the issue is not personal political affiliation (which Americans, unlike Soviet citizens, are supposedly free to choose) but political bias of the work, and there the evidence seems weaker. Social history revisionists pointed to working-class support for the Bolsheviks in 1917, a conclusion that may have fitted their biases but was nevertheless based on solid data. On the Stalin period, one of the peculiarities of Marxist revisionist scholarship was that, if it had a bias, it was in an anti-Soviet direction (the Trotskyite idea that the revolution had been betrayed and power hijacked by a bureaucratic "new class"). Its other peculiarity was the focus on Soviet mistreatment of the peasantry through a phoney class-differentiation scheme that created an imaginary class of kulaks. One has to conclude that, if revisionists wanted to whitewash the Soviet regime, they did a terrible job of it.

Sources

Revisionists were always big on sources, especially archives. On the face of it, it may seem self-evident that historians would have this particular passion, but the experience of the Soviet field shows otherwise. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, when E. H. Carr was writing his massive History of Soviet Russia, making a much more extensive use of Soviet published materials than anyone had done before him, he was often criticized for slighting oppositional sources like émigré memoirs, the subtext being the accusation that he preferred to give the victors' version of the story rather than that of the vanquished. There were similar objections to the possible future use of Soviet archives, should they become available to western scholars (as they were not in Carr's time), since some historians of the older generation assumed they would have been massively falsified and would therefore provide only disinformation. (Others, however, made the...
opposite argument, namely that the lack of access to Soviet archives prevented Soviet history being a legitimate field of scholarship.)

Curiously, the cohort that followed the revisionists shared some of this skepticism about archives. Kotkin, for example, warned in the early 1990s against too much excitement over the opening of archives: “Not all documents have been preserved, and far from all matters were committed to paper. Even access to the presidential archives will not solve certain puzzles of Stalin’s rule. But how much more do we need to know about high-level machinations? No documents will suddenly reveal that the USSR was a parliamentary democracy.” In any case, there were abundant published sources that provide “on a local level a record sometimes unmatched by the archives.” It did not do to be eclectic in one’s approach to sources, in his view.

A distrust of “archival fetishism” was just coming into the profession along with discourse analysis, and, in addition, local interpretive issues were at stake. The promiscuous use of archival sources, especially those that had been classified until 1991, disturbed Jochen Hellbeck because, as he explained, these sources tended to privilege resistance to rather than acceptance of Soviet values, the latter being his central scholarly interest. NKVD reports (svodki) were the quintessential example, but, in general, although “the outpouring of previously classified sources from Soviet archives has shed ample light on mass cases of popular dissatisfaction with the policies of the Soviet regime . . . we should keep in mind that documentary editions, however much they may be based on hard archival evidence, are always selective in emphasis.”

This brings us back to the old warning that official Soviet sources would tell the wrong story—but this time with the intriguing twist that the story they would tell would be too anti-Soviet. I am not persuaded that promiscuity with sources is a vice and monogamy a virtue. The more the merrier, in my view; and if you find the sources are telling the wrong story, it is always worth considering whether you, and not they, may be trying to rig the evidence. Rightly or wrongly, the revisionists thought that the field of Sovietology had lost the connection to the data that keeps

56. Hellbeck, “Speaking Out,” 71. There is an unexplained shift in referent from “archives” to “documentary editions,” by which he has in mind “martyrologies” like Vitalii Shentalinsky’s Raby svobody v literaturnykh arkhivakh KGB (Moscow, 1995).
57. Which is not to deny that Hellbeck made a good point about the tendency of classified archives, especially NKVD svodki, to tell the anti-Soviet story, and that his warning about the need for caution in using them was sensible.
things from going off track. In the 1980s, the revisionists’ emphasis on archives was, among other things, a strategy for keeping the field honest (de-ideologizing it), like the contemporaneous emphasis of Soviet historians such as V. Z. Drobizhev on istochnikovedenie. Stalin had good reason to dislike “archive rats”: they tend to subvert ideologies and undermine grand narratives, and the more promiscuous they are in their archival searching, the more likely they are to make unexpected discoveries.58

This is not to claim that the revisionists’ archival interests were all on the plane of high moral seriousness. When getting archival documents was a matter of matching wits with the archive keepers and overcoming barriers like the unavailability of archival inventories (opisi), it was simply great fun, an enthralling game in which every now and then one hit the jackpot; I remember thinking that it must be pretty dull working in a field where you just ordered your archival files and they came. There was no doubt also some pleasure in sticking it to the people who had not gained access to the archives. Nevertheless, it would seem perverse to deny that historical scholarship with archives is better than historical scholarship without; and bringing the archives into play in Soviet history and forcing historians to take account of them was, in the first instance, a revisionist contribution.

“Where Is the Big Picture?”

Scholarly revisionism is usually about unsettling an established historical narrative, often one with nationalist or other political overtones.59 It seems to come in two forms. The first provides a challenge to the grand narrative that invokes scholarly values and objectivity and deploys detailed research to undercut it. The second presents a counternarrative with a different political message. These are not mutually exclusive, and Sovietological revisionism probably contained elements of both. In my reading, however, the impulse to offer a different political message (to put it crudely, “the Soviet Union—or some aspect thereof—is not as bad as it has been painted by Cold War scholarship”) was much weaker than the impulse to create a nonpartisan scholarship based on detailed research. The latter was associated with a move away from political science toward social history, or from model-building towards empiricism and archives.60

With the first kind of revisionism, the objection “Where is the big picture?” will always be offered—and justly, in a sense, as this is basically a subversive, iconoclastic genre rather than a monumental one. Sometimes people say that all scholars are, or ought to be, revisionists, in that

58. See Stalin’s letter to the editors of Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, 1931, no. 6, published as “O nekotorykh voprosakh istorii bol’shevizma,” in I. V. Stalin, Sochineniia (Moscow, 1951), 13:96.
59. What follows is partly based on papers and proceedings from the comparative conference on “Revisionisms” held at the European University Institute in Florence in November 2006, for which I wrote “Revisionism in Soviet History,” and was stimulated to write the present, more personal, essay.
60. For elaboration of this point, see Fitzpatrick, “Revisionism in Soviet History.”
they should constantly be in the business of challenging conventional wisdom, but this is no doubt an unrealistic view of what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science,” whose function is to elaborate, not challenge, dominant paradigms. A more persuasive claim might be that revisionism of the first type is a natural métier for historians, who have often tended to be empiricists rather than theorists. This claim fitted the disciplinary situation of the 1970s, when political scientists and sociologists built social-scientific models and historians usually did not; but the fit is less good for the first decade of the twenty-first century, when history has become one of the many provinces of an interdisciplinary empire of cultural theory, making it less prone to iconoclasm as well as empiricism.

If the great age of revisionism in Soviet history lay between the age of social science models and that of cultural theory, that may give us a clue to its characteristics as a scholarly strategy: iconoclasm about received ideas, skepticism about grand narratives, empiricism, and lots of hard work on primary sources. In Isaiah Berlin’s terms, the Soviet history revisionists were foxes, who know many things, rather than hedgehogs, who know one big thing. Whether one prefers hedgehogs or foxes depends both on individual temperament and on collective fashion, but a lively intellectual life requires both of them. Vivat revisionism (and post-revisionism too)!