

question. If alternatives cannot be articulated, public opinion is meaningless. From the point of view of the regime, what matters is the pretense of public support.

As far as I was concerned, the issue was always the nature and consequences of terror. Indeed, there is no point in simply expressing moral indignation about mass murders in the past. To be an objective historian you must always remember while you are writing on whatever topic—social mobility, industrial norms, sports, opera—that the fact of concentration camps and the terror they inspired was part and parcel of the fabric of society. Terror distorted everything: social institutions, human relations, and culture. Yes, there was something irritating about the work of historians who pointed out that Soviet society exhibited many of the same characteristics as western societies, without noting the significant fact that at the same time millions were incarcerated and murdered in the Soviet Union. Soviet politics may have had interest groups just like in the west, but only in the Soviet case were the losers murdered. We are justified in not liking the politician who speaks with great enthusiasm about the employment policies of the Nazis. In the same way I disapprove of books that describe how similar Russian and American films were in the 1930s without mentioning that many of the Soviet scriptwriters were soon murdered.

The opening of archives does not change the picture from my point of view. We already knew enough in the 1950s to form a picture. It may be that at the time of the great purges “only” 700,000 people were sentenced to death, rather than several millions. Perhaps only two million people died at the time of the great terror. Perhaps the number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust was not six million, but only five and a half million, or even fewer. The numbers are large enough to consider these regimes monstrous, and whatever we write about them we must not forget that for a moment.

As far as I am concerned the debate was all about that.

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To the Editor:

The recent extensive coverage of the reminiscences and reflections of revisionists in Soviet studies (*Slavic Review*, vol. 67, no. 3) prompts numerous questions. I would especially like to comment on their perceptions of why they were subject to criticism and on their belief that these critiques were inspired by Cold War partisanship.

If all revisionism meant was an interest in learning more about the unknown facts of Soviet history and a refreshing defiance of conventional wisdom, few would have been critical of it. The problem with revisionism has been that its professed striving for deeper understanding and more innovative approaches had highly patterned, converging moral and ideological implications and outcomes. Revisionists, and those reading their work, could not help coming to the conclusion that, as Sheila Fitzpatrick put it, “the Soviet Union—or some aspect thereof—is not as bad as it has been painted by Cold War scholarship” (703). In turn J. Arch Getty suggested that the Soviet lower classes supported the system because they were “willing to trade free speech for cheap food” (712), inexplicably overlooking the chronic food shortages and the famine associated with collectivization.

Revisionists insist that they rejected the totalitarian model because it was unhelpful for grasping reality, because it exaggerated the power of those at the top. But as Daniels pointed out “there is nothing wrong with the concept a little tinkering could not remedy. The model needs historical context. . . . It needs to recognize the practical limits to state control over society” (707). Most of those using the concept were well aware of these limitations. It seems to me that objections to the totalitarian model had less to do with its threat to sound scholarship than with the negative moral judgment it entailed.

During the 1960s many American academic intellectuals (as well as students and graduate students) came to the conclusion that American society was intolerably unjust and corrupt, and it rubbed them the wrong way to be “judgmental” of sociopolitical systems that were critical of it and that claimed anticapitalist credentials. This may be in a nutshell the broader, attitudinal background behind the rise of revisionism in Soviet studies.

It is an interesting question why Fitzpatrick was “dissatisfied” throughout the 1980s with her “own and other people’s progress in understanding the Great Purges” (691) and

why this dissatisfaction led her finally to embrace views or findings that sharply reduced the number of victims as well as the responsibility of Iosif Stalin, the party, and any aspect of the official ideology. The new understanding of the purges has been exemplified by the volume edited by J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning entitled *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (1993). Its contributors made strenuous efforts to find nonsystemic explanations for the terror. Thus they considered it a mistake to seek its origins in the person of the dictator, in the administrative system, or in the official ideology, opting instead for diffuse, apolitical explanations that included personal hatreds, lack of coordination, crop failure, local confusion, personal conflicts, and even ancient rural traditions and superstitions.

Contrary to the much repeated claim, the critiques of the revisionists, did not, for the most part, stem from a desire to support or heat up the Cold War. These critiques originated mainly in the feeling that the revisionists were unwilling or incapable of mustering any moral indignation about the misdeeds of the Soviet system and that their work—wittingly or unwittingly—diminished its moral responsibility for the huge amount of suffering it had inflicted on its people and those of several neighboring countries. I also question the existence of a suffocating “Cold War consensus” (712)—another alleged source of the critiques directed against the revisionists. I recall a great deal of dispute and disagreement about these matters and, especially, the rise and the popularity in the 1960s of the moral equivalence school. The latter was certainly incompatible with any notion of a “Cold War consensus,” and it postulated that the two superpowers were equally responsible for it (often the United States more so) and that both systems were deeply flawed morally (on closer inspection the United States more so).

The critiques of the revisionists were also inspired, I believe, by their cavalier and often contemptuous dismissal of the information provided by refugees and defectors—people who grew up, lived in, and suffered under the Soviet system (all the more remarkable since the revisionists professed interest in information “from below”). Getty referred to these sources as “second-hand personal memoirs, gossip . . . and lurid accounts by defecting spies eager to earn a living in the West” (Getty and Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror*, 40–41). Such denigration of defectors can be explained by an aversion to the revelations they provided, which conflicted with the more favorable views of the Soviet Union entertained by many revisionists.

These observations suggest that the ideals of nonpartisanship embraced by Fitzpatrick (683) have remained as elusive for the revisionists as for those who believe that there are occasions when scholars and intellectuals should bear witness against evil.

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To the Editor:

The discussion on revisionism (*Slavic Review*, vol. 67, no. 3) depicts the evolution of Soviet studies over the last thirty-five years as a Hollywood-type story about how the good guys valiantly confronted and heroically defeated the bad guys. Some readers must feel reassured that the revisionists, idealistic knights of facts-based scholarship, ultimately prevailed over the totalitarianists, the reactionary champions of retrograde obscurantism. And even readers inclined to perceive the “discussion” as a display of sectarian triumphalism will surely find it helpful. After all, it is always good to know who is calling the shots in a particular professional arena and which faction has amassed enough power to impose its understanding of what should count as “a scientific statement based on facts” and what should be dismissed as “biased interpretation tainted by ideology”—and to these important questions the essays offer an unambiguous answer.

Other questions the “discussion” leaves unanswered. The gist of Sheila Fitzpatrick’s and J. Arch Getty’s lamentations is that until recently scholarship on the Soviet Union was not exclusionary enough and tolerated intolerable views. They passionately argue that the field should be purged of “Cold War attacks,” “antirevisionist argument[s] (or smear[s]),” arguments “value-laden in a Cold War way” (Fitzpatrick, 691, 693, 683); “mud slinging against revisionists,” “a Cold War consensus,” and “the totalitarian taint” (Getty,