Historians, unlike some postmodern anthropologists, usually efface their own personality when writing their work. The political views of a person are seen as an encumbrance, a limit on objectivity and neutrality. Ideally, the true historian ought to be like a filter through which the archival effluvia seeps with the minimum of subjective clogging. Most practicing historians know, of course, that selectivity, interpretation, emphasis, and even artistry make complete objectivity impossible, even as the best of them work as artisans careful about not allowing their personal and political bias to overwhelm the evidence. Historians cannot stand outside history, free from time and place. Someone had to educate the educator. Therefore, evaluating the contributions of a major historian such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, where she came from, what influences shaped her, and how she chose to deal with her own past should not be seen as merely a superfluous addendum to her intellectual biography but a window through which the products of her creative efforts can be understood.

Sheila Fitzpatrick was born in Melbourne, Australia, on June 4, 1941, the daughter of Brian Fitzpatrick and Dorothy Mary Davies. She grew up and was educated in that Southern Hemisphere city; graduated from its premier university, where she first became interested in Russian history; and then took her rich life experience in an extraordinary family into her work and the wider world. The unique amalgam of three English-speaking countries, three university systems, and three distinct, though not unrelated, professional cultures has given her work a special quality, which I would call “detached engagement.” By that I mean that throughout her writing Sheila has maintained, in so far as they are possible to achieve, the highest scholarly standards of objectivity, neutrality, and faithfulness to the sources (archival if at all available), and careful, thoughtful reconstruction of a complex and elusive past. At the same time, she is deeply engaged in the central questions affecting Soviet history, fearlessly treading on the toes of sacrosanct orthodoxies, forcing reluctant readers to rethink what they thought they knew,
resisting easy categorization into this group or that (she does not want to be “ascribed”), and undermining the facile generalizations and essentialist understandings of Soviet history in general, and Stalinism in particular, that have marred Western scholarship on the USSR.

She is, without doubt, her father’s daughter, and yet her work exists in an acute tension with the thrust of much of his writing and activity. Brian Fitzpatrick was a very public intellectual, a renegade journalist and, later, a historian, at the edge of respectable academia. Neither a Marxist nor a Communist, he seems to have been a dedicated anti-anti-Communist. His biographer, Don Watson, writes: “Fitzpatrick did not see Russia as the socialist fatherland but for many years he saw it as an experiment worth supporting and he was convinced that it saved Western democracy in World War II. In many ways he was a ‘fellow traveller.’”1 A gregarious man, fond of pubs and the people in them, seeking there a special fellowship and community, Brian Fitzpatrick was a democrat, a civil libertarian, a socialist, and a radical nationalist, never a Leninist. He suffered, however, according to Watson, from a “Soviet blind spot” and was willing to “turn a blind eye to Stalinism’s totalitarian abuses of all the ideals he professed.”2 His daughter “asked him early on (though without getting a serious answer) why we didn’t move to Russia, if, as he seemed to think, things were better there.”3 As a historian, he was convinced of the fundamental importance of economic factors in historical explanation (more Charles Beard than Karl Marx) and to the end of his life “continued to believe in both the concept and the existence of ‘class,’” even berating C. Wright Mills once for rejecting the term in favor of ‘power elite.’”4 Above all, he was highly suspicious of all authority. In her account of her father, Sheila Fitzpatrick quotes appreciatively his core belief expressed at the height of the cold war in 1953: “First, power corrupts men wielding it, whether Communists or Catholics, Marxists or Mennonites. And secondly, all governments are bad, and some worse.”5

What a home that must have been to have grown up in! Certainly engagement comes out of it and given all the heat and controversy, perhaps also the imperative to cultivate detachment as well. Growing up in a leftist family in anti-Communist cold war Australia—at a time when any sympathy displayed toward the Soviet project, combined with criticism of one’s own country, placed one outside the comfort zone of acceptable views—may have stimulated a life-long search in Sheila Fitzpatrick to try to get the Soviet story right, to see it in all its varied hues, and to shrug off the accusations of partisanship that would likely follow anyone working toward that noble aim.

She graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1961 and went on to St. Antony’s College, Oxford, where she earned her D.Phil. in 1969, working with Max Hayward, known in the Soviet Union as the “not unknown Max Hayward.”6 After her thesis was examined by Leonard Shapiro, she met and befriended E. H. Carr and R. W. Davies, thus coming to know the broad and contentious pleiad of British academic experts on the USSR. She first went to the Soviet Union to do her dissertation research in 1966, “having just acquired a husband (who was studying in Tokyo),” spent some eighteen
months there, and grew close to Igor Aleksandrovich Sats, a member of the
Novyi mir editorial board in its liberal period under Aleksandr Tvardovskii,
but much earlier Anatoli Lunacharskii’s literary secretary (and brother-in-
law). She regarded him as an important influence and even “a lately acquired
parent.” After completing her research, Sheila Fitzpatrick went on to teach
at Melbourne, Birmingham, St. John’s University in New York, Columbia
University, the University of Texas at Austin (I don’t want this to sound like
she can’t hold a job!), and from 1990 at the University of Chicago, where we
were colleagues for eleven years.

