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REVISIONISM IN SOVIET HISTORY

SHEILA FITZPATRICK

ABSTRACT

This essay is an account of the “revisionism” movement of the 1970s and 1980s in Soviet history, analyzing its challenge to the totalitarian model in terms of Kuhnian paradigm shift. The focus is on revisionism of the Stalin period, an area that was particularly highly charged by the passions of the Cold War. These passions tended to obscure the fact that one of the main issues at stake was not ideological but purely disciplinary, namely a challenge by social historians to the dominance of political history. A similar challenge, this time against the dominance of social history on behalf of cultural history, was issued in the 1990s by “post-revisionists.” Although I was a participant in the battles of the 1970s, the essay is less a personal account than a case-based analysis of the way disciplinary orthodoxies in the social sciences and humanities are established and challenged, and why this happens when it does. In the case of Soviet history, I argue that new data and external events played a surprisingly small role, and generational change a large one.

I was a participant in the “revisionism” that is the subject of this essay, and this essay will necessarily reflect my experience and (despite my best efforts at detachment) my biases. The movement of young historians and political scientists in the US and the UK that was labeled “revisionism” in the 1970s involved a challenge to the then dominant totalitarian model. The two main loci of revisionist scholarship were Stalinism (meaning primarily its prewar version, from the late 1920s to the Second World War) and the Russian Revolution of 1917. I will concentrate on the former, since it is both the arena I know best and the one where the totalitarian model was most entrenched. This essay is not intended as a personal account of what it felt like to be a Soviet-history revisionist back in the 1970s, though I have offered such an account elsewhere.¹ It is an attempt, informed by this particular historiographical case study, to think about how knowledge develops within academic disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, how disciplinary orthodoxies are established and challenged, and what’s at stake when this happens.

I. PARADIGM SHIFTS

I am going to treat revisionism as a paradigm for understanding Soviet history, a paradigm that in the 1970s and 1980s successfully challenged the then regnant

1. For the account of my personal experiences as a revisionist, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Revisionism in Retrospect: A Personal View,” forthcoming in *Slavic Review* (2008).

totalitarian-model paradigm, and that was then itself challenged in the 1990s by “post-revisionists.” The paradigm concept is, of course, borrowed from Thomas Kuhn.² It is useful for my purposes because it proposes that at any given time a particular *way of doing science* (history) is dominant among professional practitioners, that this way of doing science involves assumptions about methodology and relevant areas of research as well as theory, and that science typically progresses via abrupt, non-incremental, paradigm shifts (“scientific revolutions”) associated not so much with the discovery of new data invalidating the old paradigm (though Kuhn does write of a growing awareness of “anomalies”) as by processes within the professional scientific community that generate a shift in perspective. Kuhn’s idea of scientific revolution tended to undermine the notion of “pure” scientific knowledge incrementally accumulating, and to focus attention on the sociology of science, the role of scientific communities, and the conditions of production of scientific work.

While Kuhn himself was uncertain about the applicability of his concept of paradigm shift to the social sciences and humanities, scholars in these fields have tended to react more enthusiastically to his ideas than have those in the natural sciences. Scientists generally view scientific knowledge as cumulative and objectively established, whereas scholars in the social sciences and humanities have comparatively little investment in the notion of cumulateness, and find it easy to see their disciplines developing through changes of perspective in which the previous disciplinary paradigm is not so much disproven as set aside. This strong recognition factor provides encouragement for the use of Kuhn’s ideas in the social sciences and humanities, but it may also contain a warning that our “paradigm shifts,” which are certainly more frequent than those Kuhn thought occurred in the natural sciences, may also be more trivial. “Scientific revolutions” were what Kuhn set out to explain, and in the natural sciences such things don’t occur every twenty or thirty years, as has arguably been the case in the discipline of history since the 1960s. Nevertheless, even if we consider paradigm shifts in the social sciences and humanities to be something more like changes in intellectual fashion than scientific revolutions, Kuhn’s model is still useful, if only for reminding us of the power of reigning orthodoxies at any given time in determining what questions should be asked, how they should be answered, and what constitutes the relevant field of information.

What happened in Soviet history can be considered part of a larger story of paradigm shifts in the historical profession in general, namely, the displacement in the 1960s and 1970s of political history by social history as the dominant “way of doing history,” and the subsequent displacement of social history by the new cultural history in the late 1980s and 1990s. But the story of Soviet history has a number of interesting peculiarities. In Soviet history, the paradigm shift of the 1970s involved the claiming for history of an area of enquiry that had formerly been the prerogative of political scientists. Moreover, it occurred in a Cold War setting that politicized both the revisionist challenge and the totalitarian-model response, taking the ensuing controversy outside the scholarly realm and making

2. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

it particularly bitter. This wasn't unique, of course: the controversy over revisionism in German history was no less bitter and politicized. Indeed, the two became bizarrely linked when, at the height of the arguments over Soviet revisionism, opponents characterized it as the moral equivalent of Holocaust denial.

