History and Politics in Russia before the Revolution

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Abstract

An introduction to the author’s engagement with the history of historical writing in Russia and the Soviet Union, with special attention to the “new direction” studies in social and economic history that flourished in the last few decades before the revolution of 1917.

Keywords

Russia – Soviet Union – history – “the new history” – historiography – politics – ideology

The phrase “history and politics” in the title of this talk has to do with the writing of history during the long crisis of the old regime in Russia that led up to the Revolution of 1917. I got interested in this topic a long time ago and have periodically returned to it in my research and writing over the years. Rather than give a report on my latest engagement with the subject, I would like to talk a bit about how I first got interested in it, and why it has continued to fascinate me: perhaps we may consider this a contribution to the general problematic of how historians choose to ask the kinds of questions they do. In closing, I shall draw on what I have learned from studying history and politics to make a few general remarks about the historian’s craft.

As an undergraduate studying Russian language, literature, and history, back in the Cold-War days of Sputnik and the first post-Stalin “thaw” of the mid-1950s, I had, of course, heard about the great nineteenth-century

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synthesizers of Russian history, Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin (1766–1826), Sergei Mikhailovich Solov’ev (1820–1879), and especially Vasilii Osipovich Kliuchevskii (1841–1911). I had even read some Kliuchevskii, but it wasn’t until I started doing graduate work at Berkeley a little later and began some more or less serious work on such subjects as the so-called Decembrist Movement of the 1820s and the abolition of serfdom in the 1860s that I realized that the body of pre-revolutionary scholarship on modern and (for it) contemporary history was very impressive, both quantitatively and qualitatively, especially in the last two-three decades before World War I. Moreover, I discovered that quite a few of the scholars who had written about historical challenges to the autocracy, about reforms and reform movements, were also politically engaged. In certain cases, they were significant figures in the political opposition to the autocracy going in to the revolution: I have in mind such figures as Pavel Nikolaevich Miliukov (1859–1943), generally-recognized leader of the most important constitutionalist, radical-reformist (as opposed to conspiratorial-revolutionary) party, the so-called Kadets, or Constitutionalist-Democratic Party, established in the heat of the 1905 revolution, and first foreign minister of the Provisional Government formed after the abdication of Nicholas II in March 1917; Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Kornilov (1862–1925), Miliukov’s close confederate and long-time secretary of the Kadet Party; and Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Kizevetter (1866–1933), one of the Kadets’ most popular orators.

Before the revolutionary era opened in earnest in 1905, all three had well-established reputations as professional historians – Miliukov in particular: his multi-volume synthesis of Russian history, Essays on the History of Russian Culture, which he had started to publish serially in the mid-1890s after being dismissed from his teaching position at Moscow University for critical remarks about the autocracy in a lecture, was the most widely read synthesis of the day. (Kliuchevskii began to publish his great Course of Russian History much later; its publication was still unfinished in 1914). Miliukov’s conceptions of Russian history resonated widely and enduringly in the educated public, finding their way, for example, into the construction of early Russian history in Lev Davidovich Trotsky’s pre-revolutionary writings, which were resurrected in his [Trotsky’s] 1922 polemic with Mikhail Nikolaevich Pokrovskii over the peculiarities of Russia’s historical development.

In the early 1960s, I went to Russia, that is, the Soviet Union, as an exchange graduate student and spent a couple of years in the history department of Moscow University working on my doctoral dissertation about the politics of serf emancipation in the 1850s and 1860s. Several experiences during that period deepened my interest in pre-revolutionary historiography. One was the discovery that the current Soviet historiography on the subject of my thesis...
was for the most part ideologically slanted, dogmatic, and dismissive of pre-revolutionary scholarship for supposedly having committed those sins against scholarship of which it was itself, in my view, egregiously guilty. By extension, general historiographical studies (histories of historical writing), which were then in considerable vogue in the Soviet historical establishment, mostly treated the entire corpus of work by late pre-revolutionary professional historians under the rubric “the crisis of bourgeois ideology,” dwelling on its supposed philosophical and methodological contradictions to the point that it was impossible to admit the pre-revolutionary historians had made significant contributions to historical scholarship. Some efforts, not very successful, were made to square that circle.