Sheila Fitzpatrick is currently the Bernadotte E. Schmitt Distinguished
Service Professor in Modern Russian History at the University of Chicago;
hers honors are many. In recognition of her body of work, she was awarded
the Mellon Distinguished Achievement Award, which could be equated
with a Nobel Prize in History. She is the author of seven books to date and
the editor or coeditor of another seven, in addition to eighty articles as an
author. Today it is simply impossible for anyone seriously interested in Soviet
history not to know and not to have read Sheila’s work, and our understand-
ing of Stalinism in particular would be deeply impoverished without her
contributions. Sheila was a pioneer in moving the profession from its ear-
lier concentration in imperial Russian history into the current renaissance of
Soviet history. For a time, she was the only younger historian doing serious
research into postrevolutionary Russia, alongside a handful of older men,
some of them quite cranky and possessive about their hold on the field. Her
sheer productivity made her the leader in the study of the darkest period of
Soviet history, and she has even taught many of us Russian! Before Sheila
mentioned them, how many of us had ever heard of *vydvizhentsy* (proletarian
promotes) or *obshchestvennitsy* (activist wives)?

In this synthetic overview of her work, I would like to suggest what I take
to be Fitzpatrick’s Soviet story, how she explains why Russia and its revolu-
tion turned out as it did, and what the causes and the consequences of the
Bolshevik project were.

Sheila’s writings began in the New Economic Policy (NEP) period with
swings back into the revolution and civil war but generally progressing for-
ward into the 1930s, World War II, and most recently the postwar and even
post-Stalin and post-Soviet periods. At the same time, her methods and the-
matic interests have gradually moved from institutional and political history,
questions of culture and power, through social history, even at times an
apolitical social history, into explorations of social identities, everyday life,
returning often to various cultural themes. Culture was present from the
beginning, in her study of Lunacharskii, and over the years she has explored
culture in a variety of modes: the cultural policy of the regime in the 1920s
and 1930s (what she referred to as the “soft line”); the transformation of
popular and social culture in the revolutionary years of the First Five Year
Plan and after; the high culture of people such as Dmitrii Shostakovich; and
aspects of cultural practices and discourses that led her into looking at rep-
resentations and emotions.
In her first published article, a review of Soviet literature on Lunacharskii, the softest of Bolsheviks, Fitzpatrick asks, why Lunacharskii now? Why in the 1960s was there a revival of interest in this second-rank (not second-rate) Bolshevik? “Like so many of his contemporaries,” she writes, “Lunacharsky has acquired a symbolic importance: he stands for a relatively permissive policy towards art and literature, and as a mediator between the party and the intelligentsia.” She looks at Ehrenburg and Chukovskii as memoirists who, through “a very sophisticated process of selection,” construct a useful Lunacharskii who becomes in their view a liberal responsible for the party’s soft, neutral line on the arts. This was the Lunacharskii that certain intellectuals of the 1960s needed to support their claim for an art with integrity and room for diversity, if not deviance, within the larger context of a Marxist-Leninist regime. She applauds instead Lunacharskii himself, who in his Siluetty, autobiographical portraits of Old Bolsheviks, does what a good historian should do—“demythologize, and...reoccupy the old historical ground between rumour and party history.”

In the debates over the October Revolution that divided Western historians in the 1960s and 1970s, first political historians, such as Alexander Rabinowitch, and later a generation of young social historians challenged the idea of the Bolshevik victory as the work of a cynical group of political manipulators who successfully and behind the backs of the working class carried out a coup d’état. The new historiography showed that the Bolsheviks had broad support among workers and, even more importantly, soldiers, and that the Petrograd Soviet held sway over the popular forces that determined much of the course of the revolution in the late summer and fall of 1917. The actual events of October were more a coup de grace than a coup d’état in that real power had already passed to the Soviet once it had secured control of the Petrograd garrison through September and into October “in effect disarming the Provisional Government without a shot.” In the actual fighting in the October Revolution, from 24 to 26 October, 1917, less than fifteen people were killed. In her own reading of the October Revolution, Fitzpatrick recognizes the overwhelming support that the Bolsheviks had among key constituencies in the city; however, she speaks of a coup d’état. She argues that Lenin was determined to set up a one-party government no matter what the Soviet or some of his closest comrades desired. Although he was ultimately forced to compromise and admit a small number of Left Socialist Revolutionaries into a coalition government, Lenin’s own intentions, she contends, played the key role in the eventual creation of a one-party state. She shares Engels’s warning that “a socialist party taking power prematurely might find itself isolated and forced into repressive dictatorship,” a risk that “the Bolshevik leaders, and Lenin in particular, were willing to take.”

The requirement to hold power in a largely peasant country in which their support from workers grew fragile presented the Bolsheviks with a dilemma—the need to gain and hold popular support while at the same time relying on repression to stay in power. Revolutionary violence, then, and terror were built into this revolution. Fitzpatrick, like Robert C. Tucker,
Moshe Lewin, and Stephen F. Cohen, sees the civil war experience as far more formative in the Bolshevik style of rule than the long history of prerevolutionary social democracy. Actual social experience must supplement ideology; the attitudes and habits of Bolsheviks must be factored in. Soviet authoritarianism stems, first, from the irreducible fact that “a minority dictatorship was almost bound to be authoritarian, and those who served as its executants were extremely likely to develop the habits of bossing and bullying that Lenin often criticized in the years after 1917.”

Second, the followers of the Bolsheviks—the bulk of Russia’s soldiers, sailors, and workers—were less concerned with the niceties of lawful rule than Old Bolshevik intellectuals and were more willing to use force to crush opposition. Civil war certainly shaped what Bolshevism was becoming, but it also must be noted that Lenin and the Bolsheviks welcomed civil war. Their seizure of power in October, followed by the forceful dispersal of the Constituent Assembly, threw down the gauntlet to the liberals and moderate socialists and “gave the new regime a baptism by fire . . . the kind of baptism the Bolsheviks had risked, and may even have sought.”

