From the Editors

Really-Existing Revisionism

"Adelman ... was ... at that twilight stage in his career when most of his life seemed to be spent in airplanes or foreign hotels: symposia, conferences, honorary degrees... But Kelso didn't begrudge him his honors. He was good. And brave. It had taken courage to write his kind of books, thirty years ago, on the Famine and the Terror, when every other useful idiot in academia was screeching for détente."

Robert Harris, *Archangel: A Novel*
(New York: Random House, 1998), 40-41.

Every discipline has its internal, specialized debates and its external, public face. The latter, in Russian studies as elsewhere, is shaped by manner in which the field is depicted to other scholars, professionals, intellectuals, and the educated public. Its image is affected to a great degree by the way its leading practitioners participate in public debates in a range of media outside the field. The field of Soviet history, one can argue, has enjoyed both an extraordinarily prominent public profile and yet, at the same time, has suffered from particularly acrimonious and politicized depictions of its activities to interested outsiders. The centrality of Soviet communism to political and intellectual debate in the 20th century, even after its demise, still creates an atmosphere in which leading vehicles of public intellectual life, such as the New York Review of Books or the Times Literary Supplement, maintain interest in Russian and Soviet history and, for example, regularly pay high-profile attention to certain topics such as Stalin and Stalinism. This prominence does not come without its costs. Russian history, even 20th-century history, is often reduced to one period - Stalinism - or even one decade, the 1930s. The same polemical nature of discussion that leads to the placement of such topics in non-specialist venues simultaneously means that they often result in politicized in-fighting rather than a substantive airing of the most striking or most relevant debates in the field. For many years, perhaps no public issue in Soviet history has generated more heat, or snuffed out more light, than the continuing polemics over "revisionism."

Whether revisionism is a word of praise or an accusation is highly dependent upon the context in which it is used. To orthodox Marxists, the turn-of-the-century revisionism of an Eduard Bernstein was a dirty word, but others might well not perceive it that way at all. Any provocative work of history might be lauded as highly revisionist, but in the context of the Holocaust the provocation would be of an entirely different sort. In the case of French revolutionary studies - ironically enough, considering the roughly contemporaneous and inverted case of Russian historiography - "revisionism" beginning in the 1980s meant rejection of the previously predominant "social" and Marxist interpretations of the revolution and the embrace of new political interpretations initiated with the "political culture" approach first associated with François Furet.[1] In Cold War studies, revisionism refers to a particular post-1960s wave of scholarship much more critical of the United States than previous accounts of international relations. There were certain parallels between the phenomenon of revisionism in the Cold War and "domestic" Soviet historiographies, notably their sometimes vaguely, sometimes overtly

leftist orientations, the intense politicization that surrounded them, and the fact that they both flourished in a specific, pre-1991 intellectual environment.

The context for understanding the meaning and nature of revisionism in Soviet studies, then, is particular. As is well known, it was a scholarly movement that arose in the mid to late 1970s, defining itself in opposition to the historical understandings of the "totalitarian school." The political context was the Cold War, debates over socialism, and the continuing contemporary relevance of the Russian Revolution; the academic context was the rise of social history "from below" in historical studies. Forests of paper were felled and oceans of ink were spilled in the political-academic debates that resulted, and we have no wish to rehash them here. But it would be salutary to remember and rethink a thing or two now that revisionism is, or should be, a part of the history of the field rather than a concept fundamental to its current contours.

First, revisionists back before the fall of the Soviet Union were proud to be revisionist, and willingly accepted the label of revisionism. Even so, their work, like the scholarship written in the totalitarian paradigm before it, was never as monolithic as it was made out to be. Even at its height, some prominent "revisionists" - such as Sheila Fitzpatrick - sought to delineate their differences from what was, at the time, commonly understood to be revisionism.[2] Revisionism self-consciously defined itself in opposition to the way totalitarianism theory was applied to Soviet history and, again, good post-revisionist historians will note that it was as a result defined by its enmity toward a constituent "other." Because revisionism was constructed as the opposite of its predecessor, it inherited many things from its avowed enemy. If, for example, the totalitarian school made politics and ideology into the main focus and causal factors of Soviet history, so revisionism turned "social forces" into the same; if a "straight line" from Lenin to Stalin had become a fundamental verity, so some in the new camp wrote history through the prism of "alternatives"; if the totalitarian school wrote history "from above," so revisionism wrote it "from below." Some assumptions and approaches, moreover, can be traced throughout the history of the field, through the three primary generations of the totalitarian "fathers," revisionist "sons," and post-revisionist "grandchildren." To be sure, there were distinct benefits to be reaped back in the days of revisionism's rise from the combination of iconoclasm and rigor in historical scholarship that the trend brought with it, but there were also costs: the rich heritage of work written in the 1950s and 1960s was often dismissed or reduced to stereotypes and a number of lines of inquiry were closed off in the 1970s and 1980s. It is only in the 1990s that many of the limitations of the "old social history" were subject to bracing critique by those who nonetheless took its contributions seriously.