Secondly, the few scholars I met who were relatively free of this kind of dogmatism and historical sloganeering, who seemed to be interested in history for its own sake, not just interested in hewing to the current party line (not always, I have to admit, out of careerist considerations; sometimes out of conviction), all appeared to have some kind of connection to the pre-revolutionary tradition of historical scholarship. In Moscow, this was true in the first place of my thesis advisor Petr Andreevich Zaionchkovskii (1904–1983), a scholar of noble origin, in October 1917 a student in the 2nd Moscow Cadet Regiment that retreated out of Moscow along the Kiev rail line exchanging fire with the Bolshevists, who nevertheless managed to acquire proletarian credentials and survive until the categorical debilities of the “former classes” were removed in the mid-1930s. Zaionchkovskii was then able to enroll (as an “evening student”) in college, where he studied history with Iurii Vladimirovich Got’e (1873–1943), a pupil of the great Kliuchevskii and a professor at Moscow University when the revolution had rolled around. An academician when the purge of the Academy of Sciences took place at the start of the “Stalin Revolution” in the late 1920s, Got’e was exiled until the mid-1930s. He was later allowed to resume teaching, as were several of his colleagues. (In one of the innumerable ironies of Soviet history, Got’e’s background and his exile in the early, less bloody stages, of the purges, probably saved his life: in 1937–38 the Old Bolsheviks were among the main targets of the purges; those of them in academe who earlier had swept out the holdovers from the old regime were now swept aside en masse themselves, creating places once again for some of the surviving “former people.”)

And then I met Zaionchkovskii’s students, some of them already academics or archivists, some, like me, still working on their degrees. (By the way, the archivists among them were enlisted by their teacher in a conspiracy to thwart official policy to give me, a foreigner and an American to boot, maximum access to the archival materials I needed for my thesis.)
In Petersburg, or Leningrad as it was then called, where I spent considerable time in the archives, these were Boris Vasil'evich Anan'ich (1931–2015), Rafail Sholomovich Ganelin (1926–2014), and other students of Boris Aleksandrovich Romanov (1889–1957), who had studied with the greats of the Petersburg school of late imperial historiography: Aleksandr Sergeevich Lappo-Danilevskii (1863–1919), Sergei Fedorovich Platonov (1860–1933), and particularly Aleksandr Evgen'evich Presniakov (1870–1929). And then there was Sigizmund Natanovich Valk (1887–1975), the legendary archeographer whose own career had begun before the revolution, whom I had the opportunity to meet in the imperial archives on Senate Square where the great equestrian statue of Peter the Great stands. With his starched white collar and pince-nez, this diminutive person seemed to provide a direct contact with the tradition of pre-revolutionary scholarship.

Thirdly, at the beginning of the 1960s the used book shops of the two capitals were bursting with pre-revolutionary books. While novels and poetry brought pretty good prices, history books were cheap, many selling literally for kopecks. There was a much bigger market for literature, especially “the classics,” Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoevsky, than for historical monographs, but the Soviet government was doing very little at the time to meet demand with new editions; this country, with its vast expanses of forest, suffered from a chronic shortage of paper. There was enough paper, to be sure, for Pravda, for innumerable re-printings of various works of Lenin, and for immense editions of the current leader’s deathless prose. All this would soon change, for reasons I can’t go into now, but in the meantime I spent a good part of my fairly generous stipend (150 rubles a month) on these books and, in the process, I actually acquired a knowledge of historical bibliography that I probably would not have gotten otherwise. In this way, too, it was impossible not to be impressed by the quality and quantity of pre-revolutionary scholarship.

Finally, before long I got involved in another research project on the history of the liberal opposition to the autocracy, leading up to the creation of political parties in 1905–06 and the beginnings of parliamentary politics in Russia. In studying this new subject, I was constantly running into academics in general and historians in particular. So questions about the relations between their politics and their work as historians naturally cropped up.