A key question for Soviet historiography has been the role (even the meaning) of ideology. Fitzpatrick does not deduce the flow of Soviet history from ideology, a historiographical practice well established during the cold war by people such as Bertram Wolfe and resurrected in the new modernist school of Martin Malia, Stephen Kotkin, and others, which holds that ideas going back to the Enlightenment or Tomasso Campanello play a key determining role. For the modernists, the Soviet Union flows from an Enlightenment project carried to an extreme. The USSR is a gardening state in which the cultivators plan and plant and brutally cut down the weeds. Fitzpatrick does not neglect the mind-set and preferences of the Bolsheviks. But rather than the Bolsheviks successfully carrying out their ideological aims, she sees their plans as fundamentally utopian fantasies that were thwarted by their clash with reality. There was no international revolution to come to the aid of Russia; the Polish workers did not rise up in 1920 to aid the Red Army; State and Revolution was an absurd manual for running a government; The ABC of Communism, which depicted a society in which “all will work in accordance with the indications of the statistical bureaux” and where there “will be no need for special ministers of State, for police or prisons, for laws and decrees,” was patently improbable. The Bolsheviks talked about ending the exploitation of workers and women, of colonized nationalities, and spreading the revolution to the West, all the while fighting a civil war and dealing with famine and hundreds of thousands of wounded men and women and parentless children. Ideas and understandings were certainly important and had enormous consequences, but in Fitzpatrick’s story, they have to be integrated into the social reality that undermined the Bolsheviks at every step. Marxist analysis was inappropriate to Soviet social reality, too crude and too foreign, and, among other errors, led the Bolsheviks into false understandings of the “maturity” of the working class and the development of proletarian consciousness. And Marxist prescriptions for a socialist transformation of Russia
had to be adjusted. “The Bolsheviks,” according to Fitzpatrick, “had made an absurd, undeliverable promise to the working class when they talked of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ The oxymoron of a ‘ruling proletariat,’ appealing though it might be to dialectical thinkers, was not realizable in the real world.”

Given the heavy-handed practice of both Western sectarians and many Soviet historians, Fitzpatrick’s wariness of using Marxist concepts is understandable. A tendency to force Russian society into a rigid structure determined by a quite different historical evolution in the West has more often closed avenues of investigation than offering fruitful new conceptualizations. Fitzpatrick’s objections to the practice of past proponents can be understood as an appropriate critique of historical explanations that treated Marxism as an infallible text, a dogma or recipe book, from which prescriptions for analysis and action could be drawn. That text was fixed and scientific. Fitzpatrick opposes notions of historical teleology or fixed laws of history (zakonomernost’). In the mid-1970s through the early 1980s, she explored alternative social scientific explanations of Soviet dynamics, influenced by her second husband, the political scientist Jerry Hough. Along with bureaucratic politics and the play of interest groups, she was most interested in the phenomenon of social mobility.

This brings us to a central theme in her work: the concept of “class.” Fitzpatrick’s own dilemma about class, as she acknowledges, was that it is difficult to do early Soviet history and not take seriously that one concept that the Bolsheviks took very seriously, namely, class, while at the same time not falling victim to their particular classifications. Class was their sociology: society, indeed the world, was divided into antagonistic classes, exploited and exploiting classes. The Soviet dictatorship of the proletariat would not be an egalitarian society; it would favor the exploited classes and wage war against the exploiters and their international allies—a cartoon Lenin sweeping the globe of the bourgeoisie. But soon this dictatorship would change its meaning; instead of “a collective class dictatorship exercised by workers who remained in their old jobs at the factory bench,” it became “a dictatorship run by full-time ‘cadres’ or bosses, in which as many as possible of the new bosses were former proletarians.”

Along with her reluctance to accept class as a useful analytical category, one receives from Fitzpatrick’s early work two different impressions of class: first, that class is an artificial concept imposed by Marxists on a complexly differentiated social reality; and second, that class is helpful as an objective sociological entity susceptible to such simple forms of analysis as counting. Both of her views were locked in an objective sense of class that missed the quality of human intervention and invention in the making of social categories and identities. As historians and theorists began to suggest that class be seen as one of the social identities available to individuals and groups, either to represent themselves or others, Fitzpatrick moved from a more objective to a more subjective notion of class. Although a history of perceptions would never substitute for social history in her work, she became ever more
influenced by social theory that underlined the importance of ideology, the burdens of mentalité, representations, and the limits and restraints of discourse in shaping not only the way people understand their social environment, but also how that environment is produced. But that came later.

Whatever support among the workers the Bolsheviks may have enjoyed in the summer and fall of 1917, they lost the allegiance of significant parts of the working class during the civil war (1918–1921). The disintegration of the working class during the civil war left behind its vanguard “like the smile of the Cheshire cat.”

The party, especially at its upper levels, was made up largely of intellectuals and was hardly representative of workers even in its lower ranks. In the absence of either a coherent working class or an adequate class culture, the Bolsheviks were forced to rely on other social groups, such as the so-called bourgeois specialists. Antagonisms (“class tension” in Fitzpatrick’s language) developed between the displaced workers and those who favored using the spetsy (experts).

