

SOVIET RUSSIA HISTORIOGRAPHY 1917 - 53



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SOVIET RUSSIA: HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Liberal School:

A sub-division of the Western School, Liberal historians tend to reflect a right-wing, anti-Communist perspective on events. Liberal historians were prominent during the Cold War period and include the Polish-American Richard Pipes, well known for his right-wing, anti-Soviet stance, and Robert Conquest, whose 1968 'The Great Terror' was the first major writing on the Stalinist Purges.

The Western School:

Prior to *Glasnost*, Western historians were limited by restrictions on access to source material. This meant relying on a narrow range of sources from official Communist publications such as Pravda.

One exception to this was the discovery of the Smolensk Archive, captured from the local Smolensk Communist Party during Operation Barbarossa in 1941. After the war, the archive was moved to the United States and offered a new insight into the Soviet regime.

Western historians could also draw on the writings of Soviet dissidents and exiles, notably Trotsky whose prolific writings in the 1930's included heavily critical titles such as 'The Revolution Betrayed'.

The Western School has been divided into various sub-genres, for example:

Intentionalist Approach:

Intentionalists stress the role of the individual in influencing the outcome of events

Structuralist Approach:

Structuralists stress the role of circumstances in influencing the outcome of events

The Revisionist School:

Revisionist historians such as **Orlando Figes** and **Sheila Fitzpatrick** have re-assessed events in the Soviet Union, first in the light of the Khrushchev Thaw and more recently the opening of the Soviet archives after Glasnost.

There have been major re-assessments of the nature of the Revolution and the role of Lenin, new insights into the nature of Stalinism and the Terror due to the availability of the NKVD archives.

'**Post-Revisionism**' takes account of both 'pre' and 'post' Glasnost writings to reach a measured conclusion

The Soviet School:

Soviet history has changed and evolved over the years depending on the political climate. Earliest Soviet writings in the 1920's stressed the Bolshevik seizure of power with the popular support of the masses.

Such interpretations were championed by **Trotsky's** writings on the revolution such as 'The History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk' (1918) & 'Lessons of October' (1924) and found in the American socialist **John Reed's** seminal work: 'Ten Days that Shook the World' (1919).

Originally published in 20 volumes in the 1920's, 'Lenin's Collected Works' became a framework for interpreting the history of the revolution. By 1957, 55 volumes had been published. By contrast, Trotsky's writings on the revolution were erased from Soviet historiography.

During the Stalinist period, serious historical research was abandoned. Stalin authorised 'The History of the Russian Communist Party' (1938): no Soviet account was allowed to diversify from this; access to Soviet archives was severely restricted.

Some Soviet writers such as **Vladimir Busovsky** risked arrest by producing so-called 'Samizdat' writings which were circulated within the Soviet Union and smuggled abroad.

During the Gorbachev era of the late 1980's, 'Glasnost' allowed for greater openness, re-opening Soviet archives. This led to the availability of a great deal of documentary evidence; following the collapse of Communism in 1991, access to the Soviet archives was virtually unrestricted.

The Marxist School:

Marxist historians such as **Isaac Deutscher** reflect the heroic 'class struggle' of the proletariat. They are highly critical of Stalin and see 'Stalinism' as a betrayal of true socialism. Marxist Historians in the Soviet Union were suppressed under the Communist regime.

The Khrushchev era of the 1950's/ 60's saw some restrictions lifted; dissident Soviet/Marxist historians such as **Mikhail Pokrovsky** and **Roy Medvedev** advocated a return to greater liberal freedoms with writings such as: 'Let History Judge: The Origins & Consequences of Stalinism'.

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION

The Liberal School - predominantly **Pipes & Conquest** - which dominated until the 1970's believed the Tsarist regime was making steady progress towards modernisation and reform. This progress was shattered by the de-stabilising impact of the First World War.

The Liberal school therefore plays down the role of revolutionary groups such as the Bolsheviks in the February Revolution, believing that it was a spontaneous and disorganised event.

Some Western historians such as **EH Carr** and **WE Mosse** challenged this view, believing that revolution was inevitable with or without the First World War due to the nature of the Tsarist regime.

Soviet historians believe that the revolution was an inevitable consequence of the ideas of Marx and Lenin who saw history as a process of change brought about by class struggle.

Revisionist Historians have emphasised the role of the liberals, middle classes and army generals in 1917, promoting the idea of a 'revolution from above'

Robert Service believes that Nicholas was ousted from power by a 'revolution from above' rather than 'below': 'The ultimate pressure had been applied by a group of Duma politicians, who proceeded to form a Provisional Government.'