Does it make sense, however, to talk of revisionism in Soviet history in the 1990s and after, and especially as the dominant paradigm of the entire field? In the wake of 1989 and 1991, there are few who would claim the mantle "revisionist," while "totalitarian" is used proudly and has enjoyed something of a resurgence in the field. In some sense, this reflects a genuine retreat from revisionist positions, many of which sought explanatory frameworks in Soviet history outside the realms of politics and ideology. It is true also that revisionism left deep imprints on the historical scholarship following its heyday (as did pre- and anti-revisionist scholarship). Further, long after 1991 some individual scholars on both sides continued to see historical issues almost exclusively through the lenses of previously fought battles. Some have poured old wine into new bottles and retained fundamental positions staked out long ago, finding justification for what they believed

all along in newly-opened archives. Others, as suggested recently in these pages in an article on the interdisciplinary debate over the end of the Soviet Union, have refused to concede that 1991 discredits all approaches previously considered revisionist (such as a stress on Soviet "modernization"), but have also modified their positions in complex ways.[3]

When former Soviet archives opened in the late 1980s and especially after 1991, the enterprise of Soviet history, its political context, and its most pressing academic frontiers were altered if not completely transformed. In addition to introducing mountains of raw archival material, this moment coincided with two other watersheds: politically, the collapse of socialism as a desirable political alternative; and, methodologically, the ascendance of the linguistic turn and the more amorphous cultural studies over social history. In this changed environment, many former revisionists reworked their own positions. The field was nudged decisively not only by external events, moreover, but by internal ones as well. Well before 1991, as revisionist postulates became entrenched and constraining, a reaction had already begun to set in against them. This dynamic, after all, is typical in scholarship. As a defining movement in the field, one could make the case, Western revisionism perished along with Soviet communism. Whatever one thinks, it is indubitably true that the context in which the debates over Soviet history occurred has changed in cardinal ways. Revisionismís post-1991 afterlife and heritage to the field are complicated, highly charged, and subjective topics that should be discussed and documented with the greatest of care.

Something strange, however, happened along the transition to freedom and democracy: the most acrimonious accusations about revisionism survived, and are still prominent in public debate at the turn of the 21st century. We single out just one example: on the cover of the 15 June 2001 Times Literary Supplement, Britain's most prestigious review of books, a lead article was splashed across the top: "Just an Ordinary Joe: Martin Malia on the Revisionists' Stalin." Malia's article inside actually concerned Sheila Fitzpatrick's monograph and edited volume on Stalinism, not Stalin himself. But the title gives us one clue as to why revisionism, like the zombies in Night of the Living Dead, persists as if nothing had changed: it attracts readers or is perceived to do so. The wording of the TLS leader evoked images both of propaganda soft-pedaling "Uncle Joe" and of pernicious relativism, in that by implication those revisionists saw the monster Stalin (depicted on the cover lounging in a chair reading Pravda with a red dog at his feet) as just an ordinary guy.

Malia, in his article inside, was not at all responsible for the iconography without, and this is not the place to discuss his critique of Fitzpatrick's Everyday Stalinism and Stalinism: New Directions. However, he did make a number of claims relevant to the present discussion; namely that the flaws he found in Fitzpatrick's recent works demonstrate there is something "very wrong ... with the overall revisionist enterprise," that revisionism finds itself in a "conceptual cul-de-sac," and that attempts to "camouflage this ... merely betray a discipline in a state of denial."[4] If one accepts even some of the reasoning behind our thesis that the historiographical context has fundamentally changed, the putative dominance of revisionism today needs to be established, not assumed. In this light, it is regrettable that in reviewing Stalinism: New Directions, edited by Fitzpatrick, Malia focused "only on the editor's programmatic pronouncements ... regretfully ignoring the reprints ... from younger historians with which she illustrates current Stalin studies." Rather than relying on Fitzpatrick's own categorization of the contributions into two camps of

"alternative modernity" and "neo-traditionalism," one might have used these contributions to measure whether revisionism really remains the dominant paradigm in the field.

The crucial task of making the current scholarly development of the field relevant for a broader audience has by and large been neglected by practicing historians of the Soviet period. Here we are not thinking about those who continue to be mired in the politicized animosities of the field's past; they are free to say and write whatever they think about a historiography that, despite its flaws, has made rapid strides forward and remains sorely understudied by scholars in what should be related fields. We are, rather, speaking of those laboring in the field's trenches who, perfectly capable of doing so, do not pause to convey its current debates and achievements to comparativists, Europeanists, non-historians, and the wider public. This takes time and effort, and it may not be easy to remold the public face of the field through leading periodicals outside the discipline. But that endeavor is one of the primary means by which historians can make their scholarship relevant, interesting, and influential to others. There is much work to be done.

[1] See, for example, Vivian R. Gruder, "Wither Revisionism? Political Perspectives on the Ancien Régime," *French Historical Studies* , 20: 2 (1997), 245-85; Suzanne Desan, "What's After Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography," *French Historical Studies* 23: 1 (2000), 163-96.

[2] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Afterword: Revisionism Revisited," *Russian Review* 45: 4 (1986), 409-13.

[3] David Rowley, "Interpretations of the End of the Soviet Union: Three Paradigms," *Kritika* 2: 2 (Spring 2001), 395-426.

[4] Martin Malia, "Revolution Fulfilled: How the Revisionists Are Still Trying to Take the Ideology Out of Stalinism," review of Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and idem, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (London: Routledge, 2000), in *TLS* , 15 June 2001, 4.