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Perestroika in History: The First Stage

Aleksandr M. Nekrich

As long as anger and argument rage, and wonder lives, then history lives.

S. S. Averintsev

When talking of history, we do not wish to exalt or debase individuals, we seek to give the people their due, for they are the deciding force in history.

M.S. Gorbachev

At the beginning of January 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev announced that the first stage of perestroika was in principle complete. Among its positive results, he said, was a better knowledge now of history, which “is exceptionally important”.1

Soviet citizens have only a fragmentary knowledge of the true history of Russia, as a rule, but they feel its consequence in their bones. Their attitude is a mixture of confusion, shame, pride and rampant ignorance. Dissatisfaction with the works of professional historians has made people turn to histories written nearly a hundred years ago, those of Soloviev or Klychevsky, or indeed nearly two hundred years ago, such as Karamzin’s History of the Russian State. Reprints of the 19th century historians have been produced in amazing quantities, which indicates that the Soviet reader has a sustained interest in Russian history and wants to find his own place in it.

But throughout the Soviet period, the upper echelons of the Party bureaucracy have wanted nothing more than to direct discussion of the Soviet past into pre-set channels. Establishment of the one-party Bolshevik system entailed the emergence of a correspondingly new type of historiography, in the shape of M. N. Pokrovsky’s “school”, which was at first supported by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. All the other historical schools were more or less prohibited.

Those historians who did not shame the Marxist view were removed from teaching, or accused of anti-state activity. As a result they were forced to emigrate, or were exiled, or arrested, or shot, and their works went out of circulation. The advent of Stalinism destroyed “Pokrovsky’s school” as well, and this took place through the efforts of its own pupils, not for the first time in history. Later many Soviet social scientists of the new generation were liquidated as well.

The need under Stalinism for a new, politically useful, interpretation of history led in 1934–6 to a series of Party decisions about the teaching of history, and inspired the “comments” by Stalin, Kirov and Zhdanov on a new textbook history of the USSR. The result was the Short Course in the History of the Communist Party, 1938, which formed the new basis of Soviet historical science. It set out the basic professional duties of Soviet historians. Their research had to reinforce or confirm the Short Course, whose fundamental thesis was that the Party is always right.

Although there was some opposition from individuals, submission to the Party’s instructions became routine for Soviet historical writing ranging from archaeology to modern history. But as the Party leaders changed, each one tried to make his own changes in the interpretation of Soviet history.

General Secretary Gorbachev and History

What is the General Secretary’s view of Soviet history? The answer is not unambiguous, since Gorbachev’s views, like those of any leader, affect concrete policy. In his book, which is aimed mainly at the Western reader, Gorbachev stresses that “the Soviet Union is a young state without analogues in history or in the modern world”.2

It would be hard to object to that. It is true that world history has never known a state like the Soviet Union. Gorbachev’s point of view may be of interest to those people who think that the Soviet state is just a direct continuation of tsarist Russia.

However, his further thoughts on Soviet history arouse doubts and objections. Leaving aside his digressions on matters including Soviet-Nazi relations, 1939–41, and the Second World War, the main stumbling-block is his assertion that progress in the USSR was made possible only by the revolution, and that such progress is a result of socialism and the historical choice allegedly made by the people.3 Here he is repeating almost word for word certain Soviet historians. P. V. Volobuyev, for example, has in his

2 Ibid., p. 18.
3 Ibid.
recent book the totally unprovable proposition that the Bolshevik revolution saved Russia from disaster. Later Volobuyev mentions not only the “historical choice” allegedly made by the people in October 1917, but also claims that “the people remained loyal to their fundamental historical choice.”5 This idea of both Volobuyev and Gorbachev is thoroughly dubious, if only because the Soviet people were never allowed a chance to express their attitude to the Soviet one-party system through the normal constitutional means of a universal referendum. They were offered no alternative. Lenin’s formulation of the system as “the dictatorship of the proletariat” stressed that it could have no other character. In actual fact, that means, and still means, dictatorship by the Party elite. The present privileged position of the Party is determined by Paragraph 6 of the 1977 Constitution.

