

From the *Slavic Review* Editorial Board:

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To the Editor:

I do not want to rekindle old controversies that might have little interest for younger readers; nevertheless, I found Sheila Fitzpatrick's article in the Fall 2008 issue of *Slavic Review* (vol. 67, no. 3) so honest, so interesting, and also so provocative that I feel compelled to make a couple of points.

Let me start by saying that there is nothing personal in our disagreements. I regard Fitzpatrick as the best historian of the Stalinist period, and every time I teach in this area I always assign one or another of her books. To the extent that I know Robert Thurston and Arch Getty, I find them nice people, and I regard Gabor Rittersporn as one of my dearest friends. I think highly of the recent work of Lynne Viola.

I found it surprising that Fitzpatrick and the other "revisionists" thought of themselves as members of a besieged group. It had never occurred to me that they might think of themselves that way. American politics may have been unattractive and the political Left, however defined, has not been dominant. It is true that if any of the revisionists wanted a job in Ronald Reagan's State Department they would not have succeeded. But surely the Left has dominated academic life. There is no reason here to enumerate who is teaching at which university today, but it is clear that members of the revisionist group have done very well in universities. Indeed, in my department, at my university, we once rejected the application of a very promising scholar for no other reason than that he had once received a fellowship from the conservative Olin Foundation. I know of another historian who was intellectually and personally close to Richard Pipes and largely for that reason has not been able to find a job in this country. Yes, the revisionists have been attacked in scholarly journals, but certainly no more bitterly than Pipes and Martin Malia have been attacked. (I am glad to say that I have been attacked by both sides with equal vigor.) I suppose we all tend to think of ourselves as outsiders.

On the other hand, it is very much worthwhile to remember why the "revisionists" have been criticized. In their attack on the totalitarian model, they set up a straw man. No one who studied the Stalinist period argued that this was a well-functioning system in which Iosif Stalin successfully controlled everything. No one argued that human beings had been reduced to automatons. Indeed, it is in the nature of totalitarianism to be confused and inefficient, with different groups struggling behind the scenes against one another. Nor is the dispute about the extent of public support for Stalin (or, for that matter, for Adolf Hitler). The genius of totalitarianism is its ability to reduce, if not everyone, then almost everyone, to accomplices. That is true about the high and the low; it is true about the worker who denounces his fellow worker at a party meeting and about Sergei Eizenshtein who attempts to make a film about a son who denounces his father. Whether under the circumstances there is public support for the policies of the regime is a pointless

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question. If alternatives cannot be articulated, public opinion is meaningless. From the point of view of the regime, what matters is the pretense of public support.

As far as I was concerned, the issue was always the nature and consequences of terror. Indeed, there is no point in simply expressing moral indignation about mass murders in the past. To be an objective historian you must always remember while you are writing on whatever topic—social mobility, industrial norms, sports, opera—that the fact of concentration camps and the terror they inspired was part and parcel of the fabric of society. Terror distorted everything: social institutions, human relations, and culture. Yes, there was something irritating about the work of historians who pointed out that Soviet society exhibited many of the same characteristics as western societies, without noting the significant fact that at the same time millions were incarcerated and murdered in the Soviet Union. Soviet politics may have had interest groups just like in the west, but only in the Soviet case were the losers murdered. We are justified in not liking the politician who speaks with great enthusiasm about the employment policies of the Nazis. In the same way I disapprove of books that describe how similar Russian and American films were in the 1930s without mentioning that many of the Soviet scriptwriters were soon murdered.

The opening of archives does not change the picture from my point of view. We already knew enough in the 1950s to form a picture. It may be that at the time of the great purges “only” 700,000 people were sentenced to death, rather than several millions. Perhaps only two million people died at the time of the great terror. Perhaps the number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust was not six million, but only five and a half million, or even fewer. The numbers are large enough to consider these regimes monstrous, and whatever we write about them we must not forget that for a moment.

As far as I am concerned the debate was all about that.

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To the Editor:

The recent extensive coverage of the reminiscences and reflections of revisionists in Soviet studies (*Slavic Review*, vol. 67, no. 3) prompts numerous questions. I would especially like to comment on their perceptions of why they were subject to criticism and on their belief that these critiques were inspired by Cold War partisanship.

If all revisionism meant was an interest in learning more about the unknown facts of Soviet history and a refreshing defiance of conventional wisdom, few would have been critical of it. The problem with revisionism has been that its professed striving for deeper understanding and more innovative approaches had highly patterned, converging moral and ideological implications and outcomes. Revisionists, and those reading their work, could not help coming to the conclusion that, as Sheila Fitzpatrick put it, “the Soviet Union—or some aspect thereof—is not as bad as it has been painted by Cold War scholarship” (703). In turn J. Arch Getty suggested that the Soviet lower classes supported the system because they were “willing to trade free speech for cheap food” (712), inexplicably overlooking the chronic food shortages and the famine associated with collectivization.

Revisionists insist that they rejected the totalitarian model because it was unhelpful for grasping reality, because it exaggerated the power of those at the top. But as Daniels pointed out “there is nothing wrong with the concept a little tinkering could not remedy. The model needs historical context. . . . It needs to recognize the practical limits to state control over society” (707). Most of those using the concept were well aware of these limitations. It seems to me that objections to the totalitarian model had less to do with its threat to sound scholarship than with the negative moral judgment it entailed.

During the 1960s many American academic intellectuals (as well as students and graduate students) came to the conclusion that American society was intolerably unjust and corrupt, and it rubbed them the wrong way to be “judgmental” of sociopolitical systems that were critical of it and that claimed anticapitalist credentials. This may be in a nutshell the broader, attitudinal background behind the rise of revisionism in Soviet studies.

It is an interesting question why Fitzpatrick was “dissatisfied” throughout the 1980s with her “own and other people’s progress in understanding the Great Purges” (691) and