Introduction

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The history of Russia in the twentieth century (and particularly the Soviet period) has undergone several important historiographical shifts in emphasis, style, methodology and interpretation. From a story largely centred on the state, its leaders and the intellectual elite, Russian history became a tale of social structures, class formation and struggles and fascination with revolution and radical social transformation. Political and intellectual history was followed by the wave of social history, and a whole generation of scholars spent their productive years investigating workers, peasants, bureaucrats, industry and agriculture. From the revolution attention moved to the 1920s, on to the Stalinist 1930s, and at the turn of the new century has crossed the barrier of the Second World War (largely neglecting the war itself) into the late Stalin period (1945–53) and beyond. In the last decade and a half the 'cultural' or 'linguistic turn' in historical studies belatedly influenced a new concentration on cultural topics among Russianists – celebrations and rituals, representations and myths, as well as memory and subjectivity. One revisionism followed another, often with unpleasant displays of hostility between schools and generations. The totalitarian model, undermined by social historians in the 1970s, proved to have several more lives to live and reappeared in a 'neo-totalitarian' version that owed much of its vision to a darker reading of the effects of the Enlightenment and modernity.

The historiography of the USSR was divided by the Cold War chasm between East and West and by political passions in the West that kept Left and Right in rival camps. On the methodological front deductions from abstract models, perhaps necessitated by the difficulty of doing archival work in the Soviet Union, gave way by the 1960s to work in Soviet libraries and archives. The access to primary sources expanded exponentially with the collapse of the USSR, and the end of the Cold War allowed scholars in Russia and the West to work more closely together than in the past, even though polemics about the Soviet experience continued to disturb the academy. While the end of the

great divide between Soviet East and capitalist West portended the possibility of a neutral, balanced history of Russia in the twentieth century, old disputes proved to be tenacious.

Still, Russian historiography has benefited enormously from the newly available source base that made possible readings that earlier could only be imagined. One can even say that the dynamic political conflicts among scholars in the past have actually enriched the field in the variety of approaches taken by historians. At the moment there are people practising political, economic, social and cultural history and dealing with topics that earlier had been on the margins – sexuality, violence, the inner workings of the top Soviet leadership, non-Russian peoples and the textures of everyday life in the USSR.

It is easy enough to begin with the observation that Russia, while part of Europe (at least in the opinion of some), has had distinguishing features and experiences that made its evolution from autocratic monarchy to democracy far more difficult, far more protracted, than it was for a few privileged Western countries. Not only was tsarist Russia a relatively poor and over-extended member of the great states of the continent, but the new Soviet state was born in the midst of the most ferocious and wasteful war that humankind had fought up to that time. A new level of acceptable violence marked Europe in the years of the First World War. Having seized power in the capital city, the new socialist rulers of Russia fought fiercely for over three years to win a civil war against monarchist generals, increasingly conservative liberal politicians, peasant armies, foreign interventionists, nationalists and more moderate socialist parties. By the end of the war the new state had acquired habits and practices of authoritarian rule. The revolutionary utopia of emancipation, equality and popular power competed with a counter-utopia of efficiency, production and social control from above. The Soviets eliminated rival political parties, clamped down on factions within their own party and pretentiously identified their dictatorship as a new form of democracy, superior to the Western variety. The Communists progressively narrowed the scope of those who could participate in real politics until, first, there was only one faction in the party making decisions and eventually only one man – Joseph Stalin.

Once Stalin had achieved pre-eminence by the end of the 1920s, he launched a second 'revolution', this one from above, initiated by the party/state itself. The ruling apparatus of Stalin loyalists nationalised totally what was left of the autonomous economy and expanded police terror to unprecedented dimensions. The new Stalinist system that metastasised out of Leninism resurrected the leather-jacket Bolshevism of the civil war and violently imposed collectivised agriculture on the peasant majority, pell-mell industrialisation on

workers and a cultural straitjacket on the intelligentsia. Far more repressive than Lenin had been, Stalinist state domination of every aspect of social life transformed the Soviet continent from a backward peasant country into a poorly industrialised and urban one. The Stalinist years were marked by deep contradictions: visible progress in industry accompanied by devastation and stagnation in agriculture; a police regime that saw enemies everywhere at a time when millions energetically and enthusiastically worked to build their idea of socialism; cultural revival and massive expansion of literacy and education coinciding with a cloud of censorship that darkened the field of expression; and the adoption of the 'most democratic constitution in the world' while real freedoms and political participation evaporated into memories.