Another peculiarity of the story of paradigm shifts in Soviet history is that it is to a remarkable degree a story of changing perspectives *within the discipline*, almost totally disconnected from public and media opinion about the topic, and with only the most tenuous relationship to the dramatic external events occurring contemporaneously. While the revisionist challenge to the totalitarian model won over the profession by the mid 1980s, it had virtually no impact on public understanding of Soviet history, which has remained true to the totalitarian framework regardless of successive changes in disciplinary perspective. Moreover, when the revisionist paradigm itself was challenged at the beginning of the 1990s by a new cohort of cultural and intellectual historians, the intellectual substance of that challenge bore remarkably little relationship to what was happening in the world outside, namely the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent influx of new data from formerly closed archives.

At this point, a word about terminology. "Revisionism" might in principle be a neutral word for innovative work, but in my experience it is usually pejorative—the word used for those challenges to conventional wisdom that incur disapproval as well as disagreement inside the profession and censure outside. In Soviet history, the "revisionists" of the 1970s used the term unwillingly at first, often in quotation marks, but in the end it stuck. As for the way of naming what the revisionists were opposing, they called it "totalitarian-model scholarship" or "traditional Sovietology" back then, and now tend to refer to its protagonists by the shorthand of "totalitarians" (one good pejorative deserves another).

II. THE PARADIGM SHIFT OF THE 1970S

If we postulate a paradigm shift in Soviet history in the 1970s, what was its nature? It is peculiarly difficult for a sometime participant in a paradigm war to give an accurate account of what the paradigms at stake were. Even now, having had it firmly pointed out to me by young scholars that our 1970s characterization of the existing field of Sovietology contained distortions and over-simplifications (in particular, by writing modernization out of the picture as a theoretical underpinning, and by ignoring the immensely influential Harvard interviewing project³), I find it hard to stand far enough back to get a complete picture. But

3. The Harvard Interview on the Soviet social system was conducted after the Second World War, using refugees from the Soviet Union as its informants. It was an interdisciplinary effort, recruiting the best and the brightest young Russian-speaking scholars available; its major summary publications were Raymond A. Bauer, Alex Inkeles, and Clyde Kluckhohn, *How the Soviet System Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), and Alex Inkeles and Raymond Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959). While the Harvard Project team invoked the concept of totalitarianism, a comparative modernization approach was at least as important in their work. Other major scholars of the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s using a modernization framework included Barrington Moore, Jr., *Terror and Progress—USSR* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), and Cyril E. Black et al., *The Modernization of Japan and Russia: A Comparative Study* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

perhaps that is appropriate, since a paradigm under challenge must always be a construct of the challengers, and the way they construct it presumably highlights those features of the current wisdom they wish to challenge.⁴

According to the revisionist construct, totalitarian-model scholarship (“traditional Sovietology”)⁵ portrayed the Soviet Union as a completely top-down entity. The destruction of autonomous associations and the atomization of bonds between people produced a powerless, passive society that was purely an object of regime control and manipulation. The main mechanism of control was terror, with propaganda used as a mobilizing device in second place. The regime (for which “the party” and “Stalin” were often used as synonyms) was a monolith whose actions were guided by the ideology articulated in the classics of Marxism-Leninism and obligatorily quoted in all Soviet pronouncements. After the end of the 1920s, when the Stalin period began, there was no political opposition, no independent press, no representation of interest groups, no tolerance of deviation from “the party line,” and no pluralism of any kind, including cultural. This was in effect a mirror image of the Soviet self-representation, but with the moral signs reversed (instead of the party being always right, it was always wrong). As in the Soviet self-representation, the essence of the Soviet system was its difference from capitalism/Western liberal democracies, meaning that terms applicable to the one could not properly be applied to the other. But (on the Western side, not the Soviet), there was one legitimate and indeed necessary comparison: the analogy between the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany that underlay the totalitarian model. This clearly identified the Soviet system as evil and the Soviet Union as an enemy of the free world. To question the totalitarian character of the Soviet Union was to question the premise that it was evil and an enemy.

To make this a Kuhnian paradigm, we need to characterize *the way of doing scholarship* that it embodied. The first thing to note is that this approach was developed mainly by political scientists, because up to the 1970s the older generation of historians still considered Soviet history (post-1917) to be outside the permissible bounds of the discipline. The Soviet Communist party newspaper *Pravda*, and Lenin’s and Stalin’s *Works*, were the main data sources, though defector accounts (revealing what the Soviets wanted to hide) were also valued. The study of the Soviet Union (“Sovietology,” an interdisciplinary concept) was generously funded by various agencies of the US government and foundations, which distinguished it from most other area studies, not to mention most fields of history. According to the revisionist critique, Sovietology was a way of doing scholarship that had been corrupted by its over-dependence on government support, that it had thereby aban-

4. A neutral account of the revisionist–totalitarian conflict of the 1970s by a non-participant contemporary observer is in Abbott Gleason, “‘Totalitarianism’ in 1984,” *Russian Review* 43 (1984), 149-59; idem, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121-142. For a participant’s account, see Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 3: *The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43-54.