But what do I mean by “impressive” in reference to this body of scholarship? In the first place, there was a lot of it, despite the fact that Russia before the revolution had only a handful of universities (six or seven) with history or historical-philological faculties, and the country as a whole had a low literacy rate compared to most of western Europe. In terms of quality, this body of
historical writing seemed to be on a par with German or French scholarship. Not so surprising, if we consider that late imperial Russian scholarship was in close contact with European scholarship and that many Russian historians, including practically all the specialists on ancient, medieval and the modern history of foreign countries, routinely spent from one to several years in Europe, especially in Germany, but also in France and elsewhere, participating in seminars, working in archives, and so on.

In fact, in some areas of historical scholarship before 1914, the Russians seem to have been at the forefront, and even in advance of, the work being done by their colleagues in Germany, France, or, for that matter, the United States, despite the fact that history in Russia had been transformed into an academic discipline fairly late, really only in the 1860s and 1870s, perhaps slightly earlier than in the United States, but in much the same way: by adopting the German seminar-system of graduate training (the academic organization of Russian universities remained much closer to the German model, with two large dissertations required for full professorial status, and a hierarchy of Privat-Dozenten, Extraordinarius and Ordinarius ranks.)

The fact was that Russian historians were practicing what came to be called “the new history” avant le mot, beginning on a fairly large scale by the 1880s – that is, the writing of studies going beyond state politics and diplomacy to a wide variety of social and economic developments, including what today would be called “history from below.” In his first public lecture at Moscow University in 1886, the aforementioned Miliukov criticized his predecessors for seeing the state as the sole actor in Russia’s historical development. In the introduction to the first volume of his great synthesis, he declared himself an adept of the “new direction” (novoe napravlenie), which held that the proper subject of history is “the life of the people as a whole,” or “the life of the popular masses.” This Kulturgeschichte approach had by then taken a firm hold in Russian scholarship, so Miliukov faced nothing like the onslaught of criticism from the traditionalists that was directed at the first volumes of Karl Lamprecht’s Deutsche Geschichte (1891–1908), which appeared at roughly the same time. In general, judging from the secondary works I have consulted, German scholarship in social and economic history in these years was dominated by the abstract and systematizing approaches of Werner Sombart and Max Weber, while in France a significant body of applied research into social and economic history was mainly a post-World War 1 development associated with Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and the Annales school. So perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that, in applied studies in social and economic history, the Russians before World War 1 were at the forefront of European scholarship.
I am thinking here not only of the numerous studies of social groups, especially the peasantry, economic activity, and regional studies in Russian history that were produced before the war, but also of scholarship in non-Russian history. Consider the work of Nikolai Ivanovich Kareev (1850–1931), which began with his book, *The Peasantry and the Peasant Question in France at the end of the XVIII century* (in Russian; a title designed to avoid problems with the censors). Published in 1879 and based on work in the French National Archives and the Bibliothèque Nationale, this was the first major work on the subject of the peasantry in the French Revolution in any language. In succeeding decades, it was followed by a series of studies by Kareev himself and by his pupils, most notably the Ukrainian scholar Ivan Vasil’evich Luchitskii, on the social history of the French Revolution. These scholars, collectively known as *l’école russe*, came to exert a significant influence on French historiography of the French Revolution devoted to the peasant question: indeed, the very concept of “the peasantry” [*paysannerie*] in the revolutionary era as an object of study seems to have been invented by the Russians. But not only: a Russian scholar, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Onu, was the first to undertake a systematic critical study of the *cahiers de doléances* as an historical source (1908). There is a considerable literature on *l’école russe*.