However brutal and costly the excesses of Stalinism, however tragic and heroic the Soviet struggle against Fascism during the Second World War, and however devastated by the practice of mass terror, Soviet society slowly evolved into a modern, articulated urban society with many features shared with other developed countries. After Stalin's death in 1953, many in the West recognised that the USSR had become a somewhat more benign society and tolerable enemy than had been proposed by the Cold Warriors. The 1960s and 1970s were a particularly fruitful moment for Western scholarship on the Soviet Union, as the possibility to visit the country and work in archives allowed a more empirical investigation of earlier mysteries. With the development in the late 1960s of social history, historians in the West began exploring the origins of the Soviet regime, most particularly in the revolutionary year 1917, and they radically revised the view of the October Revolution as a Bolshevik conspiracy with little popular support. Other 'revisionists' went on to challenge the degree of state control over society during the Stalin years and emphasised the procedures by which workers and others maintained small degrees of autonomy from the all-pervasive state. Gradually the totalitarian model that dominated in the 1940s and 1950s lost its potency and was largely rejected by the generation of social historians.

From its origins Soviet studies was closely involved with real-world politics, and during the years of détente the Soviet Union was seen through the prism of the 'developmental' or 'modernisation' model. Implicit in this interpretation was a sense that the social evolution of the Soviet system could eventually lead to a more open, even pluralistic regime. The potential for democratic evolution of the system seemed to be confirmed by the efforts of Gorbachev in the late 1980s to restrain the power of the Communist Party, awaken public opinion and political participation through *glasnost'*, and allow greater freedom to the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet borderlands. Yet with the failure of the

Gorbachev revolution this reading of Soviet history was bitterly attacked by the more conservative who harked back to more fatalistic interpretations – that the USSR was condemned by Russian political culture or its utopian drive for an anti-capitalist alternative to a dismal collapse.

This volume of the *Cambridge History of Russia* deals with the twentieth century in the Russian world chronologically and thematically in order to provide readers with clear narratives as well as a variety of interpretations so that they may sort through the various controversies of the Soviet past. The volume is not simply a history of the ethnically Russian part of the country but rather of the two great multinational states – tsarist and Soviet – as well as the post-Soviet republics. Although inevitably the bulk of the narrative will deal with Russians, the conviction of the editor is that the history of Russia would be incomplete without the accompanying and contributing histories of the non-Russian peoples of the empire. Among the unifying themes of the volume are: the tensions between nations and empire in the evolution of the Russian and Soviet states; the oscillation between reform and revolution, usually from above but at times from below as well; state building and state collapse; and modernisation and modernity. For the historians and political scientists who have contributed to this work, understanding the present and future of Russia, the Soviet Union and the non-Russian peoples can only come by exploring the experiences through which they have become what they are.

1

Reading Russia and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century: how the 'West' wrote its history of the USSR

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From its very beginnings the historiography of Russia in the twentieth century has been much more than an object of coolly detached scholarly contemplation. Many observers saw the USSR as the major enemy of Western civilisation, the principal threat to the stability of nations and empires, a scourge that sought to undermine the fundamental values of decent human societies. For others the Soviet Union promised an alternative to the degradations of capitalism and the fraudulent claims of bourgeois democracy, represented the bulwark of Enlightenment values against the menace of Fascism, and preserved the last best hope of colonised peoples. In the Western academy the Soviet Union was most often imagined to be an aberration in the normal course of modern history, an unfortunate detour from the rise of liberalism that bred its own evil opposite, travelling its very own *Sonderweg* that led eventually (or inevitably) to collapse and ruin. The very endeavour of writing a balanced narrative required a commitment to standards of scholarship suspect to those either militantly opposed to or supportive of the Soviet enterprise. At times, as in the years just after the revolution or during the Cold War, scholarship too often served masters other than itself. While much worthy analysis came

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from people deeply committed to or critical of the Soviet project, a studied neutrality was difficult (though possible) in an environment in which one's work was always subject to political judgement.

