

## New Wine in New Bottles?

This special issue of *Kritika* is devoted to the “new political history.” What, then, is this beast, “the new political history”?

Obviously, a political approach to Russian and Soviet history is not “new”—in fact, it was long the dominant mode of analysis. This was often political history in its traditional register: the study of “high politics,” deploying a top-down model of causality and, at times, drawing on methodologies from a field that produced many Sovietologists, political science. Owing to broader shifts in the historical field, as well as limitations in source material for both the imperial and Soviet periods, the focus then changed. “Traditional” political history, as Sheila Fitzpatrick discusses in her contribution to this issue, gave way first to the “heyday” of what was once known as the new social history, and then, more recently, to the new cultural history. The title of this special issue draws attention to the fact that since the collapse of the Soviet Union political history has enjoyed something of a renaissance. Improved archival access and an invigorated interest in political history among Russian scholars have generated a spate of new work. Much of it builds on older forms of political history, but it has also pursued new directions such as those suggested by cultural studies and anthropology. In the broadest terms, the new political history can be understood as a multifaceted engagement with “the political” after an extended hiatus. Because of the explosion of different kinds of history in the intervening years, however, there can be no return to the status quo ante: “the political” now means something different.

In the Russian context, the new political history posits the existence of a field of political practices that encompasses political parties but extends beyond them.<sup>[1]</sup> While there are many ways of understanding this shift, the “new” political history seems to have several core features: an understanding of politics as a complex of interrelated practices, rather than simply government decrees and party resolutions; an attention to the interplay of high politics at the national level with everyday local politics, as demonstrated in several recent local studies; and a tendency to eschew monocausal explanatory models, be they ideological, social, or political. (Michael David-Fox’s contribution in particular addresses this latter question.) The new political history, then, seeks to examine the political in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, other registers.

In part, the term “new political history” reflects a general shift away from the paradigm of social history, at least as it was practiced during its “heyday” in the 1970s. A powerful trend in all fields of history during the past decade has been a renewed emphasis on the role of politics and culture in shaping historical actors’ worldviews, suggesting how “social” categories were themselves framed by larger discursive or political concepts. For the French Revolution, for instance, Keith Michael Baker has demonstrated how these concepts shaped the horizons and actions of important players. A major concern has been to reinsert the political, broadly conceived, into existing narratives constructed in the spirit of social history--“a shift from Marx to Tocqueville, from a basically social approach to a basically political one.”<sup>[2]</sup>

In our field, this shift occurred at a particular historical juncture--the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent “archival revolution.”<sup>[3]</sup> With few exceptions, the Soviet variant of political history combined socio-economic Marxism-Leninism with an exaggerated conception of the

Bolshevik Party's role. The liberalization of the archives, however, has opened up vast materials on political actors and movements that had previously been closed to scholars; for example, the collections of several non-Bolshevik parties are housed in the former Central Party Archive and were simply not available to researchers. Russian scholars have provided an equally important impetus to the "new Russian political history." At its best, their work--which also includes monographs and reference works devoted to political institutions that transcended political parties[4]--involves a close reading of primary materials within a broader analytic framework.[5] With the aid of new reference works, including the very important *Politicheskie partii Rossii: Konets XIX-pervaia tret' XX veka. Entsiklopediia*,[6] it is now much easier to trace the contours of the political landscape in which parties operated.

Much of the new political history has focused on the 1890-1930 period. In part, this reflects Russian scholars' search for a "usable past" as an alternative to Bolshevism. Many have focused on the early 20th century, when parties proliferated and Russia after 1905 acquired a "semi-demi-constitutional" order. At that unique moment, Russia experienced forms of political practice-- parties, competitive elections, competing mass press publications--that did not exist earlier or later. The search for a viable past also helps account for the recent interest in both liberalism ("the liberals" in general as well as the Kadets in particular) and conservatism.[7]

The publishing house Rosspen, with its series of documentary publications and monographs on the period, has become a landmark in the terrain of these new studies. At the core of our special issue is a set of reviews of Rosspen's publications on political parties in the first half of the 20th century. We invited the reviewers not only to evaluate the volumes but to comment on whether the documents they contain challenge the existing literature and to address the state of the field. Many reviewers ended up referring to and discussing materials well beyond the Rosspen volumes. Taken together, these essays offer a panoramic overview of the impact of the new documentation about political parties as well as the state of "political history" more generally.