The Bolshevik dilemma of a revolutionary Marxist party holding power in a largely peasant society was to be resolved, in the Bolshevik view, through aid from more advanced countries in Europe—another utopian fantasy as it turned out. Thus the dilemma became acute in the last years of the civil war when despair about the workers gripped many party leaders, including Lenin, and the pointed attacks of the Workers’ Opposition seemed to undermine the very sense of legitimacy of the Marxists who had made the revolution. “By 1920, a large part of the industrial proletariat had disintegrated, and the old capitalist bourgeoisie had been expropriated and ceased to exist as a class. In effect, the great ‘class struggle’ was waged by a surrogate proletariat (the Red Army and the Communist Party) against a surrogate bourgeoisie (the White Armies and the urban intelligentsia).”

But just as the impossibility of creating a dictatorship of the proletariat was becoming apparent, a provisional solution was found. The introduction of the NEP encouraged the revival of industry and the reconstitution of the working class in 1923–1924. The “Lenin levy” brought thousands of “workers” into the party, and a class base for Bolshevism was reconstituted in the first half of the 1920s. Rather than trying to achieve a party majority of actual bench workers, the Bolshevik dilemma of proletarian identity was resolved by bringing more former workers into the ruling apparatus.

The Communists “patched up the marriage with the working class” during the NEP years, but during “the First Five-Year Plan, relations soured again because of falling real wages and urban living standards and the regime’s insistent demands for higher productivity. An effective separation from the working class, if not a formal divorce, occurred in the 1930s.”

Fitzpatrick’s principal innovation in our thinking about the Soviet working class is that it actually benefited from the Russian Revolution by being recruited into the party, into the educational system, and into management. The Communists “created a broad channel for working-class upward mobility, since the recruitment of workers to party membership went hand in hand with the promotion of working-class Communists to white-collar
administrative and managerial position. . . . It was not workers that mattered in Stalin’s regime but former workers—the newly-promoted ‘proletariat core’ in the managerial and professional elites. This is clearly not what Marx and many Marxists had in mind when they envisioned the dictatorship of the proletariat. Changes in the forces of production and worker upward mobility was not accompanied by any essential changes in the relations of production or empowering the producers. Stalin pushed through a program of affirmative action for workers at the end of the 1920s “a very bold and imaginative policy which did in fact serve to consolidate and legitimize the regime . . . . Despite the relatively short duration of the affirmative action policy, the regime gained lasting credit as a sponsor of upward social mobility. The Bolsheviks never tried to fulfill the Marxist promise that the workers would rule. But they did fulfill a simpler and more comprehensible promise of the revolution—that workers and peasants would have the opportunity to rise into the new ruling elite of the Soviet state."

Even this mildly positive assessment of the fruits of the revolution was enough to have Fitzpatrick accused from the Right of being an apologist for Stalinism and from the Left for not assessing positively enough the promise and potential of the revolution and its betrayal by the Stalinists. For her, the standard Trotskyist formulation of the bureaucracy standing over and dominating society was far too simplistic, for the lower echelons of the bureaucracy were as much dominated as dominating. Fitzpatrick was fascinated by the upward social mobility of the working class into the elite that characterized early Soviet society, and she introduced Western audiences to the vydvizhentsy (those thrust upward from the working class). In contrast to those Western scholars, following Trotsky and Isaac Deutscher, who argued that the erosion of the working class was key to the eventual evolution of the Bolshevik regime from a dictatorship of the proletariat to a dictatorship of the bureaucracy, Fitzpatrick contended that the real meaning of the revolution was the coming to power of former workers who occupied the key party and state positions in significant numbers. As she put it in The Russian Revolution 1917–1932:

The way in which workers became “masters” of Russian society after the October Revolution was not by an abolition of the old status hierarchy. It was by moving in very large numbers into the old masters’ jobs. Thus the essence of the special relationship between the party and the working class after 1917 was that the regime got “cadres” (administrators and managers) from the working class, and workers got responsible, high-status jobs from the regime . . . . Although it took some time for the Bolshevik leaders (being good Marxists) to realize it, the regime’s commitment to the working class had much less to do with workers in situ than with working-class upward mobility . . . .

Fitzpatrick saw the longue durée of the revolution as encompassing modernization (escape from backwardness), class (the fate of the workers), and revolutionary violence (how the regime dealt with its enemies). Clustered
together with all its other more ephemeral utopian dreams, the Bolsheviks had two

overriding imperatives to which policy debate continually returned. It was imperative that the Soviet Union should industrialize; and it was imperative that the new regime should create its own elite by promoting and educating workers, peasants and their children. Within the Communist Party, these were universally accepted truths...which had substantial endorsement in the society as a whole, and this must surely be a factor in any explanation of Soviet achievement in these areas.... For the vydvizhentsy, industrialization was an heroic achievement—their own, Stalin’s and that of Soviet power—and their promotion, linked with the industrialization drive, was a fulfillment of the promises of the revolution.26

Even as she focused on the social transformations of the early Soviet years, Fitzpatrick warned against moving too far from ideology and political culture toward the notion (then quite popular) of “improvisation.” Certainly the Bolsheviks built their state on the run, with the materials at hand, and without precise blueprints, but they also did not build a pluralistic, inclusive state but one they proudly proclaimed was a “dictatorship.” Bolsheviks were not Mensheviks, and they certainly were not liberal democrats (even liberal democrats, as her father repeatedly experienced, were often neither liberal nor very democratic). Ideology might be what people “think and say about what they do,” but it is most productively studied in relationship with political practice, “what they do.”27