5. The work most frequently invoked by revisionists as an authoritative statement on totalitarianism was Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956). (For this generation, Hannah Arendt’s work on totalitarianism was less influential.)

done the pretense of objectivity and embraced a Cold War mission of “knowing the enemy” and providing anti-Communist propaganda.

Revisionists, many of whom were or aspired to be social historians, depicted the Soviet Union in bottom-up rather than top-down terms. They assumed that society had to be more than a simple object of regime control, whatever the constraints on association and group expression, and they questioned whether the political system was really completely monolithic. They were not interested in ideology, and they tended to regard official ideological pronouncements simply as a mask for what was really going on. Assuming that terror alone could not enforce conformity and ensure the regime’s survival (especially in the Second World War), they suggested that somebody must be getting something out of this system, that is, that there was some kind of social support for the regime.

For the revisionists who were social historians, the way to do history was to use primary sources including, if possible, archives (for the post-1917 period, Soviet archives were just beginning to become available to Western scholars—but most political topics, and some social ones, were still out of bounds). For the revisionists who were political scientists, the way to do it was to use Western social science concepts and to see the Soviet Union in a different comparative frame than the totalitarian one with Nazi Germany; sometimes this comparative frame was the developed West, sometimes—within a modernization framework—the Third World.

III. THE COLD WAR

The argument that developed between revisionists and totalitarian-model scholars cannot be understood outside the context of the Cold War, for it quickly became a political slanging match, with totalitarians calling the revisionists whitewashers and fellow-travelers who were “soft on Communism,” and revisionists calling the totalitarians Cold Warriors whose work was distorted by the imposition of a political agenda. While the revisionists were divided on the necessity of moral judgment (by which was meant overt condemnatory judgment of the Soviet system), most of them believed in the value of “objective” scholarship (then still widely accepted in the historical community) and considered that their own work was rescuing Soviet history from “bias.” There was some ambiguity, however, as to whether revisionists as a group were against the grinding of political axes in history or just against anti-communist political axes. Certainly the totalitarians thought the latter, and took the revisionists’ anti-anti-communism to be a cover for pro-communism and anti-Americanism. In their view, the revisionists’ willingness to use Western social-science concepts like social mobility and political participation in analyzing the Soviet Union amounted to a claim that there were no essential differences between Soviet and Western political systems. In particular, the totalitarians interpreted the revisionists’ interest in the idea of social support, and their wish to switch the focus of scholarly attention away from terror, as attempts to justify and give legitimacy to the Soviet system.

In fact, there was a political agenda in the air in the US in the early 1970s that undoubtedly influenced many American revisionists—that of the New Left.⁶ Sovietological revisionists, especially the political scientists, were aware of the broader movement of “revisionist” reassessment of US responsibility for the Cold War stimulated by opposition to the war in Vietnam. Many were critical of US demonization of the Soviet Union, hoped that there was a “good” side of the Soviet story to uncover, and approached stories of the “bad” side skeptically and with stern demands for evidence. In addition, quite a few of the 1970s revisionists were Marxists (never, to my knowledge, of a Stalinist variety, but sometimes Trotskyist), who hoped to find that at least part of the promise of socialist revolution had been realized or could be recovered.⁷ An important influence for some was contemporary Soviet anti-Stalinist revisionism of the Roy Medvedev type,⁸ advocating a return to “Leninist norms” (meaning the true spirit of democratic socialism) in a context of de-Stalinization.

IV. REVISIONIST ISSUES

Revisionism in Soviet history started with 1917, where revisionist historians discovered social support (including support from the working class) for the Bolsheviks, thus challenging the prevailing view that the Bolsheviks were a group of émigré intellectuals with no significant popular support who took power in a coup.⁹ The 1917 revisionists were a group of young historians with a strong esprit de corps; many of them originally trained in the late-Imperial period and were strongly influenced by their Columbia University mentor, Leopold Haimson. While their work was controversial, it was so solidly researched (using the array of published primary sources available in the West for 1917, as well as Soviet archives) that it was hard to dismiss, even by scholars who disliked its conclusions or who believed, as many of the older Russian historians did, that Russian history as a researchable area ended with the fall of the old regime.

6. Though at the time I, as a (then) outsider to American academia and not a Marxist or New Leftist, would in all good faith deny this.

7. On Marxism as an inspiration for revisionism in Soviet history, see Ronald Grigor Suny, “Fifteen Years après le Déluge: What’s Left of Marx?,” Presidential Address to AAASS, Washington DC, November 2006, published in the AAASS bulletin *Newsnet* 47:1 (January 2007), 1-7.

