Introduction: The Economic Turn and Modern Russian History

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The revival of academic interest in economic history and the analytics that the field has to offer to historians perhaps could have been predicted. Initiating a conversation about the conceptual currency of socio-economic methodologies, a number of scholars have pointed out that the protracted global economic crisis has once again rendered the invisible visible—that is, made the power of invisible economic dynamics to structure our everyday existence vividly real and undeniable.1 The prominent academic approach of the past three decades that declared everything and everyone “culturally constructed” and encouraged scholars to shift their agendas to the questions of representation has been proven ill-equipped to handle these pressing questions of socio-economic processes that are changing our lives and, surely, have not spared the lives of our historical subjects in the past.

In the field of modern Russian history, the limits of cultural analysis are felt particularly acutely as scholars shift their attention to the postwar, and especially, post-1950s period and reach out into the present. In striking contrast with the thriving and, for the last three decades, sidelined research on socio-economic transformations of the prewar decades, the post-1950s years constitute largely an uncharted territory. Thus, the persistent efforts of socio-economic historians of several generations working on the margins of the profession have ensured that we possess a rich corpus of scholarship on the

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making of the Soviet economic model of the prewar period. Our knowledge has been shaped by such classics as the works of E.H. Carr, Eugene Zaleski, R.W. Davies, Mark Harrison, Alec Nove, and Paul R. Gregory. Perhaps most importantly, the research on prewar socio-economic history has not lost its momentum since its founding decades and is presently engaged in a number of vibrant debates about the financial sources of Stalinist industrialization; the role of the collectivization and the GULAG system in the industrial push forward; the effectiveness of the emergent Soviet economy. More conceptual questions pertaining to the nature of the prewar economic system itself—what we call that which was being build in the 1930s? Was it socialist? state-socialist? state-capitalist?—are also coming under historians’ consideration.

It is this established and thriving research on the prewar period that underlines the underdeveloped state of economic scholarship on the postwar years, if, of course, one does not count the popular “stagnation” and “static” metaphors as satisfactory explanatory frameworks for understanding the late Soviet

