

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## The Revolution in Soviet Historiography

What accounts for the dramatic reappraisal of Soviet history that is under way in the Soviet Union today? Iurii Afanas'ev, Director of the Moscow State Archival Institute, addressed this question in a lecture in Russian to students and faculty of the Harriman Institute October 17, 1988.

Afanas'ev believes that the renaissance of Soviet historiography is part of a general trend in many countries toward reexamining crucial junctures of their histories. He cited the revival in France of scholarly interest in the French Revolution as an example of this international movement. In the Soviet case the chief reason for reinterpreting history relates to the current efforts to restructure the nation. Afanas'ev distinguished between simply repairing a system and *perestroika*, which is a full-scale restructuring down to the very foundation. *Perestroika*, according to Afanas'ev, is necessary because after seventy years the Soviets realize that it is simply impossible for their country to continue along the road to progress within the existing system. But restructuring requires a complete understanding of how that system evolved. The task of historians is to examine precisely this issue.

### Alternatives to Stalinism

The Soviets now feel that the Russian Revolution opened up a path for the movement of Soviet society but that somewhere along the way they got sidetracked. But where and when? Afanas'ev stressed that there are many different opinions, among both Western and Soviet historians.

One view is that the excesses of the Stalin period, the stagnation of the Brezhnev period, and the need for restructuring today are not at all unexpected — there has never been any deviation from the Bolshevik path. Rather, this is the logical, natural and “triumphant” result of the October Revolution. Afanas'ev described this view — that the Revolution occurred and from that point on, everything was an unavoidable chain of events for which there were no al-

ternatives — as “fatalistic.” A second interpretation suggests that the course of Soviet society embodied by the Stalinist system was not the only available option, but that there was a chance for a real alternative in Nikolai Bukharin. This possibility, however, was eliminated by Stalin during his political consolidation in the late 1920s. Afanas'ev indicated that he sided with a third group of historians who believe that Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) of the 1920s expanded the number of paths that Soviet society could have taken. But the NEP, he noted, failed to resolve most of the pressing economic and political problems of the period (such as industrialization strategy and the existence of private property) so that by the end of the 1920s a promising alternative did not exist to Stalin's economic and political centralization.

Another topic of recent interest to historians is the exploitation of the peasantry. One of the achievements of Socialism, he said, was supposed to be the abolition of mass exploitation. Looking at the past, historians have trouble explaining the tremendous burden borne by peasants during collectivization (when millions were “liquidated”) and after — until the mid-1960s peasants received practically nothing for their labor. Even today, Afanas'ev remarked, people are unsure as to whether or not exploitation still exists in the Soviet Union.

Afanas'ev told his audience that *glasnost'* in the study of history is part of the process of self-recognition, of self-searching. This process is replacing the loss of societal identity that took place under Stalin. For years, words had only distant relationships to the concepts to which they referred. Totalitarianism, for instance, was called democracy. This conceptual confusion became so institutionalized that today many people actually protest the debunking of long-lasting myths and distortions. People are overwhelmed by the new thinking they read in books and newspapers and by the startling images they see in movies and theater. Beside the euphoria felt by many individuals, especially in the intel-



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ligentsia, there exist feelings of mistrust and disbelief among other groups.

## *Glasnost'* in the Arts and in History

Afnas'ev lauded the new trends in Soviet publications, literature, theater and film. They are helping to dispel the wholesale lies that were fed to the people for many years and to substitute them with a more accurate depiction of the past and present. In the first three years of *glasnost'*, when the restrictions were first eased, there was a spontaneous outpouring of emotions and new ideas — people began to express what they were thinking. Afnas'ev would like to see a progression beyond this initial period, to a more balanced approach to the past that consists of positive examples rather than just negative criticism.

The self-recognition process, Afnas'ev believes, began in literature and has since snowballed into other areas. The fiction writers were poised to initiate the movement because many of their works had been written earlier and stored in drawers, until under *glasnost'* Soviet censors were forced to curtail their activity. Only recently have historians joined the ranks of this movement. Afnas'ev expects that they will shortly begin to publish books that critically examine major issues dealing with the past.

He hopes that the new strains in historical studies will change the very essence of the science of history. It would not be enough simply to correct facts and shed light on some subjects previously thought of as taboo. For instance, recent discussion on Trotsky has looked at his responsibilities during the revolution of 1917. This is a departure from previous practice, when his name was only invoked in analyses of "Trotskyism" as a counterrevolutionary movement. Another example is the examination of repression in Soviet history.

While he acknowledges the importance of such revelations, Afnas'ev stressed that historians must go even further. The presentation of new facts does not preclude the selective use of history as a servant for propaganda. He worries that history could remain a means of legitimizing future regimes and of defining what is permissible activity. This type of academic reform would be similar to changing the ornaments on a Christmas tree — some new decorations (historical facts) added, but the basic structure persisting. In response to questions from the audience as to the prospects for a change in the structure of the discipline, such as true autonomy for scholars and open access to archives, Afnas'ev was unwilling to speculate.

*Reported by Robert Monyak with assistance from Rett Ertl.*

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Columbia University  
420 West 118th Street  
New York NY 10027