Dimitri Volkogonov suggests that the First World War was a main reason for Nicholas' downfall: 'The two chief causes of the February Revolution were the unsuccessful progress of the war and the weakness of the regime.'

Richard Pipes refutes the idea of a popular workers revolution; while acknowledging that 'industrial labour' had a role to play. He emphasises 'The mutiny of the Petrograd Garrison stimulated disorder among the civilian population unhappy over inflation and shortages.'

Pipes adds: 'The Tsar yielded not to a rebellious populace but to generals and politicians.'

Peter Kenez refutes Trotsky's claim that a 'handful of Bolsheviks' had pre-empted the February Revolution. 'It is absurd to assume that the workers needed the Bolsheviks to tell them that they were hungry and tired of the war.'

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

The Liberal School disputes the Soviet view that the revolution was a popular rising; they see it as the outcome of a small and determined group i.e. The Bolsheviks, to seize power without the mandate of the people (or even the Soviets!)

Some Western Historians - referred to as the Libertarians - suggest that the genuine struggle of the proletariat against oppression was 'hijacked' by the Bolsheviks for their own ends

Before *Glasnost*, the Soviet School saw the revolution as an inevitable change driven by class conflict. They believe the Bolsheviks - operating on behalf of the proletariat - played a key part in this triumph.

Revisionist historians take a structuralist approach, believing the October Revolution came about as a result of changing factors in society such as industrialisation and trade unionism leading to increased militancy among the workers

Richard Pipes believes the October Revolution was a sudden, unplanned 'coup d'état' rather than a carefully calculated event: 'few [Bolshevik leaders] realised what had happened in Petrograd on the night of 25th October 1917.'

Orlando Figes further exposes the 'Soviet mythology' surrounding the 'popular image' of the Revolution as a large-scale Bolshevik insurrection, describing how: 'it passed unnoticed by the vast majority of the inhabitants of Petrograd. The legendary storming of the Winter Palace was more like a routine house arrest since most of the forces defending the palace had already left for home'

Service adds that 'there was uncertainty about the strength of active support for the Bolsheviks in Petrograd' but points out that 'The Petrograd Soviet, through its MRC, controlled the garrison; and workers in the Red Guard had the necessary arms and commitment.'

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON THE CIVIL WAR

Pipes believes that Red victory in the Civil War was not down to the leadership of Trotsky but that superior industrial resources, transport and communications were vital: 'Contrary to conventional wisdom, it [was the Whites] who had the superior generalship and morale. In the final analysis, they appear to have lost...because they faced insuperable handicaps.'

Figs, however, argues that the Reds' 'crucial advantage' was unity; that 'they could claim to be defending the Revolution.' The Whites, on the other hand, suffered 'a problem of image...that they were associated with the old regime'.

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON WAR COMMUNISM

Sheila Fitzpatrick believes that the introduction of War Communism was a desperate response to the economic crisis caused by the Civil War: 'To cope with a desperate situation, they turned to more radical policies and tried to extend the sphere of centralized government control much further and faster than they had originally intended.'

Alec Nove, the prominent economics historian, asserts however that War Communism was not only a response to the dire situation created by the Civil War but also represented: 'stages towards socialism or even the gateway to full Communism.'

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON NATIONAL MINORITIES

Service casts doubt over the Bolsheviks' commitment to granting autonomy to the national minorities under the auspices of the Soviet Union: 'the principle of self-determination was implemented much more restrictedly than had been promised by Lenin before the October Revolution.'

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON STALIN'S RISE TO POWER

The Liberal School believe that Stalin's rise to power was due to his own personal qualities. Stalin, according to *Conquest*, demonstrated the necessary grit, determination, manipulative skills and ruthlessness to attain power through his own means. The weaknesses of Stalin's opponents are also highlighted.

The Soviet School also emphasised Stalin's personality as being a key reason for his assumption of power, though from a more flattering perspective. Stalin was viewed as the leader who saved socialism from the 'Trotskyite leftists' and 'Bukharin rightists'

(While Lenin remained a revered figure, Stalin was seen in a less favourable light during the time of the Khrushchev Thaw; since *Glasnost*, Stalin's repressive dictatorship has been viewed as a betrayal of the original spirit of the revolution)

Among Western Historians, Structuralists such as **EH Carr** challenged the importance of Stalin's personality believing his rise to power was more attributed to party structure where the position of *General Secretary* came to be all-important

Revisionist Historians believe that Stalin's rise to power was due to social and cultural changes in party membership; the importance of Stalin the individual is downplayed, while more emphasis is placed on the rank and file of the party in enabling Stalin to assume power

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON STALIN AND STALINISM

a) The Liberal / Traditional / Intentionalist View:

Traditionalist historians believe that Soviet society was the victim of a totalitarian state; suffering systematic and widespread repression centrally organized by the Communist Party with Stalin at its core.