With the opening of the Soviet Union and its archives to researchers from abroad, beginning in the Gorbachev years, professional historians and social scientists produced empirically grounded and theoretically informed works that avoided the worst polemical excesses of earlier years. Yet, even those who claimed to be unaffected by the battles of former generations were themselves the product of what went before. The educator still had to be educated. While the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union permitted a greater degree of detachment than had been possible before, the Soviet story – itself so important an ingredient in the self-construction of the modern 'West' – remains one of deep contestation.

The prehistory of Soviet history

'At the beginning of [the twentieth century]', wrote Christopher Lasch in his study of American liberals and the Russian Revolution,

> people in the West took it as a matter of course that they lived in a civilization surpassing any which history had been able to record. They assumed that their own particular customs, institutions and ideas had universal validity; that having showered their blessings upon the countries of western Europe and North America, those institutions were destined to be carried to the furthest reaches of the earth, and bring light to those living in darkness.[1]

Those sentences retain their relevance at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Western, particularly American, attitudes and understandings of Russia and the Soviet Union unfolded in the last hundred years within a broad discourse of optimism about human progress that relied on the comforting thought that capitalist democracy represented the best possible solution to human society, if not the 'end of history'. Within that universe of ideas Russians were constructed as people fundamentally different from Westerners, with deep, largely immutable national characteristics. Ideas of a 'Russian soul' or an essentially spiritual or collectivist nature guided the interpretations and policy prescriptions of foreign observers. This tradition dated back to the very first travellers to Muscovy. In his *Notes Upon Russia (1517–1549)*

1 Christopher Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1962; paperback edn: McGraw Hill, 1972), p. 1. All references in this chapter are from the latest edition listed, unless otherwise noted.

Sigismund von Herberstein wrote, 'The people enjoy slavery more than freedom', observations echoed by Adam Olearius in the seventeenth century, who saw Russians as 'comfortable in slavery' who require 'cudgels and whips' to be forced to work. Montesquieu and others believed that national character was determined by climate and geography, and the harsh environment in which Russians lived had produced a barbarous and uncivilised people, ungovernable, lacking discipline, lazy, superstitious, subject to despotism, yet collective, passionate, poetical and musical. The adjectives differed from writer to writer, yet they clustered around the instinctual and emotional pole of human behaviour rather than the cognitive and rational. Race and blood, more than culture and choice, decided what Russians were able to do. In order to make them civilised and modern, it was often asserted, force and rule from above was unavoidable. Ironically, the spokesmen of civilisation justified the use of violence and terror on the backward and passive people of Russia as the necessary means to modernity.

The most influential works on Russia in the early twentieth century were the great classics of nineteenth-century travellers and scholars, like the Marquis de Custine, Baron August von Haxthausen, Donald Mackenzie Wallace, Alfred Rambaud, Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu and George Kennan, the best-selling author of *Siberia and the Exile System*.[2] France offered the most professional academic study of Russia, and the influential Leroy-Beaulieu's eloquent descriptions of the patience, submissiveness, lack of individuality and fatalism of the Russians contributed to the ubiquitous sense of a Slavic character that contrasted with the Gallic, Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic. American writers, such as Kennan and Eugene Schuyler, subscribed equally to such ideas of nationality, but rather than climate or geography as causative, they emphasised the role of institutions, such as tsarism, in generating a national character that in some ways was mutable.[3] Kennan first went to Russia in 1865, became an amateur ethnographer, and grew to admire the courageous