For most people even slightly acquainted with the historiography of the Soviet Union, Sheila Fitzpatrick would be identified as a “revisionist” and a “social historian.” Revisionism in its simplest definition included those scholars (then young) in the late 1960s and through the 1970s who rejected the totalitarian model and sought a more complex (or in the vocabulary of the day, “ nuanced”) understanding of Soviet society and politics. While among the strongest advocates of social historical methodologies, from the beginning, Fitzpatrick was critical of certain tendencies among revisionists: Stephen Cohen’s sharp distinction between Leninism and Stalinism as completely different phenomena, in his words “an essential discontinuity,” appeared too stark for Fitzpatrick and was expressed too polemically.28 Here she took a radical middle path between those who, on the one hand, saw an essential continuity between Marxism, Leninism, and Stalinism, an inevitable outgrowth of the system out of its ideological origins, and those, on the other, who spoke of a “revolution betrayed” and viable alternatives. Critical of the older school of historians whose work was often directed at indicting the Soviet experiment, she worried about revisionists moving toward exculpation. Once the initial cohort of revisionists who wrote on 1917 demonstrated that the Bolsheviks had popular support by October and at times proposed radically democratic institutions and practices, even within their own party, another source of Stalinism had to be found: since 1902 and 1917 were no longer sufficient at explaining how the revolution turned out, maybe it
was the civil war, or the peasantry, backwardness, perhaps the bureaucracy? She demurred from those revisionists who sought “to exonerate Lenin and the revolution for responsibility for Stalinism.”

Rather than alternatives or roads not taken, she was more interested in what the “revolution fulfilled,” how the coming to power of the working class was realized, not in terms of its dominant position in the state but how that state carried out the industrialization of the country, so enamored by Marxists. In *The Russian Revolution*, she traces “lines of continuity between Lenin’s revolution and Stalin’s . . . . But the issue here is not whether 1917 and 1929 were alike, but whether they were part of the same process. Napoleon’s revolutionary wars can be included in our general concept of the French Revolution, even if we do not regard them as an embodiment of the spirit of 1789; and a similar approach seems legitimate in the case of the Russian Revolution.”

The concept of the revolution ought to include both the originating upheaval and the consolidation of the new regime. Hence, her inclusion of Stalinism in the 1930s as part of the revolution. The Great Terror, she argues, lies at the boundary of the revolution and postrevolutionary Stalinism. In its rhetoric the *Ezhovshchina* (the party purges organized by Nikolai Ezhov) was revolutionary terror, but in its practice “totalitarian terror in that it destroyed persons but not structures, and did not threaten the person of the Leader.” Still, 1937–1938 must be included in the revolution for “dramatic reasons alone.”

Along with A. L. Unger and Kendall E. Bailes, Fitzpatrick showed how a new “leading stratum” of Soviet-educated “specialists” replaced the Old Bolsheviks and bourgeois specialists. The largest numbers of beneficiaries were promoted workers and party rank-and-file, young technicians, who would make up the Soviet elite through the post-Stalin period until Gorbachev took power. Stalin, wrote Fitzpatrick, saw the old party bosses less as revolutionaries than “as Soviet boyars (feudal lords) and himself as a latter-day Ivan the Terrible, who had to destroy the boyars to build a modern nation state and a new service nobility.”

The term “Stalinism” has its own genealogy, beginning in the mid-1920s even before the system that would bear its name yet existed. Trotsky applied the word to the moderate “centrist” tendencies within the party stemming from the “ebbing of revolution” and identified them with his opponent, Stalin. By 1935 Trotsky’s use of Stalinism gravitated closer to the Marxist meaning of “Bonapartism” or “Thermidor,” “the crudest form of opportunism and social patriotism.” Even before Trotsky’s murder in August 1940, Stalinism had become a way of characterizing the particular form of social and political organization in the Soviet Union, distinct from capitalism but for Trotskyists and other non-Communist radicals not quite socialist. Not until the falling away of the totalitarian model, however, did scholars bring the term Stalinism into social science discussion as a sociopolitical formation to be analyzed in its own right. For Robert C. Tucker, Stalinism “represented, among other things, a far-reaching Russification of the already somewhat Russified earlier (Leninist) Soviet political culture.” For Stephen F. Cohen, “Stalinism was not simply nationalism, bureaucratization, absence
of democracy, censorship, police repression, and the rest in any precedented sense. . . . Instead Stalinism was excess, extraordinary extremism, in each.”

Taking a more social historical perspective, Moshe Lewin saw Stalinism “not only a specific and blatant case of development without emancipation,” but “in fact, a retreat into a tighter-than-ever harnessing of society to the state bureaucracy, which became the main social vehicle of the state’s policies and ethos.”

Stalinism was now a way of describing a stage in the evolution of noncapitalist statist regimes in developing countries dominated by a Leninist party, as well as an indictment of undemocratic, failed socialist societies. The cohort of social historians of Stalinism that emerged in the 1980s was not particularly interested in broad synthetic interpretations of Stalinism or Marxist-inspired typologies. Their challenge was directed against the top down, state intervention into society approach and proposed looking primarily at society, while at the same time disaggregating what was meant by society. They looked for initiative from below, popular resistance to the regime’s agenda, as well as sources of support for radical transformation. Some stressed the improvisation of state policies, the chaos of the state machinery, the lack of control in the countryside. Others attempted to diminish the role of Stalin. As they painted a picture quite different from the totalitarian vision of effective dominance from above and atomization below, these revisionists came under withering attack from more traditional scholars, who saw them as self-deluded apologists for Stalin at best and incompetent, venal falsifiers at worse.

