From the Editors

"1930s Studies"*

There can be no mistaking it. We are living in the era of "1930s Studies." In an earlier "From the Editors" column we noted the "dictatorship of the decade," the fetishization of the decade as the default chronological unit of analysis. [1] In our field, among all other periods, "the 1930s" are king.

"The 1930s," of course, are an ex post facto abstraction, a neat excision of one segment of a larger story. Nor is "the 1930s" merely the decade 1930-39. Like the "long 19th century" of 1789-1914, "the 1930s" (note the definite article) is a shorthand for a bundled set of strands that typify an arbitrary slice of time. "1930s Studies," then, concerns itself with developments that typify the period 1928-39, with 1939 serving as an endpoint not because it is the last year of the dekada, but because it signifies the "end" of the 1930s on the eve of wartime. The red thread, the dominant strand, in this bundle is obviously Stalin and Stalinism.

There are clear disciplinary and historiographical reasons for the preeminence of the 1930s in our scholarship. Experts on the 1930s often have a leg up on the competitive job market, at the expense of what are clearly more marginalized fields today like early and even imperial Russian history. Presentism is a present danger. In addition, to a great extent "1930s Studies" addresses, but in so doing also transposes, many of the burning issues of the field from the period before 1991 -- in particular, debates over the nature of Stalinism and its relationship to the Soviet system and socialism more generally. This morally hypercharged discussion was expressed most nakedly in the debates over "revisionism" that continue to reverberate to this day. We editors can bear witness to this fact. In Kritika's first three volumes we wrote 12 "From the Editors" columns touching on a wide variety of topics, many of them quite topical, and often in a polemical tone. The one that struck the most responsive chord -- that truly struck a nerve -- was our column on "really-existing revisionism." [2] Moreover, in private conversations we editors have received many responses from both sides of the ongoing polemic, including criticism from partisans on both sides of this enduring divide.

We stand by our editorial. We do not believe, however, that it was superior to, or more timely than, our other pieces. We take the response to reflect more the concerns of the field than the column's particular incisiveness, iconoclasm, or polemical nature. In short, the issue to which our readers have responded most passionately is precisely the one that, in terms of its topic, is least original or innovative. Our assertion, for instance, that the field is afflicted by a narrow preoccupation with the 1930s -- one that frequently goes so far as to ignore the 1920s and 1940s, not to mention a wider grounding, and "discourages long-term perspectives among its adepts" -- evinced hardly any reaction. [3]

Specialization is combined with relatively easy publishing marketability in such areas as the flourishing sub-field of "1930s Studies." Indeed, there is some risk that the sweep of Russian history is becoming telescoped into the Stalin period in a way our German colleagues once worried about the tendency to read all German history in relation to Hitler. The empirical focus of much of this research means, however, that it remains embedded within an unquestioned...
"Soviet narrative" beginning in 1917 and with the 1930s as its hinge. It also has the unintended consequence of blunting comparative analysis, either of broader European trends or of more persistent currents in Russian history. Our point is obviously not that the 1930s were unimportant. Rather, it is striking how rarely the significance of this decade as a discrete block is explicitly articulated and analyzed. Repeated conferences in North America and Europe in the 1990s were devoted to what "the opening of the archives" has to tell us about the 1930s (or "Stalinism," which all too often itself is reduced to one decade) as a historical bloc. A series of overviews of the field published in scholarly journals has attempted to measure the impact of the "archival revolution," most often with particular reference to the Stalin era. [4] Rarely did these conferences or articles investigate the limitations and especially the implications of the 1930s as a self-evident periodization.

Interestingly, it has been works in cultural studies -- which often rely much less on archives -- that have been most innovative in attempting to reconfigure the periodization of modern Russian history, and to great effect. Works by Katerina Clark, Aleksandr Etkind, Eric Naiman, and Stefan Plaggenborg, among others, have all emphasized the prerevolutionary origins of certain currents that became ascendant in the Soviet period, and have stressed how Stalinism cannot be understood without accounting for transformations (and disappointments) that took place during the 1920s. [5] Much can be gained, and not only for Soviet history, by questioning the self-evidence of Soviet history as a unitary and distinct chronological zone, and especially the role of the 1930s as the absolute essence and center of Soviet history. We recall one discussion with some practitioners of "1930s Studies" who claimed to be studying the Stalin phenomenon in its full expanse -- but were uninterested in Stalin's revolutionary activities in the imperial periphery before 1917; his conduct during the 1917 Revolution and Civil War; his apprenticeship during the 1920s; or his role as war leader. In short, Stalin's life -- which in some ways mirrored Russian society -- had been reduced simply to the 1930s. [6]

It is against this background that one can truly appreciate the achievement of a work such as Yuri Slezkine's Arctic Mirrors. [7] It has received deserved praise for its analysis of nationality questions and nuanced attention to Soviet goals and policy. Tellingly, the Russian field has commented almost exclusively upon the chapters in Slezkine's work dealing with the 1930s. Less observed, but to our mind more impressive, is the sweep of Slezkine's study, measuring the ebbs and flows of elite attitudes from the 18th century down to the 1970s.

Clearly, the current predominance of "1930s Studies" within the Soviet and, more broadly, Russian field cannot and will not stand -- for the simple reason that the frontiers of historical research will always march forward, and to an extent are doing so already. Researchers have many incentives to plow untilled historical soil, and it is already clear that there will be qualitatively more incursions into postwar history and the Soviet collapse in the years to come. The foreseeable threat of not questioning today's received chronologies -- something that should be historians' stock in trade -- will be a conceptual hangover derived from the field's narrowness of vision.

Footnotes