Or consider the social and economic history of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds pioneered by Mikhail Ivanovich Rostovtsev (1870–1952), who wrote his great syntheses while teaching at Harvard and Yale after the revolution, but had made his impact on international historiography well before World War I as a Petersburg historian. His work was being translated into German or actually written in German as early as 1910 – for example, his *Studien zur Geschichte des römischen Kolonates*. Another Russian scholar, less known internationally, who made significant contributions to the social and economic history of the ancient world, with titles like *The History of the Eastern Trade of Greco-Roman Egypt* (1907) was Mikhail Mikhailovich Khvostov (1872–1920). Khvostov was a student of Pavel Gavrilovich Vinogradov (1854–1925), a professor at Moscow University from the mid-1880s, whose *Villainage in England* (1892) (in English) is an early milestone, if not the cornerstone, in the social history of medieval England. It was followed by *The Growth of the Manor* (1905) and *English Society in the Eleventh Century* (1908). Vinogradov, Sir Paul, spent most of the last quarter-century of his life as an Oxford professor. One could go on, but the point is not to provide a taxonomy of pre-revolutionary Russian historiography, but rather to give some idea of the accomplishments and level of sophistication of Russian historical writing before World War I. What Soviet historiography characterized as “the crisis of bourgeois historiography” looked to me more like its florescence. This perception led to the question of where this burst of
creativity and of innovation came from. So the ingredients for what turned out to be a long-term interest in pre-revolutionary Russian historiography were at hand: first, gaining some familiarity with a body of work that I found impressive, especially by contrast with much of Soviet historical scholarship; and secondly, being aware of the challenge thrown down by Soviet historiography’s explanation of it all as a manifestation of “the crisis of bourgeois ideology.”

To a degree, the Soviet historiographers were right about the “crisis” in historical writing, but only to a degree whose implications they did not seem to appreciate. As a matter of fact, or so it seems to me, history has been in a kind of epistemological crisis ever since it became transformed into an academic discipline in the course of the nineteenth century; that is, since it passed, *grosso modo*, from writers to professors, from a branch of literature to the status of some kind of science (*Wissenschaft, nauka*). The claims that historical writing contributes to the production of positive knowledge, and sometimes to the “science of society,” have waxed and waned, but the fictive element in historical writing, the problem of narrative, remains. Most late nineteenth-century Russian historians operated in the positivist tradition: that is, at a minimum, they thought that history was directional, and that the relationship between documents, broadly speaking, and reality was non-problematical from a philosophical point of view. By the end of the nineteenth century, neo-Kantian idealism had acquired considerable resonance among Russian historians, as among the non-Marxist intelligentsia more broadly, but the extent to which neo-Kantianism affected their applied historical studies (as opposed to their treatises on method, of which there were an increasing number towards the end – a sign, one might say, of some state of “crisis” in themselves) – is for me a moot question. A more significant influence on scholarship, it seems to me, was the progressive politicization of social and, within it, academic life over the last decades of the old regime. Most professors of history in Russia were unable to, and in many cases did not want to, stand aloof from this politicization.

In short, here we have a period of unusual creativity and accomplishment in the writing of history occurring in a time of ideological, political, and social flux. How did movements on these various fronts relate to each other? How did ideology and politics impinge on scholarship, in regard to such things as subjects selected for study and interpretation, and so on? It seemed to me, and still seems so, that the study of pre-revolutionary Russian historiography and of its sociopolitical context has much to offer for our understanding of the historian’s craft.

A look at the history of the intelligentsia, that is, at the critically minded educated public, and at political and social developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tells us a lot about the precocity of Russian
scholarship in taking up the “new history,” social and economic history, “history from below.” The turn of Russian historians away from an Hegelian preoccupation with the role of the state in Russian history was pretty clearly linked to a marked erosion among the educated public of the reputation of the state as the main engine of progress in Russian history – a view that dated back to the Promethean rule of Peter the Great in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, as did the origins of that public itself. The state’s reputation for being an engine of progress survived essentially intact, despite the critiques of aristocratic frondeurs of the late eighteenth century and of the Slavophiles in the age of Romanticism, through the reforms of the 1860s, which had included not only the abolition of serfdom, but also a series of administrative and legal reforms that seemed to be putting Russia onto, or back onto, the European track. Then, as the state’s reform efforts sputtered and turned to reaction over the 1870s and 1880s, the younger generation of historians turned their attention away from the state to social and economic history, just as a wave of populism or “peasantophilia” born of noblesse oblige (most populists at this time were the sons and daughters of the nobility), swept over an entire generation of educated youth. Thus historians’ disenchantment with the role of the state in the present led to reassessment of its historical role and to a search for other determining forces in history: economic forces, societal forces, the popular masses, and so on. “The people make their own history” is the reductionist implication in the writing of “history from below.” This was the principal context of the appearance of the “new history” in Russia.