8. Roy Medvedev’s indictment of Stalin’s crimes, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, was published in English translation in 1971 (transl. Colleen Taylor, ed. David Joravsky and Georges Haupt [New York: A. A. Knopf, 1971]) and widely read; it had considerable influence on early revisionists like Stephen F. Cohen and Moshe Lewin. For Lewin’s interpretation of the late Lenin as an anti-oligarchical gradualist, see Moshe Lewin, *Lenin’s Last Struggle*, transl. A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

9. Major revisionist works on 1917 include Alex Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), and *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: Norton, 1976); Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Baku Commune, 1917–1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); William G. Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Diane Koenker, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Allan K. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983–87); and Steve A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories 1917–1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

The next logical step was to apply a revisionist approach to the 1920s, the period of NEP (the New Economic Policy, constituting a relaxation of the sterner Marxist approaches of War Communism in the immediate post-revolutionary years). This was more complicated, as the sources available in the West were less abundant and Soviet archives on the period less accessible. Perhaps it was “no accident,” as Soviet Marxists liked to say, that the pioneer in extending revisionism into the 1920s was not a historian but a young political scientist, Stephen F. Cohen, whose topic was Nikolai Bukharin, Stalin’s unsuccessful “rightist” rival at the end of the 1920s. Cohen’s argument was that the moderate and gradualist policies Bukharin was promoting at the end of the 1920s presented a real alternative to Stalin, and that the more moderate and pluralist NEP, dismantled by Stalin at the end of the 1920s, would have been a viable long-term alternative. Stalinism, in Cohen’s view, was essentially an illegitimate outcome of the Revolution and original Bolshevism; there was “essential discontinuity” between Lenin’s revolution and Stalin’s.¹⁰

From Cohen’s standpoint, the totalitarian model was quite appropriately applied to the Stalin period, but it was wrong for the Bolshevik Revolution and the NEP period. In addition, he may have felt that it was a strategic mistake in the revisionist-versus-totalitarian fight to engage the enemy on its strongest front, the one likely to provoke the most aggressive counterattack; if so, events certainly proved him to be right. There was the further problem that the source base of published materials dried up drastically for the period after the 1920s, while Soviet archives for the post-1929 period were still largely inaccessible to Western scholars in the early 1970s, making work on the 1930s a real test of scholarly ingenuity and research skills.¹¹ Regardless of these prudential considerations, some reckless young historians (myself among them) went into the field of the 1930s. This predictably provoked indignation among older scholars in both disciplines, since revisionism about the Stalin period was seen as tantamount to a justification of Stalinist repression; and it also produced an acrimonious split—the first of several—among revisionists themselves.¹²

Like their counterparts working on 1917, Stalin-period revisionists were interested in questions of social support and other “from below” approaches; there was also a more diffuse skeptical strain expressed in disputation of various aspects of the “standard story” of Soviet history on grounds of insufficient evidence and prejudice. The first collective enterprise of Stalin-period revisionists was a 1974

10. See Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography 1888–1938* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), and idem, “Bolshevism and Stalinism,” in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1977), reprinted in Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

11. Access gradually increased through the 1970s and 1980s, especially for social-history topics. Until *glasnost*, it was impossible for Western scholars to get access to political or classified materials; the Central Party Archive was completely off limits.

12. In a manifesto of the mid 1980s (“Scholarly Missions: Sovietology as a Vocation”), Cohen sharply distinguished his approach from the “unfortunate trend” in revisionist history of the Stalin period that emphasized modernizing achievements and ignored repression, noting that time would show whether this was simply an overreaction to Cold War Sovietology or “an unstated political desire to rehabilitate the entire Stalin era” (Cohen, *Rethinking*, 33).

conference on the Soviet Cultural Revolution of the late 1920s, which explored initiatives “from below” (that is, from the lower ranks of the Communist Party, the young, and professionals who felt themselves outside the Establishment in their disciplines), in addition to the more familiar initiatives “from above” (that is, from Stalin and the party leadership).¹³ One line of revisionist work focused on Soviet “affirmative action” policies of the early Stalin period by which upwardly mobile urban workers and peasants and their children were recruited into a new elite; I argued that for the beneficiaries this seemed a real-life fulfillment—however distorted, from the standpoint of Marxist theory—of the promise that the Revolution would bring workers to power.¹⁴ Other lines of revisionist research identified cases and loci of successful mobilization of workers in support of regime policies,¹⁵ or focused on the disorder and understaffing of local administration and the unintended consequences of regime policies.¹⁶ In the Marxist wing of Stalin-period revisionism, Trotsky’s interpretation of Stalinism as “revolution betrayed”¹⁷ had considerable resonance, producing social-history works that emphasized the Stalinist state’s “bureaucratic deformation” and oppression of the working class in the 1930s.¹⁸

The issue of the Great Purges of 1937–1938 was extremely controversial. For the totalitarian-model scholars, they were the prime example of terror as a systemic part of the totalitarian system. Revisionists tried to find another story of their genesis and another way of looking at them,¹⁹ tending (with respect to the Purges, as well as in general) to be skeptical about claims that Stalin had personally initiated particular policies and to assume that Party and government were much less monolithic than anodyne Soviet accounts made out.²⁰ But as a

13. Published as *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978). Note that not all the contributors would have identified themselves as “revisionists,” then or later.

14. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921–1934* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and idem, “Stalin and the Making of a New Elite” [1978], reprinted in Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

15. See Lynne Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin’s Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928–1932* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988); William J. Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918–1929* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity 1935–1941* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

16. See J. Arch Getty, *The Origin of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered 1933–1938* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Roberta Manning, “Government in the Soviet Countryside in the Stalinist Thirties: The Case of Belyi Raion in 1937,” in *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies* #301 [1983]. For a strong “unintended consequences” argument, see Lynne Viola, “The Campaign to Eliminate the Kulak as a Class, Winter, 1929–30: A Reevaluation of the Legislation,” *Slavic Review* 45:3 (1987), 503–524.

17. See Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* [1937] (London: New Park Publications, 1967).

18. Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization, 1928–1941* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1986); Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985). Note that, while Marxist revisionists were generally uneasy with the argument about working-class upward mobility, their picture of the oppression of workers *in situ* was not inconsistent with the idea that upward-mobility workers could consider themselves Stalin’s beneficiaries.

19. A collective revisionist effort in this direction was *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, ed. J. Arch Getty and Roberta Manning (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

20. See Getty, *The Origin of the Great Purges*; Gábor Tamás Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications*

convincing new general theory of the Purges failed to emerge, revisionists started to focus on the notorious numbers question: how many victims? The problem was the almost total absence of reliable data before the opening of classified Soviet archives at the end of the 1980s. Estimates by non-revisionist scholars were high and, as Jerry Hough noted, kept getting higher without any new evidence being adduced.²¹ Revisionist estimates were low, but until the opening of the archives they too were largely speculative.²²

All of these revisionist approaches provoked intense criticism. The numbers argument was particularly volatile, as the fact that the high numbers came from scholars hostile to revisionism and overtly anti-Communist and the low numbers from revisionists could not fail to suggest to each side that the other was politically motivated. But other revisionist hypotheses were very controversial too, partly because of the suspicion that looking for “from below” explanations was tantamount to getting Stalin and the regime off the hook and to refusing to make the necessary moral judgment on the evil of their policies. Similar criticisms were made of work whose terminology implied possible comparison with Western institutions (for example, “upward mobility,” “interest groups,”²³ and so on). The revisionists were accused of whitewashing and even “appeasement” of the totalitarian Soviet regime (the name of E. H. Carr being regularly invoked here²⁴), and critics started to invoke an even more damaging analogy: Holocaust denial. The analogy was based not only on the numbers argument (suggesting lower numbers of victims of the Great Purges being allegedly analogous to questioning the figure of six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust), but also on the proposal

and *Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR, 1933–1953* (Chur, Switzerland and New York: Harwood, 1991).

21. Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 176.

22. Stephen Wheatcroft was the main revisionist player in the numbers argument, opposed at different times by Steven Rosefielde, Robert Conquest, et al. See S. G. Wheatcroft, “On Assessing the Size of Forced Concentration Camp Labour in the Soviet Union, 1929–1956,” *Soviet Studies* 33, no. 2 (1981), 265–295; idem, “A Note on Steven Rosefielde’s Calculations on Excess Mortality in the USSR, 1929–1949,” *Soviet Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 1984), 277–281; idem, “More Light on the Scale of Repression and Excess Mortality in the Soviet Union in the 1930s,” in Getty and Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror*.

23. In the interests of brevity and a coherent narrative, I have omitted the important contemporary line of political-science revisionism associated particularly with Jerry Hough, which both developed a more sophisticated critique of the totalitarian model than that of the historians and explored alternative methodologies, including bureaucratic interest-group and comparative approaches (see Jerry F. Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977]; also Hough and Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed*). This work influenced revisionist historians and the intense controversy surrounding it in political science spilled over into history (for more on this, see Fitzpatrick, “Revisionism in Retrospect”); undermining the picture of monolithic Stalinist rule by researching bureaucratic and regional conflict was certainly part of the revisionist historians’ agenda in the 1970s, though it remained relatively undeveloped. For the classic “revisionist” study of this kind, we had to wait until the next generation of scholars, when James R. Harris produced his *The Great Urals: Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet System* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

24. Carr’s multivolume *A History of Soviet Russia*, which started to appear in the early 1950s (7 vols. [New York: Macmillan, 1950–1964]) was well regarded by revisionists but controversial in the field as a whole, both because of Carr’s politics and his methodology and source base: he was criticized for being “on the side of the victors” in history, and for neglecting émigré sources in favor of official Soviet documents and statistics, of which he was the first systematic scholarly user.

for “objective” rather than accusatory investigation, which was seen as an unacceptable abnegation of moral judgment in the face of evil.²⁵

Revisionists of the Stalin period were somewhat daunted by the hostile reception of their work, especially with respect to issues of social support. In the latter part of the 1980s, when previously classified Soviet archives illuminating all kinds of anti-regime activity became available, resistance—as theorized by James C. Scott²⁶—became a major preoccupation.²⁷ Apart from its intellectual attractions, the resistance framework had the great advantage that it could not possibly be construed as pro-Soviet.

