

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Soviet Historiography Reconsidered

On January 29, Yuri Borisov, Senior Fellow at the Harriman Institute, delivered a lecture entitled "The Political History of the Soviet 1930s Reconsidered." Borisov addressed two main questions in his talk: the general state of historical science in the Soviet Union, and the problems of 1930's history and historians and how they relate to today's history and historians. There are substantial and severe debates between historians about how the 1930s should be treated. Borisov began by noting that there is still a great deal of interest in the Soviet 1930s. The 1930s were a time of great conflict in the USSR, and, says Borisov, the renewed interest in them stems not only from a love of history but from the fact that for most Soviets the era of Stalinism is not yet over. In this way, perestroika is for many people but an attempted divorce and estrangement from the Stalinist system.

Historical Science: Evolution and Crisis

As a historian at the Academy of Sciences, Borisov has had ample opportunity to observe the current state of historical work in the USSR. Over the last several years, there has been a very important dynamic in Soviet historiography. According to Borisov, since the beginning of perestroika, there has been a rapid evolution of political and historical views. However, this is less an embodiment of the ideals of the new thinking than another of the many crises that it has engendered. How this crisis will be resolved is not yet clear. Current historians, the ones who helped initiate perestroika, were also participants in, and the unsuccessful documenters of, another "perestroika"--that begun by Nikita Khrushchev. Borisov noted that while many of today's events have parallels in Khrushchev's reforms, the two periods are historically speaking quite different. There is, says Borisov, no turning back this time.

For many historians, perestroika is a conceptual crisis. There still exists a large body of professional historians who object vehemently to the current criticisms of Stalin and Stalinism. They grew up and were trained in that era, and

many want to preserve their memories of the past. They simply do not understand perestroika and its revisionism. This is quite ironic in view of the massive campaigns of revisionism and disinformation that Stalin launched in these historians' formative years. Perhaps Stalinism so distorted their views that they cannot understand any attempts to rethink the system and its meaning, even though they must know that much of what was said during that period was false. Revisions of revisionism may be too painful to bear.

Revisionism Revised

Borisov then moved to a description of the changing views of history that perestroika has spawned. A common point of view among contemporary historians is that one great weakness of Khrushchev's perestroika was that it was based on personal criticism of Stalin and his excesses rather than on constructive criticism of the system. It was no accident that the system propelled Stalin's new critics to its apex. As a result, Khrushchev and his contemporaries were not totally free to criticize the system that had given them so much. The current restructuring and new thinking have led to what Khrushchev's reforms lacked: criticisms of the Stalinist system. This is a much more important step than simply criticizing Stalin. It leads naturally to fundamental questions and doubts about the Soviet state, since the system that has dominated since the 1930s was implemented largely by Stalin. The prevailing view is that the Soviet Union that exists today is largely Stalin's personal creation that began in the 1930s. The common line is that while Lenin was and largely remains a saintly figure, Stalin was an evil genius who corrupted Lenin's designs and turned them against his people for personal reasons.

Not so, says Borisov. This common view is one of the real problems in overcoming the psychological barriers that must be broken down in order for perestroika to be effective. This view implies that the ideals and system that Lenin laid down were basically good, and that the system was corrupted only through the evil of Stalin's personality. This lets Lenin off the hook and places blame for most of the Soviet Union's



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problems squarely on Stalin's shoulders. This is not hard, because Stalin was certainly a horrible figure. But Borisov says that we should not place the blame for the cruel nature of the Soviet political system or its failures on Stalin.

Rather, he contends that the system, inherently evil, was initiated by Lenin. Stalin's variations were tactical, not strategic. It would be naive, said Borisov, "to think that Lenin and his system were good and then along came Stalin, the evil bolshevik genius and turned the system bad." But many believe that it is enough to criticize Stalin thoroughly and return to a Leninist state; then everything would be fine. Says Borisov: There is no great difference between Lenin and Stalin. But this is not a popular view in the Soviet Union. At the beginning of perestroika, there was a large group of anti-Stalinists fighting against a large group of pro-Stalinists. But now this wave of powerful anti-Stalinist progressive historians is not making a qualitative step forward in their criticisms of Stalin or Stalinism. Their position is not much different from that of historians under Khrushchev or in the first years of perestroika. This tendency, claims Borisov, is going to put the brakes on the progressive development of historical science in the Soviet Union, and may well help put the brakes on perestroika as well.

The Transition to Independent Historiography

A related and important development in the Soviet historiography is the rapid appearance of unofficial, free and independent amateur historians. Instead of masses of faceless official historians who are not really accountable to the public, these new, independent historians are publishing their work in free and independently produced journals that depend

entirely upon their readership for support. This is a radically new development in Soviet historical science and, in Borisov's words, it could change the way Soviet historians deal with human forces.

The structure and direction of the USSR Academy of Sciences is also undergoing change. In the past, all of the Academy's studies were very rigidly chronologically structured. All good history began after 1917, there was a period from 1917 until 1941, from 1941-1945, etc. The revolution and its strict ideological underpinnings put serious constraints on what could be studied and in what context. Now, however, that is being transformed. Historical studies are now freer of the revolution's strict time constraints. This will open up the door to a much wider range of study in the Soviet Union, says Borisov, and it can not but help the state of history as a science in the USSR.

For perestroika to be successful in the Soviet Union, there must be a sufficiently broad and honest historical debate about the nation's painful past. Historical science, just as almost every other aspect of the USSR, is undergoing some wrenching transformations. Whereas in the past history had been the province of the party and was severely constrained in its content, conclusions, and even permissible topics of study, it is now becoming a dynamic and open field. This evolution is evidenced by the raging debate over reinterpretation of Stalin and his legacy of the 1930s. Borisov underscored the fact that while Soviet historical science is not yet able to meet its enormous task fully, at the very least it has made the first, most important steps in opening itself to the formerly forbidden possibilities of revising "official" interpretations of the past and bringing the excesses of the system out into the open.

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