As I have already suggested, most professors of history in late-nineteenth century Russia were firmly on the side of the Enlightenment project that had first been introduced into Russian thought in the eighteenth century. They believed in progress and in the idea of universal history. They were mostly liberals (in a very broad sense) in their politics when the age of politics came around. They saw Russia’s future in terms of its progressive assimilation into the ranks of the constitutional monarchies or republics of Western Europe and North America. Russian social science came of age over the several decades preceding World War 1, building on the same epistemological foundations as did modern German and French historiography, sociology and economics. Historians like Kliuchevskii, Kareev, Vinogradov, and Miliukov thought of history as a science of society in service to society. They considered it the historian’s job to seek in applied historical research an understanding of the “laws” and regularities that govern the workings of society, so as to apply them to the cause of progress. The nature of this commitment varied among individual historians from a search for historical laws proper, to the testing of sociological theories, to a modest belief in the historian’s responsibility to generalize and
explain the past’s relevance to the present. You can see that these historians belonged to the Russian intelligentsia. The ideal of “objectivity” in the sense of disinterestedness had little of the resonance among Russian historians, that it did among contemporary American historians, as Peter Novick has reminded us in his book *That Noble Dream. The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (1988).

This combination of political engagement (in the broad sense of service to progress), scientism, and a commitment to applied historical research led to the writing of many outstanding works in both Russian and world history. In regard to the significant Russian contributions in non-Russian history, the search for laws and regularities that operated universally (therefore, in Russia, too) stimulated interest in comparative-historical methods and so to the application of these laws to history beyond Russia’s borders. Any country’s archives were grist for their mill.

Two major historians of our period, Kliuchevskii and Kareev, were seriously involved in the populist movement of their youth. Kliuchevskii became the first major academic historian to give a critical assessment of Peter I for the suffering that tsar had inflicted on his people. Kareev provides us a well-documented case in which his populist preoccupation with the “peasant question” as a youth carried directly over to his decision to study the peasantry in the French Revolution. Vinogradov’s interest in the English peasantry seems to have had a similar linkage. Later, the comparativists Nikolai Pavlovich Pavlov-Sil’vanskii (1869–1908) and Boris Ivanovich Syromiatnikov (1874–1947) interpreted Russian feudalism as a local variant of a pan-European phenomenon.

The case of the great historian of Rome and the Hellenistic world Mikhail Rostovtsev provides a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of over-determining historical interpretations, but also a good example of the need to understand the intellectual climate in which historians work. When Rostovtsev’s views on civil strife in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, in general, and especially his famous interpretation of the “decline and fall” as the result of a rusticating social revolution of the uncivilized hinterland against the civilized city were laid out in his English-language books after the Revolution, they were criticized, by Arnaldo Momigliano (1908–1987) and other historians of antiquity, for being drawn from analogy with the recent Russian revolution and civil war. While it is true that Rostovtsev was consistently anti-Bolshevik before, during, and after the revolution, it is, I think, much more likely that his views on social strife in the ancient world and on those aspects of life in that world that drew his attention were in many ways characteristic for his generation of western-oriented, progressive-minded scholars. Rostovtsev had a thirty-year career in Russia
before the revolution. He had been born, as it were, into the problem of the two cultures – that of the common people (the peasants who still constituted eighty-five percent of the Russian population at the turn of the twentieth century, a majority of whom were still illiterate) and of the Europeanized elite. This problem had been a preoccupation of the Russian educated imagination, at least, since the creation of a Europeanized elite within the upper crust of the nobility in Peter’s time. Even that aspect of Rostovtsev’s interpretation of the “social revolution of the third century” which seemed most clearly reflective of events in the revolution of 1917 and in the ensuing civil war – the alliance of the peasants with the army – may have drawn on a range of experience that went back considerably further than 1917.