In her 1986 review of social historical work on Stalinism, Fitzpatrick isolated three approaches within the revisionism challenging the T-model (totalitarianism). The first emphasized “that the regime had less actual control over society than it claimed, that its actions were often improvised rather than part of a grand design, that implementation of its radical policies often diverged from the policy-makers’ intentions, and that the policies had many unplanned and unanticipated social consequences.” Here the idea of a Stalinist “revolution from above” was preserved, though amplified by reference to social restraints and consequences. The work of Moshe Lewin fits this description. The second approach focused on the social constituencies, responding to social pressures and grievances, and liable to be modified in practice through processes of informal social negotiation. Vera Dunham is an exemplary representative of this approach. And the third approach went furthest of all and argued that the Stalin revolution was more a revolution from below than from above, that popular initiative “from below” was decisive in shaping policies in the 1930s. Gabor Rittersporn made such an argument in his study of the Great Purges. Fitzpatrick came closest to the third approach in her introduction—“Cultural Revolution as Class War”—to her edited volume, Cultural Revolution in Russia, in which she emphasized the participation in the revolution of “forces within the society,” while conceding that initiative came from above. The radical thrust of that introduction was not carried through by the contributors to the volume, and Fitzpatrick
herself soon shifted toward a recognition of the importance of the “revolution from above.” Her revisionism aimed at finding new ways of interpreting the Soviet past, and she saw herself as an “iconoclastic revisionist” resistant to any orthodoxy, whether it be the T-model or Marxism. She feared the foundation of a revisionist orthodoxy and revisionist scholars who would “take themselves too seriously, exaggerate their contributions, underestimate those of their predecessors, and speak as if they were replacing error with truth.”

In the 1990s, with Soviet archives open and available, Sheila turned to close studies of the everyday life of urban dwellers and peasants under Stalin. These pointillist accounts, careful ethnographic reconstructions of how ordinary people dealt with the tumultuous changes and brutal repressions of the 1930s, must surely be counted as her most original and powerful monographs. Rich in anecdote and telling detail, they were informed by a number of social theories then in vogue: James Scott’s ideas of “everyday resistance” and “hidden transcripts,” the Alltagsgeschichte (everyday history) school of Alf Ludtke and others, the Subaltern Indian historians, and the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman. These two books, along with accompanying articles, changed the way the profession understood Soviet life under Stalin, bringing the reader down to the household, the family table, the marketplace, and showing us how people survived and made out in an economy of chronic shortage, a political arena marked by a relentlessly expanding state, the elimination of older forms of social support like the church, severe disruptions of traditional networks and hierarchies, and blows to the family. Over time, class became less meaningful than it had been in the revolution and 1920s. This was social history with the state as a hulking presence. “What mattered was the relationship to the state—in particular, the state as an allocator of goods in an economy of chronic scarcity . . . . [P]roduction no longer served as a meaningful basis of class structure in Soviet urban society. In fact, the meaningful social hierarchies of the 1930s were based not on production but consumption. ‘Class’ status in the real world was a matter of having greater or lesser access to goods, which in turn was largely a function of the degree of entitlement to privilege that the state allowed.”

In these works, there is no apology for the horrors that ordinary people in the USSR had to endure in the 1930s; genuine heroism had been replaced by official heroes and heroics; and the sacrifices and suffering were all the more unbearable. But somehow people managed. “There were fearful things that affected Soviet life,” she wrote, “and visions that uplifted it, but mostly it was a hard grind, full of shortages and discomfort. Homo sovieticus was a string-puller, an operator, a time-server, a freeloader, a mouther of slogans, and much more. But above all, he was a survivor.” In a later article published in Australia, she noted that happiness was part of the official script, the acceptable public expression of positive emotion, “a kind of civic requirement,” while grief, suffering, and toska (melancholic longing) were decidedly non-Soviet emotions that “might carry overtones of ingratitude, even disloyalty, to the beneficent state.” They were the private expression
of feelings found in diaries. In Fitzpatrick’s vision of everyday Soviet life, themes of achievements and legitimacy had been left far behind, and the personal suffering and misery of the ordinary Soviet men and women had been now brought to the fore.

By the early and mid-1990s, the social historical wave had receded, and cultural history became “the dominant force in the modern Russian historical field,” though a new interest in political history, enriched by the available archives, also was lapping at the shore. Fitzpatrick’s work continued to express the variety of Soviet experiences. Her work on class identities flowed naturally into a concern with the conventions of self-presentation and the reinvention of personae in revolutionary and postrevolutionary societies. In her coedited volume on Soviet women with Yuri Slezkine, she emphasized how diverse the life paths of the memoirists were. Soviet subjectivity cannot be captured with a single diary or encapsulated in an easy formula. While the subjectivity enthusiasts were concerned with individual identities and sensibilities, Fitzpatrick remained concerned with collective responses.

Fitzpatrick began to deconstruct the notion of class in a stunning series of articles that paralleled the work that feminists were doing with gender categories and theorists of nationalism were doing with the nation. Class as “a matter of classification” presented a far more intriguing problem to her than the idea of class as a reified social category. For the Bolsheviks, identification with the proletariat was an ideological sine qua non, but in actuality, as Fitzpatrick emphasized, that identity in any meaningful sociological sense became a mirage soon after October. After the revolution, people needed to fashion new identities and even to challenge the identities of others. In her work on denunciations, she investigated how individual Soviet citizens attempted “to discredit the class self-presentation of others.” This led to investigations of petitions and appeals in which people tried to present themselves with positive class identities complete with life stories.