Gorbachev thus summarizes his position on the history of the country: “...Soviet history is in general a history of indisputable progress, despite all the losses, setbacks and failures ... we stubbornly marched on and never thought of retreating, or giving up ground we had gained, or of questioning our socialist choice.”6

The “choice” did indeed entail terrible sacrifices but, as the Soviet historian has it, this was the fault of counter-revolutionary forces who disagreed with the verdict of history.7 We should, however, observe that the “verdict of history” was reached not only in October 1917 but also in 1929–33 by the self-same Party during the second Bolshevik revolution, the “revolution from above”. Although there were then no more Whites or interventionists, the Bolsheviks and the Soviet state declared war on a national scale against their own citizens, the peasants, car-marked by the Party for ruin and destruction in the guise of “de-kulakization”. Millions of peasants died in de-kulakization and collectivization, agriculture was destroyed, as we know from the abundant personal testimony, the scholarly literature published in the West, the half-admissions by Soviet leaders, and from Soviet writers in their wake. Even now, fifty years on, the Soviet state is incapable of coming to terms with the consequences of collectivization. Who at that time passed the “verdict of history”? Stalin answers with his customary succinctness at the XVIth Congress of the Bolshevik Party in 1930: “We are now conducting a policy of liquidation of the kulsaks as a class, a policy that makes our special measures against them look like a trifle.”8

Stalin praised his Party for the destruction of a section of the people: “You are aware that we Bolsheviks do not confine ourselves to frightening people, we go beyond, to the liquidation of this bourgeois class.”

The noted Soviet agrarian historian V. P. Danilov has written in a recent article: “The excessive violence of collectivization and the associated coarse methods used in creating the kolkhoz and reinforcing its organization, the artificial intensification of class war and the widespread use of “de-kulakization” led to unnecessary losses and sacrifices, peasant protest extending to armed uprisings, the destruction of half the cattle stock, and the famine of 1932–3 in the rural parts of the Ukraine, the Don and Kuban, the Middle and Lower Volga regions, the Urals and Kazakhstan.”10 It is noticeable that Danilov, while mentioning the loss of cattle, fails to say how many peasants perished.

Yuri Chernichenko, however, who has been writing for many years on economic questions, has declared loudly what Western researchers have been saying for years, namely that the famine in the Soviet countryside was organized by the state.11 The well-known publicist Ivan Vasilev has summed up the results of Soviet agrarian policies: “It is the spiritual impoverishment, indeed pauperization, of the countryside that I consider to be the most intractable consequence of the decimation of the peasantry, and one that it will take many generations to recover from.”12

Gorbachev links the peasant uprisings in the fifteen years following the October revolution with a necessity for an “ineluctable historical choice”! He says that “collectivization changed, perhaps not easily and not immediately, the entire way of life of the peasantry, making it possible for them to become a modern, civilized class of society”.13

But that assertion only scrapes the surface of the problem: collectivization entailed the mass destruction of the productive forces of the countryside, and the peasantry as a social class were undermined physically and morally. The centuries-long tradition of love of work on the land was lost. According to V. Danilov, “A view alien to socialism took root for a long time, namely that the kolkhoz was a source of material and human resources for society and the state.”14 Contrary to Danilov, that view is not only not alien to socialism, but it was constantly cultivated by the Bolsheviks, and Gorbachev himself is not far from it when he says: “Collectivization released considerable resources and many workers

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6 Gorbachev, op. cit., p. 38.
7 Volobuyev, Vybor put'ya ... p. 164.
10 Danilov, op. cit., p. 36.
13 Danilov, op. cit., p. 40.
14 Danilov, op. cit., p. 30.
needed in other areas of development in our society, above all in industry. The logic is curious, and it goes some way to revealing his approach to Soviet history. “Just think: how can we agree that 1917 was a mistake and all the seventy years of our life, work, effort and battles were also a complete mistake, that we were going in the ‘wrong direction’?” At least Gorbachev implicitly concedes the possibility of the question, even if he does deflect it.

