

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Reinterpreting the 1920s

Professor Viktor Danilov, a Soviet authority on collectivization and agrarian relations at Moscow's Institute of History, delivered a lecture at the Harriman Institute April 21, 1989 on historical debates now taking place in the USSR.

Danilov began by noting that Soviet historiographers have long avoided even considering alternatives to history through their adherence to the primitive tenets of "determinism," that is, the insistence that whatever happened was the only possible course of events. Even after Stalin's death, scholars maintained that there were no alternatives to the key events in Soviet history (for instance, the brutal collectivization of farms in the late 1920s). Danilov stated that one of the first objectives of contemporary historical science is the rejection of determinism and the elaboration of new interpretations about the past.

New Views

The pluralism of opinions currently flourishing under Mikhail Gorbachev has already permitted the recovery of different historical interpretations in "publicist" writings and in works of fiction. Indeed, Soviet public consciousness over the past three years has been marked by an almost compulsive re-examination of history, seeking out the roots of all the nation's misfortunes and tragedies. These diverse efforts are closely linked to questions regarding the proper path for *perestroika*.

Nonetheless, some of the theories still display a determinist approach. Two such versions are especially influential. The first is put forward by sociologist Igor Klyamkin, who maintains that the tragedies of Stalinism were inevitable due to the backwardness of the country.

The second is advanced by philosopher Aleksandr Tsipko, who created a sensation with his analysis of the ideological roots of Stalinism in the journal *Nauka i zhizn'*. For Tsipko, Stalinism was the direct expression of Marxism-Leninism "in action." His thesis enjoys substantial support today — even within politically influential circles. Tsipko, however, is no stranger to controversy. In an earlier work, *Sotsializm: zhizn' obshchestva i cheloveka* (1980), he

maintained that all revolutions, including that of October 1917, eroded moral principles through the widespread introduction of violence.

Danilov also discussed the various historical "fantasies and utopias" that have become popular in the age of *glasnost'*. For example, the novel *Muzhiki i baby* by Boris Mozhaev portrays peasant society in the 1920s as an ideal community based on mutual assistance, high moral standards, and diligent labor. This insular, conflict-free "conservative utopia" was united against collectivization — and destroyed by it.

The Bukharin Option

The unrealized potential of the New Economic Policy, a mixed economic program started in the early 1920s by Lenin but terminated late in the decade by Stalin, represents a more interesting alternative. It is praised today by many writers and scholars, including prominent economist Nikolai Shmelev, who believe that NEP provided a basis for more stable and rapid economic growth than did Stalinist centralization. If the policies of NEP had been preserved, they argue, general living conditions would have been better in the 1930s and not as many Soviets would have died in World War II. Pro-NEP writers extrapolate from the 1921-29 growth rates of ten to eleven percent to predict fantastic economic development had NEP continued. They ignore the fact that the growth rates of 1921-25 were those of a "post-war" recovery period, and that there were steady declines in the latter half of the decade.

Danilov considers Mozhaev's and Shmelev's evaluations simplistic, and as such, reflections of the general poverty of historical knowledge in the Soviet Union, which can be dispelled only through extensive research. Intra-party debates of the 1920s are especially poorly understood, despite their great importance. Ironically, the re-examination of these conflicts now relies on the work of Western scholars, such as Stephen Cohen and Moshe Lewin.

The much-discussed "Bukharin alternative" — policies advocated in the 1920s by Nikolai Bukharin, who was executed in 1938 — raises two important points. First,



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Bukharin based his agrarian policies on concrete research, particularly that of the economist Aleksandr Chayanov. Bukharin was clearly influenced by Chayanov's study of the failures of collectivization during the immediate post-revolutionary period, and by his conclusion that families and cooperatives were the most effective types of economic units. It is interesting to note that radical critics of today, like Tsipko, mention Chayanov's rural system as the correct model for farms under *perestroika*.

Second, in his speeches on the eve of the 15th Party Congress in 1927, Bukharin recognized that the central government's grain policies were unrealistic. Unfortunately, he had to devote most of his time to political infighting, leaving him little opportunity to discuss the problem. As a result, Bukharin did not object to the unrealistically high procurement figure of nine-hundred million pounds of grain. In the spring of 1928, Bukharin and his allies finally realized that the agricultural surplus was much less than assumed, but by then neither Stalin nor the Left was willing to accept lower projections. (The grain policies led to forced collectivization and a famine which killed millions.) Bukharin's alternative assessment of the situation should receive more attention in Soviet scholarship.

No Trotsky, No Kirov

Unlike the current attention devoted to the ideas of Bukharin, there is still very little balanced discussion of Leon Trotsky. Indeed, Trotsky remains the last "enemy of the people" in Soviet history books. Nevertheless, Danilov believes that an examination of Trotsky's speeches in 1923 and 1924 reveals his grasp of the possibilities for using cooperatives for rural economic development. Once again, Danilov blames misunderstanding of Trotsky on the wide gaps in Soviet historical knowledge.

Stalin's political defeat of Bukharin in 1929 eliminated the last clear alternative to Stalinism. Some historians are now reviving the figure of Sergei Kirov, the popular Leningrad party leader, finding in him a viable alternative. Danilov, however, believes that Kirov represented at best "Stalinism with a human face."

Danilov concluded his address by expressing the hope that Western and Soviet scholars will join together to continue the study of Soviet history and the alternative directions which it might have taken.

Reported by Thomas Sherlock and Mark Koenig

Because seminars and lectures are not held over the summer, this will be the last issue of *At The Harriman Institute* until October. The staff of the Institute wishes everyone a happy and productive summer.

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