While already previewed in earlier pieces, the turning point in her work on class came with the 1994 piece in *The Journal of Modern History* (of which she was one of the editors), “Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia.” In this article, she showed how the Marxist idea of class as positioning in relation to the means of production gave way to state ascription of class belonging that was akin to the prerevolutionary classification of the population by *soslovie* (legal estate). The Bolsheviks essentially invented class categories in the absence of actual, clear class identifications and turned them into legal categories that afforded people particular advantages and disadvantages. What is most dramatic in this picture is the active construction of social reality by the state, the making of class in the absence of clear class positions or class consciousness (pace the work of Edward P. Thompson). While it is easy enough to trace the genealogy of such an approach to the work of Leopold H. Haimson on social identities, Gregory Freeze on *soslovie*, Moshe Lewin on the artificial category of the *kulak* (rich peasant), Teodor Shanin on the awkwardness of applying class analysis to the peasantry (and, if I might add immodestly, Ron Suny on the
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state production of nationality), Fitzpatrick’s story is rich in its emphasis on “class stigma,” the real costs of being ascribed to the wrong class. Once ascribed to a class, which might become an alien class, which then became an enemy class, the identity became indelible, fixed on passports (or not worthy of receiving a passport), the consequences could be catastrophic, literally a matter of life and death. Class ascription helped solidify a new social hierarchy in Stalin’s Soviet Union. A new elite with new privileges, a kind of “service nobility,” emerged, a soslovie that would remain in power almost to the last days of the USSR.

Reading through Fitzpatrick’s corpus, one is struck foremost by her inventiveness, her constant exploration of new materials and new ways of interrogating them, her deep interest in variation as well as constancies. For those like myself who tend to think of history as a special form of science—a nauka (science; a field of study) that is about discovery, as in ecology or biology, of variations—and a social science—that is about regularities, patterns, and generalizations, if not universal or natural laws—Fitzpatrick’s work, like all good science, moves our understanding forward by producing new knowledge of change and constancy over time. When she takes up a question like the forms of citizen’s supplications to state authority, her apparent pleasure in discovery is matched by her consideration of their various genres: ispoved (confession) of “what is in my heart,” cries for help, denunciations, complaints, opinions, suggestions, advice, and the particular form of the annon-imka (anonymous letter). She notes the regularities in language, in greetings, and the consistent performative elements. In the debate between the modernists and the neotraditionalists, Fitzpatrick is closer to the neotraditionals, such as Terry Martin (though I am sure that once she reads this she may reconsider her position.... Or nuance it). Her investigations on patron/client networks, blat (favors), proteksia (patronage), semeistvennost’ (family connections) show the persistence of older practices even in the throes of modernization. Family bonds were strengthened in the 1930s (despite what we supposedly learned about Pavl Morozov), rather than becoming atomized or individualized. The only sexual offense to feature frequently in denunciations, even after homosexuality was outlawed in 1934, was female promiscuity. Denunciation was a practice, like patronage and favoritism, that operated where law and bureaucracy functioned poorly. Russia and the Soviet Union may have been modernizing; the regime may have had a modernist ideology; but when the rubber industry hit the muddy dirt road, older ways of doing things found a new life.

What about theory? This is a difficult question (shchekotlivyi vopros). Fitzpatrick has expressed her “low tolerance for totalizing theory, including Marxist and Foucauldian (though sharing with Marx an ingrained suspicion of ideology as false consciousness).”53 I can confess to my own frustration during my first years in the University of Chicago Russian History Workshop with the general hostility to theory, especially Marxism, that pervaded many discussions. Historians in general tend to be atheoretical in contrast to anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists, and there I was
a superannuated student of political science, pulled by my home department in one direction and the association with die-hard empiricists in the workshop in another. I frequently tried to insinuate some social science, Foucault, or Marx into the discussion, sometimes against considerable skepticism. Over time, resistance faded away—less due to any particular pressure from me and more due to general trends in the profession like the cultural turn and the turn away from the cultural turn that impelled students to think through the larger epistemological issues posed by theorists and historians in other national fields. The study of history, while suspicious of, if not hostile to, the methodological individualism (rational choice), quantification, and formal modeling of political science, was imbibing the concerns with language, representations, subjectivities, and self-reflexivity of anthropology, historical sociology, and literary studies in particular.

Rather than being a producer of theory, Sheila Fitzpatrick is a consumer, an employer, and deployer of theory. Her instincts, it seems to me, take her to the concrete, the particular, the empirically and archivally demonstrable. But she does not stop there: rather than just cheese and worms, she makes sense of diversity and variety, finds patterns and meanings, and enriches our understanding as any good botanist would do in a rain forest.

The question has been posed: is there a Sheila Fitzpatrick school of Soviet history? After all, her considerable achievements and the training of a generation of students at the University of Texas and the University of Chicago certainly auger the formation of such a school. The first question to be asked about the question is: what is a school? Arguably, the cadre (to use a favorite Soviet word) of historians who came out of her courses and workshops make up a stellar generation of scholars teaching and training themselves another generation of historians. But do these scholars share a single approach to history, a common intellectual agenda, be it social history or the history of categories or a hostility to the Marxist concept of class? On first glance, it is not easy even to argue that two historians of Soviet nationalities policies such as Yuri Slezkine and Terry Martin—one who deals with discourses and representations among other things and the other who focuses on policies and institutions—employ a common approach to their shared subject. School, it appears, is too narrow a term to encompass the variation among Fitzpatrick’s students or the colleagues most influenced by her.