2 Marquis de Custine, *Journey for Our Time: The Journals of Marquis de Custine*, ed. and trans. Phyllis Penn Kohler (1843; New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1951); Baron August von Haxthausen, *The Russian Empire: Its People, Institutions and Resources*, 2 vols., trans. Robert Farie (1847; London: Chapman and Hall, 1856); Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, *Russia on the Eve of War and Revolution*, ed. and intro. Cyril E. Black (1877; New York: Random House, 1961); Alfred Rambaud, *The History of Russia from the Earliest Times to 1877*, trans. Leonora B. Lang, 2 vols. (1878; New York: Hovendon Company, 1886); Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, *The Empire of the Tsars and the Russians*, 3 vols., trans. Zénïade A. Ragozin (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1902); George F. Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 2 vols. (New York: Century, 1891).

3 David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 28–53.

revolutionaries ('educated, reasonable self-controlled gentlemen, not different in any essential respect from one's self') that he encountered in Siberian exile.[4] For his sympathies the tsarist government banned him from Russia, placing him in a long line of interpreters whose exposures of Russian life and politics would be so punished.

Russia as an autocracy remained the political 'other' of Western democracy and republicanism, and it was with great joy and relief that liberals, including President Woodrow Wilson, greeted the February Revolution of 1917 as 'the impossible dream' realised. Now the new Russian government could be enlisted in the Great War to make 'the world safe for democracy'.[5] But the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd turned the liberal world upside down. For Wilson's secretary of state, Robert Lansing, Bolshevism was 'the worst form of anarchism', 'the madness of famished men'.[6] In the years immediately following the October Revolution the first accounts of the new regime reaching the West were by journalists and diplomats. The radical freelance journalist John Reed, his wife and fellow radical Louise Bryant, Bessie Beatty of the *San Francisco Bulletin*, the British journalist Arthur Ransome and Congregational minister Albert Rhys Williams all witnessed events in 1917 and conveyed the immediacy and excitement of the revolutionary days to an eager public back home.[7] After several trips to Russia, the progressive writer Lincoln Steffens told his friends, 'I have seen the future and it works.' Enthusiasm for the revolution propelled liberals and socialists further to the Left, and small Communist parties emerged from the radical wing of Social Democracy. From the Right came sensationalist accounts of atrocities, debauchery and tyranny, leavened with the repeated assurance that the days of the Bolsheviks were numbered. *L'Echo*

4 Ibid., p. 37.

5 On American views of Russia and the revolution, see Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*; and N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917–1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Peter G. Filene (ed.), *American Views of Soviet Russia, 1917–1965* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1968).

6 Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1967), p. 260. See also his *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

7 John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919); Louise Bryant, *Six Months in Russia: An Observer's Account of Russia before and during the Proletarian Dictatorship* (New York: George H. Doran, 1918); Bessie Beatty, *The Red Heart of Russia* (New York: Century, 1918); Arthur Ransome, *Russia in 1919* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919); *The Crisis in Russia* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1921); Albert Rhys Williams, *Through the Russian Revolution* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921). See also the accounts in Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment*; Filene, *American Views of Soviet Russia*; Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution*.

de Paris and the London *Morning Post*, as well as papers throughout Western Europe and the United States, wrote that the Bolsheviks were 'servants of Germany' or 'Russian Jews of German extraction'.[8] The *New York Times* so frequently predicted the fall of the Communists that two young journalists, Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, exposed their misreadings in a long piece in *The New Republic*.[9]

The Western reaction to the Bolsheviks approached panic. Officials and advisers to the Wilson administration spoke of Russia as drunk, the country as mad, taken over by a mob, the people victims of an 'outburst of elemental forces', 'sheep without a shepherd', a terrible fate for a country in which 'there were simply too few brains per square mile'.[10] Slightly more generously, American ambassador David Francis told the State Department that the Bolsheviks might be just what Russia needed: strong men for a people that do not value human life and 'will obey strength . . . and nothing else'.[11] To allay fears of domestic revolution the American government deported over two hundred political radicals in December 1919 to the land of the Soviets on the *Buford*, an old ship dubbed 'the Red Ark'. The virus of Bolshevism seemed pervasive, and powerful voices raised fears of international subversion. The arsenal of the Right included the familiar weapon of anti-Semitism. In early 1920 Winston Churchill told demonstrators that the Bolsheviks 'believe in the international Soviet of the Russian and Polish Jews'.[12] Baron N. Wrangel opened his account of the Bolshevik revolution with the words 'The sons of Israel had carried out their mission; and Germany's agents, having become the representatives of Russia, signed peace with their patron at Brest-Litovsk'.[13]

8 Walter Laqueur, *The Fate of the Revolution: Interpretations of Soviet History from 1917 to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 1967; revised edn New York and London: Collier Books, 1987), p. 8.