Yet even as revisionist social historians moved into politically less contentious areas, their fight appeared in some essential respects to be won. In the first place, social history finally achieved dominance in the Russian history field, following the trend in the discipline as a whole. In the second place, “Soviet history” became an accepted part of Russian history—indeed, the most popular period as far as student interest was concerned, such that universities started routinely hiring Soviet historians. The Soviet-history field, minuscule at the beginning of the 1970s, mushroomed; and, as there had been comparatively little Soviet history written by historians before the revisionists, this new generation of graduate students and scholars was trained largely on revisionist work. Many revisionists’ arguments and approaches became part of the new “conventional wisdom” of the field;²⁸ revisionists stopped having (more than the usual) trouble finding jobs and getting their manuscripts past journal and publishers’ referees and, with the passage of time, themselves became senior scholars. The totalitarian model had come to seem passé among scholars of Soviet history and politics, even, para-

25. An early published example of this link was made in Leonard Schapiro’s review of my *Russian Revolution*, “Upward Mobility and Its Price,” *Times Literary Supplement* (March 18, 1983), 269. Subsequently it became a basic part of the anti-revisionist argument, especially after Gabor Rittersporn, a Hungarian-Jewish scholar based in Paris, not only associated himself with US Soviet revisionism but also intervened in the Holocaust-denial debate in France, taking the unpopular position that even Holocaust deniers had the right to express their opinions.

26. See particularly James C. Scott, *The Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

27. See *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance*, ed. Lynne Viola (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); also Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Jeffrey J. Rossman, *Worker Resistance under Stalin: Class and Revolution on the Shop Floor* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2005). I discuss this issue, and the related one of lines of revisionist enquiry prematurely abandoned under pressure of intense criticism, in my *Slavic Review* piece.

28. This is not to say that criticism stopped: in some respects, it got a new lease on life with the post-Soviet opening of classified archives, which scholars associated with anti-revisionism like Richard Pipes and Martin Malia took as evidence that they had been right about Soviet repression all along. This argument was complicated, however, by the fact that the Western scholars who in the 1990s and 2000s were most active in scouring the new archives for data on Soviet repression were revisionists (always “archive rats”) such as Arch Getty and Lynne Viola: see, for example, J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), and Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin’s Special Settlements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

doxically, as the *glasnost* generation of Russians, hitherto deprived of access to theories of totalitarianism and Western “Cold War” scholarship, was preparing to embrace Orwell’s *1984*.²⁹ But in the West, within the field of Soviet history, a paradigm shift had occurred: the anti-totalitarian “from below” approach was now the dominant paradigm. As the old joke has it, it was time to stop saying revisionist arguments were wrong and start saying they were boring because everybody already knew them.

V. POST-REVISIONISM: A NEW PARADIGM?

The challenge to the revisionist paradigm that came in the 1990s was associated with the shift in the broader historical profession from social history to theory-informed cultural and intellectual history. The inspiration for the new approach came from Stephen Kotkin³⁰ and Michel Foucault, and its standard-bearer was the new journal *Kritika*. The hallmark of post-revisionist work (which has not yet acquired another label) was an exploration of the subjective dimensions of Soviet experience and the rediscovery that ideology matters.³¹ But the post-revisionists understand ideology not in the sense of a canonical body of texts, as did the totalitarians, but more as *Weltanschauung*—something collectively constructed rather than imposed. “Modernity” is often invoked in post-revisionist work, Stalinism providing an example of an alternative (non-liberal) version stemming, like its liberal counterpart, from the European Enlightenment.³² In the Foucauldian perspective of the post-revisionists, “from above” and “from below” approaches were equally flawed because power relations are necessarily multiple and decentered.

“Post-revisionists” tended to be evenhandedly critical of both sets of precursors (totalitarians and revisionists),³³ but it was the revisionist social historians whose “hegemony” in the field they sought to displace and who were therefore the significant competition. In the mid 1990s, when the post-revisionist challenge emerged, there was some expectation, even among revisionists, that this heralded a new paradigm shift in Soviet history, this time involving a move from social history, relatively innocent of overt theory, to theory-driven cultural history. Ten years later, it is not so clear that this is what actually happened. Certainly Soviet

29. The appeal of the idea of totalitarianism to the post-Soviet Russian public is a fascinating topic that space constraints prevent me from addressing here. Russian historians did not share this fascination, but they were also only peripherally involved in the interpretive battles of Western scholars. The great contribution of Russian scholars like Oleg Khlevniuk since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been in the field of Soviet political history—neglected, for reasons of academic fashion, by most of their Western counterparts.