Although newly available sources are integral to the new political history, the relationship between "the archival revolution" and "the new political history" is complex. The latter engages a much expanded range of actors and sources, yet new documents can be selected and interpreted in ways that merely bolster old or canonical interpretations. Several of our essays, moreover, detect in individual volumes a traditional source bias in favor of doctrinal documents from central bodies over documents that might better reflect "politics as practice," such as correspondence between regional affiliates and the center, documents elucidating the system of local caucuses, or protocols of election meetings. But even when the selection is constraining, the essays also demonstrate that these sources can be read against the grain or in the context of approaches perhaps not imagined by the compilers.

As several reviewers point out, the Rosspen series is organized by political parties. However, it exhibits some notable blind spots. It largely concentrates on the central Great Russian parties, to the exclusion of the regions and peripheries. We lack, for instance, a volume on the Bund or Poalei Tsion, or the Muslim parties of the Volga basin. Aleksei Miller's contribution to this issue highlights the need to work "between the local and the inter-imperial." In addition, as Terence Emmons points out, the sources for the document collections tend to be institutional. One of the

most exciting areas of our field is the search for new kinds of sources, or new ways of reading old sources, in order to interpret individual, group, and popular understandings of politics.

The focus on parties has the advantage of recovering many historical actors from historiographical oblivion and describing them in detail, but it fails to portray the more general terrain on which they operated. As Frederick Corney notes, “In this insistently party context, other much more broadly employed modes of political expression or action, including the voice of the worker plenipotentiary (*upolnomochennyi*) and nonparty person (*bespartiinyi*), have been implicitly or explicitly relegated below the party voice” (208). To avoid considerations of only single political parties, we asked a number of authors to review volumes on separate but related parties; several also included volumes reflecting the broader institutional structure in which the parties operated. Thus, Semion Lyandres reviews a volume of documents on the Provisional Government alongside those on the moderate socialist parties in 1917.

Although it concentrates on the era of parties and revolution, the “new political history” explores other periods as well. Anthropological and literary modes of analysis have enriched our knowledge of the Muscovite and early imperial “politics of autocracy,”<sup>[8]</sup> the imperial aspects of Russian rule,<sup>[9]</sup> and the “high” politics and culture of the imperial period.<sup>[10]</sup> Studies of the revolutionary and Civil War era, in particular, have increasingly devoted attention to politics with a small “p”--to the tactics and strategies of surviving in catastrophic times.<sup>[11]</sup> Furthermore, as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, there is a new interest in a political approach to the Soviet period, including the politics of the everyday.<sup>[12]</sup> The insight that institutions have their own political culture and help shape the surrounding ecosystem has found reflection in works on the Stalin period,<sup>[13]</sup> and the view of politics as a discursive envelope, within which agents understand themselves and frame their goals, has been central to the recent scholarship on Soviet society.<sup>[14]</sup>

Clearly, the “new political history” in our field is in dialogue with other disciplines; political history has always been informed by other fields. However, as we suggested at the outset, the nature of political history’s “interdisciplinary” referents has shifted, and at the very least we should cultivate awareness of the dynamics of this shift and take care not to cut off other sources of inspiration in the human sciences. There also remains the basic challenge of reintegrating “high” politics, as traditionally understood, into a more broadly conceived political field. We still face the question of negotiating structure and conjuncture, ideology and circumstance--an analytic problem that increasingly divides our field, especially for the revolutionary and Soviet periods.

## Footnotes

[1] For a pioneering study in this spirit, see Leopold Haimson, “The Parties and the State: The Evolution of Political Attitudes,” in *The Structure of Russian History*, ed. Michael Cherniavsky (New York: Random House, 1970), 309-40; see also S. V. Leonov, “Partiinaia sistema Rossii (konets XIX v.-1917 god),” *Voprosy istorii*, no. 11-12 (1999): 29-48.

[2] Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1. See also Baker, “Introduction,” in *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed.

Baker, vol. 1 of *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1987), xi-xxiii; and William Sewell, "Ideologies and Social Revolutions," *Journal of Modern History* 57, 1 (1985): 57-85. For the Russian field, see Stephen Kotkin, "'One Hand Clapping': Russian Workers and 1917," *Labor History* 32, 4 (1991): 604-20; Ronald Grigor Suny, "Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and Its Critics," *Russian Review* 53, 2 (April 1994): 165-82; and Steven Smith, "The 'Social' and the 'Political' in the Russian Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 38, 3 (1995): 733-43.

