

## From the Editors

### A Remarkable Decade

Someone once said that revolutions - moments of great intensity, during which everything seems transformed - are the sex of history. If so, the ten years since the fall of Soviet communism have been the sex of historiography. As the human sciences in general were buffeted by far-reaching changes in the 1990s, they were doubly compounded in our area by the "opening of the archives" and the implications of 1989 and 1991. Even as the archival euphoria faded into sober assessments of the hard empirical, theoretical, and organizational challenges that lie ahead, it has sometimes seemed that the archival revolution and the post-communist vistas on which we perch might allow virtually any historical topic to be approached anew - or at least bombarded with new evidence without the blinkered, specialized caution that is the scourge of less turbulent fields. Needless to say, the "morning after" arrived some time ago.

Vivid fragments of memory pass before our mind's eye: a minor riot in a store over a cart of butter at the height of the economic collapse of the early 1990s, Solzhenitsyn's return and the Stolypin craze, the White House under assault by tanks, a warm cabbage pirozhok at Russkoe bistro, the pawed-over list of declassified fondy at GARF in the mid-1990s. The rise and fall of the mysteriously-named "Bim Bom" visible from the reading room windows of the erstwhile sanctum sanctorum, the Central Party Archive. In the end, the historical and the historiographical are inextricably intertwined; for those students of Russia whose intellectual and scholarly lives intersected with this period of cognitive flux and world-historical change, it has certainly been a remarkable decade.[\[1\]](#) Indeed, this journal might well be considered one of its results.

Every once in a while it makes much sense to take stock. In this case, the cult of the decade - that "decimal-oriented chronological marker that is said to possess distinctive cultural characteristics," a unit of time that often insidiously molds understandings of popular culture and historical change alike - can serve a valuable purpose.[\[2\]](#) (It should be noted, however, that in some cases we are really talking about a bit more than a decade. The "long 1990s" in our field began with the acceleration of perestroika circa 1987 and arguably continues into the 21st century.) When we commissioned pieces from leading scholars in a range of fields, some defined thematically and some chronologically, we really did not know what to expect. All we did was invite a range of interesting and accomplished figures to assess the achievements and the failures of historical research in their field in the last decade. We realized that we could not include all areas, and the mix was intended to be suggestive rather than comprehensive. We made efforts to include a number of Russian and European commentators as well as a range of scholarly approaches and positions, although in both cases last-minute withdrawals prevented us from publishing quite as much as we would have liked. We take pride in including certain fields (military, economic, history of science) that have sometimes been ignored in historiographical discussions. Others (such as quantitative social history) may have been marginalized a bit more recently, yet, as becomes clear, the reports of their deaths have been greatly exaggerated. The two review articles in this number should also be read in conjunction with the other pieces. The article-length treatment on the new/old cultural history by Laura Engelstein was originally intended as a "Ten Years After" contribution before it blossomed into a much larger statement; the piece on interpretations of the end of communism by David Rowley addresses a burgeoning

literature on 1991 in several fields, the implications of which many historians have yet to confront.

The picture that emerges from this exercise in stock-taking is instructive in several ways. The assessments, reflecting not only the differing dynamics of various fields but also the various attitudes of different scholars, are notable for their range: some qualify their enthusiastic optimism only very lightly, many others picture the glass just about half empty or half full, still others are frankly pessimistic about much that has occurred. Some contributions focus solely or mainly on the Russian-language historiography, others mainly on the Anglo-American or European literature, and some others on both or all three. The overall result, however, is a lesson in what might be called the dialectics of historiography. In one sense, those dialectics operate across space: we can perceive the interaction among individual scholars, national contexts, and international trends in the way fields have developed during a critical period. In those cases in which both Russian and Western works are considered, we can see better in retrospect just how intricate the intellectual and academic exchanges, conjunctures, and disjunctures have been. In another sense, those dialectics operate across time: in response to many kinds of historical and historiographical change some lines of inquiry are repudiated, others embraced. Yet those dialectics display a cunning of their own. As Laura Engelstein suggests in her work on the cultural turn, many "new" questions have their roots in or recapitulate much older ones; as Alain Blum implies, just as the "old" social history was being repudiated in many areas it was experiencing a little-observed renaissance in others. It flows from our discussion that programmatic statements about the "state of the field" that ignore these kind of phenomena and oversimplify the situation are little more than what Fritz Stern once called "vulgar idealism."[\[3\]](#)

The one topic that is close to universal in this special issue is the opening of the archives, or, as it has come to be known in Russia, the archival revolution.[\[4\]](#) Both catchphrases hide a complicated and sometimes contradictory reality, and we certainly have heard our share of discussions on this topic over the years. Many of them have featured declarations about what "we now know," or balance sheets about how the archives have changed our understanding of the Soviet and Russian past. Framing the question like a report card tends to focus attention only on the "revelations." When it is put that way, it is a simple matter to judge how much our views have changed in a decade: a little, but not all that much. In our view, one cannot understand the "archival question" from this perspective. It is a bit like saying that when we looked at the moon with a hand-held telescope we knew all along that there were craters; when we look at it now through the Hubble telescope we see nothing but those same craters in much more detail. The point is, of course, that the texture becomes completely different; looking at their minutiae and their broad outlines both, we may ultimately come to a much different appreciation of what they are. In reconsidering the past, a decade is but a short period in that kind of process. Still, as Oleg Khlevniuk points out in this issue, the early over-estimations of what can be learned from the former Soviet archives - and, by extension, their opposite, the notion that nothing fundamentally new has emerged - are now largely a thing of the past. *Kritika* remains committed to scholarship that will combine both empirical and conceptual discovery. Insofar as the telescoped exhilaration of the archival revolution is a thing of the past, we have now entered the post-revolutionary age.

[\[1\]](#) The phrase, of course, derives from the memoirs of the literary critic Pavel Annenkov about the decade between 1838 and 1848, later immortalized by Isaiah Berlin in his four-part essay on

the birth of the Russian intelligentsia: Isaiah Berlin, "A Remarkable Decade," *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1978), 114-209.

[2] Jason Scott Smith, "The Strange History of the Decade: Modernity, Nostalgia, and the Perils of Periodization," *Journal of Social History* 32: 2 (Winter 1998), 263-86, quotation 263.

[3] Fritz Stern, "The Political Consequences of the Unpolitical German," *History*, no. 3 (1960), 122, quoted in Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 73.

[4] Vladimir Kozlov and Ol'ga Lokteva, "'Arkhivnaia revoliutsiia' v Rossii (1991-1996)," *Svobodnaia mysl'*, no. 1 (1997), 113-21, no. 2 (1997), 115-24, no. 3 (1997), 116-28.