30. See his *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), as well as his “1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks,” *Journal of Modern History* 70:2 (1998), 384-425.

31. For the group’s manifesto on subjectivity, see Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, “Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin’s ‘Magnetic Mountain’ and the State of Soviet Historical Studies,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44:3 (1996), 457-463.

32. See *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, ed. David L. Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000).

33. Stephen Kotkin, “1991 and the Russian Revolution,” *Journal of Modern History* 70:2 (1998), 386; “Really-Existing Revisionism?” (editorial), *Kritika* 2:4 (2002), 707-711.

historians (like everyone else in the profession) are now required to take cultural theory seriously. Professedly “post-revisionist” Soviet historians have also made major contributions, both individually and through the journal *Kritika*.³⁴ Yet the picture is complicated by the fact that a number of the most innovative and influential works in Soviet history published in the past decade are *not* post-revisionist, being products of a competing school of young scholars who tend to define themselves *against* post-revisionism and the cultural turn (though they too publish in *Kritika*).³⁵

Whatever the nature of the shift that occurred within the community of Soviet historians in the 1990s, it was a relatively benign event, lacking the intense political and personal bitterness of the 1970s. The end of the Cold War set the tone here, discrediting the kind of accusations of political bias and disloyalty in scholarship that the Cold War itself had generated. Despite the wealth of information on Soviet repression available as a result of the opening of secret Soviet archives at the beginning of the 1990s, seen by survivors of the totalitarian school like Richard Pipes, Martin Malia, and Robert Conquest as finally discrediting the revisionist paradigm, “post-revisionists” steadfastly refused to enter this argument or incorporate it in their critique of revisionism. The now middle-aged revisionists, for their part, generally reacted quite sympathetically to the work of young post-revisionists, even allowing themselves to be influenced by their demand (or that of the historical profession as a whole) to pay attention to cultural theory.

This lack of rancor and antagonism, while wholly welcome, is unusual when important disciplinary and/or public issues are at stake. One reason for it was that Soviet history had finally, with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, ceased to have much public resonance in the United States and Europe. But there was probably another underlying reason for the revisionists’ positive response to their ostensible challengers, namely, that one of the first post-revisionist achievements was to make sayable something that revisionists had tried, without full success, to articulate twenty years earlier. Without using the terminology of social support, Kotkin and those who followed him saw the Stalinist ideology and values (“Stalinist civilization”) as a collective social construction, not something imposed by the regime.³⁶ On the face of it, this was a much broader claim than the revisionists ever made, though it may in practice

34. *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* started publication in 2000. The cohort of young “post-revisionist” historians includes Peter Holquist, Michael David-Fox, Amir Weiner, Igal Halfin, Jochen Hellbeck, Francine Hirsch, and Anna Krylova (the first two are editors of *Kritika*). For outsiders to the field, Jochen Hellbeck’s admirable *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) may serve as an introduction to the work of this group.

35. Notably Terry Martin (whose book *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001] became an instant classic), James Harris, Julie Hessler, Golfo Alexopoulos, Matthew Lenoe, Kiril Tomoff, Mark Edele, and others of the so-called “Chicago” group, which is self-consciously distinct from the “Columbia” group (Holquist, Weiner, Halfin, Hellbeck) that was in graduate school a few years earlier. For a “back to social history” critique of post-revisionism from one of the Chicago group, see Mark Edele, “Soviet Society, Social Structure, and Everyday Life: Major Frameworks Reconsidered,” *Kritika* 8:2 (2007), 349–373.

36. For a more detailed discussion of these points, see Fitzpatrick, “Revisionism in Retrospect.”

amount to much the same thing, namely, that the urban young and the upwardly mobile identified with the Soviet project. Remarkably, given the past history of political contention in the field, this has been accepted in the field without controversy. Evidently the transposition from the social realm to the cultural and the introduction of new terminology, as well as the end of the Cold War, have totally defused the issue.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is striking how tenuously and insignificantly the paradigm shifts in Soviet history that I have discussed have been associated with the introduction of new data, still less the persuasion of old opponents. Although the revisionist challenge to the totalitarians more or less coincided in time with the early forays of historians into Soviet-period Soviet archives, typically it was not archival discoveries that led revisionists to challenge the totalitarian model: the impulse to challenge often preceded both archival access and discoveries. The same holds for the attempted paradigm shift from revisionism to post-revisionism. Despite the fact that post-revisionism arrived on the scene about the same time as the opening of formerly classified Soviet archives, and post-revisionists were among those who used them, the post-revisionist impulse had little to do with archival discoveries:³⁷ it was the cultural theory that the post-revisionists brought to bear that was the new factor.

