Some years ago a graduate student at the University of Chicago, who had been attentively listening to my course of lectures in Soviet history and politics, asked: “Why do you avoid the ideology? How can you talk about the Soviet Union without bringing in ideology?” I was somewhat taken aback, but I had an answer. Basically, from the time I had started teaching history in 1967, I had been struggling against the then-dominant causal arguments that explained Soviet policies and practices as derived from Marxism-Leninism. As a member of the emerging group of self-described “social historians” (in my case, “socialist historian” would have been a more accurate description – but this was America, not Britain), I was trying to understand the grander structures and processes, the underlying forces, what earlier had been called the substructure, that shaped the Soviet state and social experience. Deductions from Marx’s *Capital* or Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* could not, we believed, explain much more than the aspirations of leaders. They left out the actual social and economic constraints in which Bolsheviks found themselves, not to mention the unintended consequences of their choices and actions.

By the late 1970s the twig, in the opinion of some, had been bent too far in the social direction, and historians – not me – were speaking of a “social history with the politics left out.” Ideology still figured in more conservative readings and in popular formulations of Soviet history, but few of us anticipated that a younger generation would follow some of the most conservative writers on the USSR and revive the argument from ideology. In a fine review article in *Revolutionary Russia*, Stephen Smith gives three reasons why ideology has come back into Soviet studies with such strength: the opening of the archives, which showed that Soviet leaders actually took Marxism-Leninism quite seriously and “spoke Bolshevik” even in their internal communications; the limitation presented by a purely social explanation; and the cultural turn in social science and