9 'Thirty different times the power of the Soviets was definitely described as being on the wane. Twenty times there was news of a serious counter-revolutionary menace. Five times was the explicit statement made that the regime was certain to collapse. And fourteen times that collapse was said to be in progress. Four times Lenin and Trotzky were planning flight. Three times they had already fled. Five times the Soviets were "tottering." Three times their fall was "imminent" . . . Twice Lenin had planned retirement; once he had been killed; and three times he was thrown in prison' (Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, 'A Test of the News', *The New Republic* (Supplement), 4 Aug. 1920; cited in Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore*, pp. 198–9).

10 Quotations from Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore*, pp. 94, 95.

11 Ibid., p. 98.

12 *Times* (London), 5 Jan. 1920; cited in E. Malcolm Carroll, *Soviet Communism and Western Opinion, 1919–1921*, ed. Frederic B. M. Hollyday (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 13.

13 *From Serfdom to Bolshevism: The Memoirs of Baron N. Wrangel, 1847–1920*, trans. Brian and Beatrix Lunn (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1927), p. 291.

Western reading publics, hungry for news and analyses of the enigmatic social experiment under way in Soviet Russia, turned to journalists and scholars for information. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, who had accompanied a delegation of the British Labour Party to Russia in 1919, rejected Bolshevism for two reasons: 'the price mankind must pay to achieve communism by Bolshevik methods is too terrible; and secondly, . . . even after paying the price I do not believe the result would be what the Bolsheviks profess to desire.'[14] Other radical dissenters included the anarchist Emma Goldman, who spent nearly two years in Bolshevik Russia only to break decisively with the Soviets after the repression of the Kronstadt mutiny in March 1921.[15]

The historian Bernard Pares had begun visiting Russia regularly from 1898 and reported on the beginnings of parliamentarianism in Russia after 1905. As British military observer to the Russian army he remained in the country from the outbreak of the First World War until the early days of the Soviet government. After service as British commissioner to Admiral Kolchak's anti-Bolshevik White government, Pares taught Russian history at the University of London, where he founded *The Slavonic Review* in 1922 and directed the new School of Slavonic Studies. A friend of the liberal leader Pavel Miliukov and supporter of constitutional monarchy in Russia, by the 1930s Pares had become more sympathetic to the Soviets and an advocate of Anglo-Russian rapprochement. Like most of his contemporaries, Pares believed that climate and environment shaped the Russians. 'The happy instinctive character of clever children,' he wrote, 'so open, so kindly and so attractive, still remains; but the interludes of depression or idleness are longer than is normal.'[16] In part because of his reliance on the concept of 'national character', widely accepted among scholars, journalists and diplomats, Pares's influence remained strong, particularly during the years of the Anglo-American–Soviet alliance. But with the coming of the Cold War, he, like others 'soft on communism', was denounced as an apologist for Stalin.[17]

In the United States the most important of the few scholars studying Russia were Archibald Cary Coolidge at Harvard and Samuel Northrup Harper of the University of Chicago. For Coolidge, the variety of 'head types' found

14 Bertrand Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London, 1920; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), p. 101.
15 Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1923; London: C. W. Daniel, 1925).
16 Sir Bernard Pares, *Russia between Reform and Revolution: Fundamentals of Russian History and Character*, ed. and intro. Francis B. Randall (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), p. 3. The book was first published in 1907.
17 On Pares, see Laqueur, *The Fate of the Revolution*, pp. 173–5.