What distinguishes both Sheila Fitzpatrick’s scholarship and teaching has been its broadness, inclusiveness, willingness to adapt to, and adopt new approaches and evidence. There is no orthodoxy here, no commitment to a single explanation. Consistently committed to varieties of approaches to history rather than confirming or disconfirming a particular model or paradigm, she moved from studies of bureaucracy through social history on to cultural study of discourses and categories, from the world of what is to what does it mean, and explored emotions and the everyday. When one reads through her work, one finds a rich, complex story of the Soviet experience that defies reduction to a formula. She eschews the idea that there is a magic key, an essential factor, that explains the changing complexities of the Soviet
experience—be it the totalitarian model, *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin’s or Stalin’s personality, or, as has more recently become fashionable, modernity. If that openness and commitment to hard thinking about hard problems constitutes a school, then one could argue there is a Fitzpatrick school, but such broad inclusiveness would belie the very notion of a school. A more fruitful question might be: what characterizes the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick and in which ways are those qualities captured in the work of one, more, or many of her students and colleagues?

The first characteristic both of Fitzpatrick and the great majority of her students is the affection for, the infatuation with, the archives. Even before it was customary or easy for Western historians of the USSR to use Soviet archives, she managed to push through the door, overcome the myriad obstacles placed in her way, and endure the tedium necessary to find the gems that gave clues and insights to a darkly understood society. Her work builds from the ground up, not from grand theory or master narrative or modernist or Marxist teleology, but from the sources, is very often ethnographic, the fieldwork done largely in the archives. While archives are certainly central to the work of those students and colleagues most closely associated with Sheila Fitzpatrick, more of them have worked with institutions and legislation—nationalities policies, laws on property—or the history of collectivities—musicians, doctors, veterans, journalists—than in the mosaic reconstruction of the daily lives of ordinary people, as in her two groundbreaking books on Stalin’s peasants and the urban population. In the Chicago workshop, there was no orthodoxy, no insistence on conformity, and no unchallenged hierarchy—as Richard Hellie and I can both attest. We were all students, Sheila Fitzpatrick not least of all.

The second characteristic of Fitzpatrick and many of those closest to her illustrates one of the great ironies of our profession. While Sheila has been vilified as an apologist of the Soviet project, even a Stalinist, while she has been calumniated by the most conservative critics of Soviet historiographical revisionism for changing her mind over time, the great consistency in her work has been a coolness rather than an emotional attachment to the USSR or Marxism, on the one hand, and a reluctance to adopt the easy Soviet-bashing of aspiring organic intellectuals of the American state, on the other. Here again her students and close colleagues have shared with her a critical attitude toward the practices and aspirations of the Soviet regime but not the visceral hatred or disdain that passed for judgment in the cold war years.

Sheila Fitzpatrick has called herself a British-style “positivist at heart,” who believes “that historians ought to keep their value judgments and prejudices out of their writing.” History may be subjective but one must strive to discipline “the subjective impulse.” She is against “ponderous scholasticism,” “semantic orthodoxy (conformity to a particular intellectual jargon),” and ideologies of all sorts. She does not see teleological progress in history but a great cycle “where one relative truth succeeds another in a sequence that is not pre-determined.”
Her first foray into Russian history in Melbourne as an undergraduate was an honors thesis on Soviet music. Music has been a big part of her life and has given her great pleasure, companionship, even solace at hard times. Many of those who were at Chicago at the time remember how important her playing in the University of Chicago orchestra was after the loss of Michael Danos, her beloved “Misha,” a faithful attendee at the Russian History Workshop. She enjoyed making music with her friends and even, on occasion, with her students. At Chicago, she made a wonderful kind of music with those in the weekly workshops. There she worked through sometime cacophony toward some kind of harmony, tolerant of dissonance, trying to find the right note. Fidelity to evidence was the right key in which to play. And new melodies were always being sought. “Historical interpretation,” she once wrote, “means finding patterns. But none of these patterns fit completely, so we keep looking for new ones.”

If there is one conclusion to be made about her work to date, it is that Sheila Fitzpatrick is always learning; she is always open to new ideas, new ways of looking at the world, new challenges to comfortable orthodoxies. Even in her most un-Marxist moments, she would probably feel quite at home with one of Marx’s dictums, which he probably borrowed from Aristotle: “Doubt everything.”

Notes
2. Ibid., pp. xx, xvii. “If Fitzpatrick’s initial affection for Russia stemmed from faith in the revolution, his continuing defence of it in the face of overwhelming evidence of appalling aberrations was sustained by his distaste for the politics of its detractors. Rationality suffered on more than one score: not only did anti-communism serve to shore up the irrationalities of capitalism but it took a quite irrational attitude to Russia. To paint Russia as all bad was to be as unreasonable as the apparat-chiks who painted it as all good.” (p. 213)
7. Ibid., p. 135.
8. Ibid., p. 141.
10. Ibid., p. 289.
13. Ibid., p. 71.
16. Ibid., p. 92.
20. Ibid., p. 11.
23. This is a central motif in Fitzpatrick, Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union.
28. Ibid., p. 50.
30. The Russian Revolution, 2nd ed., p. 3.
31. Ibid., p. 4.
35. Ibid., p. 34.
42. Ibid.
44. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Cultural Revolution in Russia*, pp. 8–40.
48. Ibid., p. 227.
56. Ibid., p. 412.
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