

After the Fall. Essays in Russian and Soviet Historiography. Kritika

Editor's Introduction

A Remarkable Decade Revisited

Someone once said that revolutions - moments of great intensity, during which everything seems transformed - are the sex of history. If so, the decade "after the fall" of Soviet communism could be considered the sex of historiography. As the human sciences in general were buffeted by far-reaching changes in the 1990s, such changes were compounded in our area by the "opening of the archives" and the implications of 1989 and 1991. Even as the archival euphoria faded into sober assessments of the hard empirical, theoretical, and organizational challenges that lay ahead, it sometimes seemed that the archival revolution and the post-communists vistas on which we perch might allow virtually any historical topic to be approached anew - or at least bombarded with new evidence without the blinkered, specialized caution that is the scourge of less turbulent fields. Needless to say, the "morning after" arrived some time ago. An afterword to the present volume addresses the "post-post-Soviet" shifts that are occurring in the historiography of the 2000s and contrasts them to continuities that can be posited over the approximately 15 years since the field initially yielded to the seductions of upheaval.

But here let us recall the first post-Soviet decade. Vivid fragments of memory pass before our mind's eye: a minor riot in a store over a cart of butter at the height of the economic collapse of the early 1990s; Solzhenitsyn's return and the Stolypin craze; the White House under assault by tanks; a warm cabbage pie at the once-popular Russkoe bistro; the pawed over list of declassified *fondy* at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in the mid-1990s; the rise and fall of "Bim Bom," a store evidently named after a pair of prerevolutionary clowns and visible from the reading-room windows of the erstwhile *sanctum sanctorum*, the Central Party Archive. In the end, the historical and the historiographical are inextricably intertwined; for those students of Russia whose intellectual and scholarly lives intersected with this period of cognitive flux and historical change, it has certainly been a remarkable decade. *Kritika Historical Studies* and its parent journal, founded in 2000, might well be counted among its results.

Historiography in Anglophone scholarship on Russian studies is treated less as an important and separate field of inquiry than in many other traditions of history-writing, including in Russia itself, where historiography has typically had considerable stature in terms of both the educational system and the number of publications devoted to it. In North America, consideration of historiography is often relegated to targeted discussions in the introductions of books and articles or to textbook-like publications presenting the field to students. Much more rarely, historians turn their scholarly gaze onto the relatively distant past of the field and its practitioners, subjecting historiography not to recollection or polemic but to genuine historical inquiry. But such works are few and far between, and in general the history of Russian studies, to put it optimistically, awaits more intensive examination.

The present volume represents another kind of historiographical endeavor: it juxtaposes thematic and well-documented essays by leading scholars who themselves have participated in shaping and observing the academic literature during the crucial transformations since *perestroika*. Some contributors define their slices of the historiography in thematic terms; others do so

chronologically. Unlike many historiographical discussions configured for introductory or textbook-like statements, however, all these authors survey and analyze bodies of literature as works of scholarship in their own right. It is our hope that observing the ways in which these high-level historiographic interventions, when placed together, augment one another - how the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts - will stimulate further sustained historiographic inquiry in the field.

The essays here originated in a 2001 special issue of the journal *Kritika* and since then have been revised, extended, or updated by most of the authors. When we editors originally sent out our invitations to these scholars, we really did not know what to expect. All we did was invite a range of interesting and accomplished figures to assess the achievements and the failures of the historical research in their field in the last decade. We realized that we could not include all areas, and the mix was intended to be suggestive rather than comprehensive. We made efforts to include a number of Russian and European commentators as well as a range of scholarly approaches and positions, although in both cases last-minute withdrawals prevented us from publishing quite as much as we would have liked. We take pride including certain fields (military and economic history, history of science) that have sometimes been ignored in historiographical discussions. Others (such as quantitative social history) may have been marginalized a bit more recently, yet, as becomes clear, the reports of their deaths have been greatly exaggerated. The selection on cultural history, as perhaps befits the area that in recent years has been simultaneously at the epicenter of the methodological attention and the most difficult to pin down conceptually, turned into a longer interpretive article; the piece on interpretations of the end of communism addresses a burgeoning literature on 1991 in several fields the implications of which many historians have yet to confront.

The picture that emerges from this exercise in stock-taking is instructive in several ways. The assessments, reflecting not only the differing scholars, are notable for their range: some qualify their enthusiastic optimism only very lightly; many others picture the glass as half-empty or half-full; and still others are frankly pessimistic about much that has occurred. Some contributions focus solely or mainly on the Russian-language historiography; others mainly on the Anglo-American or European literature; and a third group on both or all three. The overall result, however, is a lesson in what might be called the dialectics of historiography. In one sense, these dialectics operate across space: we can perceive the interaction among individual scholars, national context, and international trends in the way fields have developed during a critical period. In those cases in which both Russian and Western works are considered, we can see better in retrospect just how intricate the intellectual and academic exchanges, conjunctures, and disjunctures have been. In another sense, these dialectics operate across time: in response to many kinds of historical and historiographical change some lines of inquiry are repudiated, others embraced. yet the dialectics display a cunning of their own. As Laura Engelstein suggests in her work on the cultural turn, many "new" questions have their roots in or recapitulate much older ones; as Alain Blum implies, just as the "old" social history was being repudiated in many areas, it was experiencing a little-observed renaissance in others. It flows from our discussion that programmatic statements about the "state of the field" ignore these kind of phenomena at their peril.

The one topic that is close to universal in this special issue is the opening of the archives, or as it

has come to be known in Russia, the archival revolution. We have more to say about this in the afterword, but for now, suffice it to note that the essays included here demonstrate how behind both catchphrases lies a complicated and sometimes contradictory reality. Many discussions on this topic, especially in the early years of historiographical flux, featured declarations about what "we now know" or balance sheets about how the archives have changed our understanding of the Soviet and Russian past. Framing the question like a report card tends the focus attention only on the "revelations." When it is put that way, it is a simple matter to judge how much our views have changed: a little, but not all that much. In our view, this type of perspective misses some of the most fascinating aspects of the "archival question," those that have to do with disciplinary evolution and *faktura* - manner of execution, or texture - in the writing of history. It is a bit like saying that when we looked at the moon with a handheld telescope we knew all along that there were craters; when we look at it now through the Hubble telescope we see nothing but the same craters in much more detail. The point is, of course, that the texture becomes completely different; looking at their minutiae and their broad outlines both, we may ultimately come to a much different appreciation of what they are. In reconsidering the past, a decade is but a short period in such a process. As Oleg Khlevniuk points out, the early over-estimations of what can be learned from the former Soviet archives - and, by extension, their opposite, the notion that nothing fundamentally new has emerged - are now largely a thing of the past. *Kritika* remains committed to scholarship that combines both empirical and conceptual discovery. Insofar as the telescoped exhilaration of the archival revolution has now also become a part of history, we have entered the post-revolutionary age.