Intentionalists among Western Historians believe that Stalin was fundamentally the motivator behind policies of oppression and cruelty culminating in the period of The Terror

EH Carr, however, challenged this view concluding that Stalin's policies were more a product of the time and place. Such views were later picked up on by Revisionists.

b) The Revisionist / Structuralist View:

Since the mid-1980's, Revisionist Historians have challenged the view of a totalitarian state, arguing that Stalin was a weak and opportunistic leader at the head of a chaotic and confused system of government unable to deal with the economic and social pressures the Soviet Union faced.

Revisionist historians also suggest that there was a measure of popular support for Stalin's policies including those of repression; support for the policies of class warfare and de-Kulakisation for example. There was also great enthusiasm for the programme of rapid industrialisation among the workers - such views have proved controversial

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON 'THE TERROR'

Isaac Deutscher believes that Stalin, in an attempt to assert total control over the Soviet people, found it necessary to recreate and indeed surpass the oppression of his predecessors: 'Now, in the period of the Great Purges, as he suppressed his opponents, he more than resembled Ivan the Terrible.'

Volkogonov argues that in fact it was Lenin, rather than Stalin, who instigated the culture of fear and terror that permeated the Soviet Union: 'Lenin did not merely inspire revolutionary terror, he was also the first to make it into a state institution.'

Robert Conquest believes there was no one cause of the purges, citing: 'the consolidation of the dictatorship, the rise of individuals and the emergence of extreme economic policies.'

Roy Medvedev, however, is in little doubt that 'the criminal' Stalin's main motivation 'was lust for power, boundless ambition.' Medvedev continues that fear of exposure and retribution drove him to commit more and more crimes. 'Having wiped out most of the Leninist old guard and almost all his erstwhile friends and comrades, having cast aside all laws of party and state, Stalin had good reason to be afraid...;

Nove suggests that victims of the purges were made scapegoats for the real failings: 'Shortages of consumer goods, breakdowns in supply, errors in planning could be put down to malevolent planning...or so the readers of Pravda were supposed to believe.'

Robert Thurston, while not absolving Stalin from blame, is more sympathetic towards his overall role in the purges. He argues that Stalin 'did not carry out a systematic plot to purge the nation' but rather 'he was sitting at the top of a pyramid of lies and incomplete information and he must have known it.'

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

Richard Overy is critical of the Soviet Union's capabilities to defend itself in the early stages of Operation Barbarossa in 1941: 'The defensive weaknesses were compounded with the poor state of organisation and preparation in Soviet armoured and air formations.'

Medvedev is damning in his criticism of Stalin as supreme commander of Soviet forces during the war: 'Stalin was in several respects a poor commander...he had much more to do with the reverses at the beginning of the war than with the victories at the end.'

Chris Ward believes it was the Soviet people themselves who played a vital role in ensuring Soviet victory: 'the positive factor of spontaneous Soviet patriotism cannot be over-estimated'.

Overy agrees to an extent, asserting that 'Soviet success owed something to...popular patriotism and native endurance; the role of Stalin; the political environment of planning and mobilisation.'

HISTORIANS' VIEWS ON THE COLD WAR

a) The Liberal / Traditionalist / Intentionalist View:

Traditionalists believe that Stalin was the aggressor, continuing Lenin and Trotsky's policy of world revolution, having established 'socialism in one country'. Stalin is seen as an opportunist who took advantage of the circumstances that arose at the end of World War II

b) The Revisionist / Structuralist View

Revisionist historians argue that Stalin's policies were a defensive reaction to American aggression; Stalin feared American military, atomic and economic strength and was merely protecting the interests of the Soviet Union

(Post-Revisionist historians now generally favour the Traditional View)

Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, sympathetic to Stalin's post-war strategy, states that 'he also attempted, through the use of diplomatic measures, to assert special rights in the east. It was Stalin who suggested the American occupation zone...'

Chris Ward supports this view, believing that Stalin was: 'Profoundly debilitated by four years of struggle against the most vicious imperialist regime ever to emerge from Europe [Germany] Russia was quite unable to risk further conflict.'

J.L. Gaddis, however, a Post-Revisionist, states: 'What is there new to say about the old question of responsibility for the Cold War? 'New' history is bringing us back to the old answer; that as long as Stalin was running the Soviet Union a Cold War was inevitable.'