External events were more important than new data in changing thinking about Soviet history within the discipline. The Cold War provided a climate in which the totalitarian model could flourish; and the fact that totalitarian theory postulated a kinship between the former wartime enemy (Nazi Germany) and the current one (the Soviet Union) made its utility all the greater. Moreover, political changes in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death in 1953 laid the groundwork for revisionism, particularly the political-science variety, because they contradicted one of the axioms of totalitarian theory: that totalitarian regimes are incapable of changing from within. Yet in other respects it is not so easy to link external events with shifts in disciplinary paradigms. The biggest external event of all—the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991—seems surprisingly out of sync with disciplinary developments. To Richard Pipes and other old opponents of revisionism, to be sure, the collapse appeared triply to discredit revisionism: by showing that, contrary to some revisionist claims,³⁸ the Soviet Union was not stable; by providing new data (from newly opened Soviet classified archives) on the magnitude of repression; and by demonstrating once and for all that the Soviet government lacked popular support. Yet, as Pipes himself noted, the field seemed

37. An exception must be made here for diaries and other first-person documents, which were often preserved outside the official structure of Soviet state archives. Jochen Hellbeck's work, for example, was stimulated by the discovery of Stefan Podlubnyi's fascinating diary of Soviet self-fashioning in the newly organized Narodnyi Arkhiv (People's Archive) in the early 1990s.

38. Stability was an issue for political scientists rather than historians. In the 1980s, some scholars like Seweryn Bialer, active as "doves" in the policy field, were arguing (against Pipes and other "hawks") that the system had stabilized after its revolutionary turmoil, was not in imminent danger of collapse, and could now be dealt with as a "normal" state: see Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

oddly indifferent, seemingly unable to recognize what he saw as a victory for the totalitarians and a rout of the revisionists.³⁹ Certainly there *was* a challenge to the revisionists around this time—but it was from younger scholars who, regarding the old totalitarian/revisionist controversy as *passé*, were anxious to make their own contribution and change the terms of the debate.

From my own perspective as a participant, it appeared to be generational change that was the prime mover, particularly with respect to the “success” of revisionism—meaning acceptance of the revisionists’ ideas, methodological premises, and terms of debate, and their removal from the realm of controversy—sometime in the second half of the 1980s. This was not a period of dramatic change either in the outside world or in the data base, despite the waning of the Cold War and the steady increase in archival access. Yet something happened inside the discipline: it was as if a kind of silent glacial slippage had removed revisionist social history from its position as a marginal, embattled challenger and repositioned it as something like a new orthodoxy.⁴⁰ Nobody announced that the revisionists were right, but suddenly (logically it should have been gradually, but I am reporting my own perception at the time) people seemed to be taking their ideas for granted. The key process, apparently, was the passage of time, confirming Einstein’s reported observation that scientific arguments are never won, it’s just that the old scientists die. Young Soviet-history revisionists had become older, and their opponents had become older still and started to retire. Most important, the field of Soviet history itself had greatly expanded from its tiny beginnings in the early 1970s; by the late 1980s, Soviet history (from 1917 on) had become a popular teaching subject as well as a research area acceptable to all but the most conservative Russian historians, resulting in an influx of graduate students and young scholars.

Summarizing the case I have examined in this essay, the paradigm shift that occurred in Soviet history as a result of the revisionist challenge did not mean that disconfirming evidence invalidated an existing body of knowledge, but rather that the discipline shifted its ground, as well as the ground rules for historical enquiry. In effect, historians successfully contested the political scientists’ “ownership” of Soviet history, at the same time—reflecting a general trend in the historical profession—displacing political history by social history as the central focus of the discipline, and imposing new rules on research methodology stressing archives and primary sources. Similarly, the post-revisionist challenge to the revisionist paradigm involved an attempt to move the focus from social to cultural history, while at the same time imposing new ground rules that required historical work to have an underpinning in cultural theory and that privileged close textual analysis, especially of ego-documents.

39. Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). The reason, Pipes speculated, was that revisionist professors had successfully brainwashed their students.

40. Richard Pipes observed the same thing, though of course from a different angle, writing with outrage of the way revisionists had “[taken] over many of the leading university chairs in the United States, England, and Germany, and . . . imposed their views on students and professional organizations.” He found the “thought control” associated with enforcement of the new paradigm appalling, having “no obvious parallel in any other branch of historiography, save possibly Black studies.” Richard Pipes, “1917 and the Revisionists,” *The National Interest* (Spring 1993), 68.

All of this looks very like Kuhnian paradigm shift. What is less clear is whether this is the way knowledge actually develops in the historical discipline, or simply the way that we—all, by now, readers of Kuhn—have learned to tell (and therefore create) the story. It has often been pointed out that learning the current paradigm in a discipline is the essence of professional socialization.⁴¹ But if professional socialization in graduate school also includes learning the theory of paradigm shift, we may now have a more complicated situation. Perhaps, as a result of growing theoretical self-consciousness among historians, the Kuhnian paradigm has become not only a mode of analyzing how our discipline works but also one of its structuring principles. Whether this is a sign of disciplinary maturity or pathology (the disease of Kuhnian reflux?) is something I leave to others to decide.

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41. On professional training as the inculcation of paradigms, see Barry Barnes, *T. S. Kuhn and Social Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 16-22.