

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Russians' Perceptions of their History

On April 11, Harriman Institute professor Leopold Haimson delivered a lecture on "Russians' Perceptions of their History." Haimson began by stating that most people today, particularly Soviets, have ceased to try to understand fully current events or to predict future events in the Soviet Union. There is a "sense of confusion and chaos" in Soviet society that is affecting Russians' ability to understand their history. "Historians project upon the past their own perceptions and understandings," said Haimson, and historical writing has always looked to the past for explanations of present conditions, and in this way, "redefines the past." It has been no different in the Soviet Union. Today, however, the efforts of historians in redefining and reshaping their past are more serious than ever before.

### Changing Views

The Russian Revolution, for example, has changed dramatically in the eyes of historians. What was viewed by both supporters and opponents of the regime as a seminal event in the history of mankind "now is in danger of being viewed as a historical aberration" to be placed in historical parentheses. This dramatic change in perception is emblematic of the serious nature of the historiographic changes in the Soviet Union today.

One reason for Russians' somewhat peculiar vision of their past is the unique structure of old Russian culture. The peasant masses and the intelligentsia, divided historically into two separate and unequal classes, always have had differing viewpoints on their role in history. According to Haimson, most peasants viewed their plight of poverty and deprivation as natural and unavoidable, with the hope of a better world awaiting them; the Russian intelligentsia, however, "lived in the past and the future" and refused to live in the present. This characterized the intelligentsia's attitude and actions with respect to all of Russia's problems. They looked to the past for explanations of the present and for future aspirations,

and in the process they projected their values on both the past and future.

This "precarious linking of the past and future" was the search for *zakonomernost'*, the sense of order, logic, and inevitability of Russian history. It is a reflection of the wishes of Russian historians—they wanted their history to make sense, "or their self-image would suffer."

### Continuities and Discontinuities

*Zakonomernost'* was the epitome of continuity in history. Wide circles of the intelligentsia, encompassing the entire political spectrum, sought to find this phenomenon in Russian history. It gave them the essential logical link between the past, present, and future that made their difficult lives more bearable. There was the sense that if they could make it through the present, they would someday reach the logical conclusion of history. Finally, all would be well.

But the sense of *zakonomernost'* was shattered in 1917 by revolution. It was "a cardinal break in Russian history." This belief was shared by all Russians, whether for or against the revolution. "1917 was the inception of an effort to build a radically different society, different from Russia's past as well as from the rest of the world." The sense of discontinuity engendered by the revolution paved the way for problems that now are surfacing. The idea that the revolution was a *perelom* (break) provided the "rationalization and acceptance of the incredible suffering" brought on by the aberrations of the system. Russia was different, and it would eventually lead to something better: this was a critical idea, believed by both supporters and opponents of the regime.

There was a second dimension that also contradicted the continuity of history. This was the "role attributed to the party as a subjective factor in the shaping of Soviet society, the shaping of a different social order." The Party was endowed with a mystical and omniscient sense.



## Breakdown of Beliefs

The beliefs engendered by the revolution held firm and grew in the Soviet Union until the 1960s and 70s, said Haimson. During the period of *zastoi* (stagnation), this belief system began to break down and led to the current systemic crisis "due to two regime pronouncements." These were: 1) that "Russia's present must be judged by the same standards as the West"; and 2) the "curious notion" of the official proclamation of the achievement of mature socialism in the Soviet Union. According to Haimson, these two pronouncements involved the restoration of the present, in which so many refused to believe, and the loss of a sense of distinction from the West, which led to a crisis of values. This was followed in turn by the current systemic crisis.

The inception of perestroika also embodied two great contradictions: those "attendant in a revolution from above that intends to release a revolution from below"; and the desire both to imitate and at the same time to remain distinct from the West. This has led to an erosion of authority, a loss of respect and fear of the government, and polarization of westernizers and Slavophiles. But the crisis of values has gone even farther today; now there is a "perceived and actual threat of the disintegration of the very fabric of society as well as the body politic." Two phenomena are thus progressing here: distrust of all authority as well as desire for the restoration of order through the assertion of a strong authority.

## The Present and a Prognosis

"All previously held values and cognitive systems have collapsed," concludes Haimson. Soviets are now searching for an explanation of what has happened. In so doing,

they are returning to the questions that seemed to dominate the nineteenth century intelligentsia: *Kto Vinovat?* (Who is to Blame?) and *Shto Delat'?* (What is to be Done?) Again, they are searching in the past for "moorings for their present feelings." Today's political parties, more properly called *kruzhki* (circles) because of their resemblance to nineteenth century intelligentsia political circles, are taking the names of those nineteenth century societies. But despite the appeal to their history, said Haimson, "there is no genuine understanding of the parties whose history they are appealing to."

*Kto vinovat?* According to Haimson, it depends on who you are. If you are far left, you will blame it all on Stalin, Lenin, the Communist Party, or a combination of the three. If you are far right, you might blame the Masons or liberal organizations. *Shto delat'?* Just as they have always done, Russians are appealing to their past to look for answers.

But the desperation and gravity of the confusion and chaos reflect the dimensions "of the crisis of values and cognition in the Soviet Union." This makes for negative developments and real dangers in historiography, such as idealizing the past and projecting onto it utopian and distorted visions in order to create more attractive worlds whence to escape from the present disorder. This, in turn, can produce a demand for orthodoxy that can stifle honest attempts at interpreting the past. It is resulting today in "the distortion of 70 years of Soviet history as an aberration that should be seen outside the context of Russian historical experience." And this, says Professor Haimson, is definitely not the case. The present chaos in the Soviet Union is making people think about their past in a totally different way, and is resulting not only in distortions of the present, but dangerous revisions of the past.

-Reported by Joshua Larson

Columbia University  
Harriman Institute  
420 W 118th Street  
New York NY 10027

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