My interest in Russian historiography has yielded a couple of general observations about the historian’s craft. The first has to do with the notion of “crisis.” When they wrote of the “crisis of bourgeois historiography” (or of “bourgeois ideology”), Soviet historiographers were obviously not referring to the quantity and quality of scholarship being produced before the revolution, but rather to the lack among pre-revolutionary historians generally, of a consistent philosophical position from which to derive their historical explanations; in a word, to their philosophical eclecticism. In other words, Soviet historiographers supposed, you can only adequately explain the past by adopting a consistent philosophical position (and we know what position they had in mind). Yet it seems to me that a comparative study of pre-revolutionary and Soviet historiography suggests that a good dose of eclecticism may be an asset rather than a liability for the historian.

Secondly, and relatedly, I think the story of the historical profession in late Imperial Russia reminds us that the pursuit of “objectivity,” that, in Peter Novick’s phrase, “Whatever patterns exist in history are ‘found,’ not ‘made,’” is a will-o-the-wisp. And this is true, despite the likelihood that some of these Russian historians, operating unreflectingly in the positivist tradition, may have accepted “objectivity” as their goal. To say that historical patterns are imagined by historians is not to adhere to a completely relativist position, like that of Hayden White. History writing is always a dialogue between the past and the present. Times of social and political stress, and of rapid change, even of “crisis” within limits, appear, if the Russian case is an example, to be more stimulating for scholarship than periods of orthodoxy. This may be so not in spite of, but rather because of, the political/ideological engagement of the historians living in those times.

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The “New History” in Russia.

Some Examples

Bogoslovskii, Mikhail Mikhailovich (1867–1929).

Got‘e, Iurii Vladimirovich (1879–1943).
Zamoskovskii krai v XVII veke: opyt issledovaniia po istorii ekonomicheskogo byta (1906).

Kareev, Nikolai Ivanovich (1850–1931).
Krest’iane i krest’ianskii vopros vo Frantsii v poslednei chetverti XVII veke (1879).
Ocherk istorii frantsuzskikh krest’ian: s drevneishikh vremen do 1789 goda (1881).

Khvostov, Mikhail Mikhailovich (1872–1920).
Istoriia vostochnoi torgovli greko-rimskago Egipta: 332 g. do R. Kh. – 284 g po R. Kh. (1907).

Luchitskii, Ivan Vasil’evich (1845–1918).
Vopros o krest’ianskoi pozemel’noi sobstvennosti vo Frantsii do revoliutsii i prodazhe national’nykh imushchestv (1896).

La propriété paysanne en France à la veille de la Révolution (principalement en Limousin) (1912).

Ocherki po istorii russkoi kul’tury, 3 vols. (1896–1903).

Vybor 1789 goda vo Frantsii i nakazy tret’iago sosloviia s tochki zreniia ikh sootvetstvuiia istinnomu nastroeniia strany. Chast’ pervaiia (1908).

Platonov, Sergei Fedorovich (1860–1933).
Ocherki po istorii Smuty v Moskovskom gosudarstve XV–XVII vv. (1899).

Rostovtsev, Mikhail Ivanovich (1870–1952).
Studien zur Geschichte des römischen Kolonates (1910).


Rozhkov, Nikolai Aleksandrovich (1868–1927).
Sel’skoe khoziaistvo Moskovskoi Rusi v XVI–XVII veke (1899).

Vinogradov, Pavel Gavrilovich (1854–1925).
Issledovaniia po sotsial’noi istorii Anglii v srednie veka (1887).

The Growth of the Manor (1905).


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Terence Emmons:  
*Publications bearing on Russian Historiography*