[3] Vladimir Kozlov and Ol'ga Lokteva, "'Arkhivnaia revoliutsiia' v Rossii," *Svobodnaia mysl'* nos. 1-4 (1997); Mark von Hagen, "The Archival Gold Rush and Historical Agendas in the Post-Soviet Era," *Slavic Review* 52, 2 (Spring 1993): 96-100, and Stephen Kotkin, "1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks," *Journal of Modern History* 70, 2 (1998): 384-425.

[4] E.g., Vladimir Buldakov, *Krasnaia smuta: Priroda i posledstviia revoliutsionnogo nasilia* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997); G. A. Gerasimenko, "Obshchestvennye ispolnitel'nye komitety v revoliutsii 1917 g.," in *Fevral'skaia revoliutsiia: Ot novykh istochnikov k novomu osmysleniiu*, ed. P. V. Volobuev (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1997): 145-59; and L. G. Protasov, *Vserossiiskoe uchreditel'noe sobranie: Istoriiia rozhdeniia i gibeli* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997). Daniel Orlovsky has long emphasized the centrality of institutions: Daniel Orlovsky, "Professionalism in the Ministerial Bureaucracy," in *Russia's Missing Middle Class*, ed. Harvey Balzer (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 267-92.

[5] Boris Kolonitskii, *Simvoly vlasti i bor'ba za vlast': K izucheniiu politicheskoi kul'tury rossiiskoi revoliutsii 1917 goda* (St. Petersburg: "Dmitrii Bulanin," 2001); Oleg Vital'evich Budnitskii, "V. A. Maklakov i evreiskii vopros (Iz istorii russkogo liberalizma)," *Vestnik Evreiskogo universiteta*, no. 1 (19) (1999): 42-94; and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin i Ordzhonikidze: Konflikty v Politbiuro v 30-e gody* (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1993).

[6] V. V. Shelokhaev et al., eds., *Politicheskie partii Rossii. Konets XIX-pervaia tret' XX veka. Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1996).

[7] The breadth and depth of the current interest in conservatism is illustrated by collections of conference proceedings such as *Konservatizm: Istoriiia i sovremennost'*, an ongoing series published by Perm' State University since 1993; Arkadii Minakov, ed., *Konservatizm v Rossii i mire: Proshloe i nastoiashchee. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, no. 1 (Voronezh: Izdatel'stvo Voronezhskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2001); and Vera Dubina et al., eds., *Evoliutsiia konservatizma: Evropeiskaia traditsiia i russkii opyt. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii*. Samara, 26-29 apreliia 2002 goda (Samara: Samarskii nauchnyi tsentr RAN, 2002).

[8] Edward Keenan, "Muscovite Political Folkways," *Russian Review* 45, 2 (1986): 115-81; Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345-1547* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press); Kollmann, *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Valerie A. Kivelson, *Autocracy in the Provinces: Russian Political Culture and the Gentry in the*

*Seventeenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996). See also the “Ex Tempore” exchange on “Muscovite Despotism” in *Kritika* 3, 3 (2002): 473-508.

[9] To cite just one example, Thomas M. Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700-1860* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

[10] Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in the Russian Monarchy*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995 and 2000); and Andrei L. Zorin, *Kormia dvuglavogo orla: Literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologiiia v Rossii v poslednei treti XVIII-pervoi treti XIX veka* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001).

[11] Sergei Viktorovich Iarov, *Gorozhanin kak politik: Revoliutsiia, voennyi kommunizm, i NEP glazami petrogradtsev* (St. Petersburg: “Dmitrii Bulanin,” 1999); Iarov, *Krest'ianin kak politik: Krest'ianstvo Severo-Zapada Rossii v 1918-1919 gg. Politicheskie myshlenie i massovyi protest* (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1999); and Iarov, *Proletarii kak politik: Politicheskaia psikhologiiia rabochikh Petrograda v 1917-1923 gg.* (St. Petersburg: “Dmitrii Bulanin,” 1999)--all three reviewed in *Kritika* 3, 1 (2002): 164-72. See also Igor' Nar'skii, *Zhizn' v katastrofe: Budni naseleniia Urala v 1917-1921* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001); and Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1918-1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[12] E.g., Elena Aleksandrovna Osokina, *Ierarkhiia potrebleniia: O zhizni liudei v usloviakh stalinskogo snabzheniia, 1928-1935* (Moscow: Rossiiskii otkrytyi universitet, 1993); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Elena Zubkova, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: Politika i povsednevnost', 1945-1953* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2000).

[13] See, for example, Khlevniuk, *Stalin i Ordzhonikidze*, and O. V. Khlevniuk, *Politbiuro: Mekhanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1996).

[14] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); and Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).