"To play tricks with history," Trotsky once noted, "is impermissible, especially in an epoch of great shocks and convulsions." The twenty years before Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union certainly qualify as "an epoch of great shocks and convulsions," yet the enduring legacy of Stalin's historical tricks continues to present a nearly insurmountable barrier to an accurate appreciation of the social consequences of his own revolution. Historians in the West are like the blind men feeling up that proverbial elephant, mistaking parts for the whole and ready to jump to sweeping generalizations and construct all-explanatory models on the basis of fragmentary probing. The models, however, have proven to be shortlived and of little value except perhaps to impatient policymakers. In recent years the more difficult and time-consuming task of digging deeper for the social roots of Stalinism has been undertaken by a small number of analysts. All are indebted to the pioneers—Moshe Lewin, R. W. Davies, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Kendall Bailes, and the others—but their labors have merely shown the rest of us how enormous the job that lies ahead.

The dominant and still influential approaches to the Soviet past and present, most importantly the theory of "totalitarianism," have as part of their theoretical baggage biases toward focusing on the center of political power and on limiting that focus to the realm of politics.

Given an understanding in which power and a monopoly of decision-making exists at the center and the key stimuli and initiatives come from the top, in which regional and national authorities simply repeat and reflect the policies dictated from above, there is little incentive to look at localities. Since national regions, as well as Russian regions and cities, are here perceived as being acted on rather than acting themselves, the greater interest of investigators naturally is directed toward the center. Ethnic regions are often conceived as varied examples of what went on in Russia proper without significant deviation from the general pattern. But evidence from social historians has begun to suggest that inputs from below were not consistently ignored, even in the 1930s, that initiatives from below and regional variations had significance both in policymaking and in differential applications and effectiveness of policies, and that local resistance, patterns of social structure, family circles, and national culture all affected the contour of life and politics in the Soviet Union. If one accepts the possibility of a more variegated picture of the USSR, then a full re-evaluation of Stalinism and its effects on society would require local and ethnic regional studies.

By its nature political history is centrist, interested as it is in the activities of the central state and the outward radiation of its decisions and policies. Social history has always had a closer relationship to local history, to the study of New England cities or old English counties, to glassmakers in a French town or metallists in Saint Petersburg. But in Russian history in general local studies have been neglected, in part under the impression that local differences really made no difference, that the regionalism of American or West European nations provides few parallels to the centralized state of tsarist or Soviet Russia. The Russocentric and political historical biases have not been seriously challenged by historians of the national minorities, who have generally written more about the history of national elites and cultural developments. The social history of the non-Russian peoples is only now beginning to be written, though the difficulties of obtaining Georgian, Ukrainian, or Armenian material on the 1930s present as many problems as finding sources on Russian regions. Once a series of lo-