Such a formulation denotes major progress for a Soviet leader. Even professional Soviet historians would hardly dare to phrase the question like that, particularly as the question is far from rhetorical. It arises again and again in the Soviet press, in letters from various Party veterans worrying that they may have spent their lives in vain.

The most extensive recent document about the state of the social sciences, including history, and the tasks imposed on them by the CPSU, is Central Committee secretary A. N. Yakovlev’s speech to the colloquium of social scientists at the Academy of Sciences on 17 April 1987. (Yakovlev is a corresponding member of the Academy.)

According to him, CPSU policy towards the Soviet past is clear and unambiguous: there is a direct link between the 1920s, the Lenin period, and the 1980s, the Gorbachev period. The intervening periods are, as it were, just transitional phases between Lenin and Gorbachev. Yakovlev said this explicitly elsewhere: “In the auditorium of the Palace of Congresses we felt the 1920s and the 1980s were an indissoluble entity.” The Central Committee secretary is campaigning for a full restoration of the “Leninist concept of socialism”, evidently forgetting the CPSU Programme confirmed by the XXVIIth Party Congress: “The Soviet people, under the leadership of the Communist Party, has realized concretely V. I. Lenin’s plan for the building of socialism. Socialism in our country has become a reality.”

Yakovlev speaks of the need to “safeguard a new reading of the theoretical heritage created by our precursors in the name of the social liberation of man”. So far as history is concerned, Yakovlev says: “We need a truthful and full analysis of every page of our history, aimed at revealing in all its aspects the dialectic of the path we have trodden.” Here the secretary for ideology goes further than the General Secretary, who had suggested focusing primarily on the events of 1937.

Gorbachev’s critical remarks evoked anxiety even among members of his staff and obvious dissatisfaction in the country on the part of opponents of perestroika. He was forced to manoeuvre. During a meeting with media managers on the 8 January 1988 he explained that “we cannot agree with people who urge us to forget history or use only a part of it. Now we can all see that such a point of view is unacceptable.” He added that understanding of history is not fixed, it seeks depth and development—thus giving himself room for manoeuvre in judging the past. Clearly Gorbachev’s change of position was closely linked with the political problems of the day and the need to consolidate the position of his supporters while struggling on two fronts: with the die-hards inside the Party, and the so-called avant-gardists who had shown their claws during the Yeltsin affair.

Professional Historians Set Their Limits

THE SORRY STATE of the social sciences, as perceived by the Central Committee, caused the widest range of people to write in to the press. They included writers, Party veterans, veterans of the Second World War, workers, and historians. Not one of them had a good word for Soviet historical science. It was only the guardians of the “glorious past”, in the form of the Party elite of the historical establishment, that defended themselves in the polemical article “We are the descendants of October”.

The situation for historians, in particular non-conformist historians of Soviet society, is still unenviable. All the key positions have been occupied by the “guardians”, whose elevation dates back to the days of Stalin. They adapted to the Khrushchev period, but life was at its most perilous for them in the Brezhnev years. At that time the Central Committee department for science and higher education was headed by S. P. Trapeznikov, but the “guardians” managed, in the face of unbelievable difficulties, to drag him into the Academy of Sciences as a corresponding member. When perestroika began, they did not at first take it seriously. They were all “as pure as the driven snow”. Their general attitude to the past was Stalinist and pragmatic, and tended as a rule to prevail over simple common sense. One fairly vivid example will suffice. For more than twenty years the USSR Institute of History had been preparing Volume V of its Essays on the History of Historical Science in the USSR. The vicissitudes accompanying the preparation of the
book merit a separate story, but anyway it came out in 1985. Although the book was devoted precisely to the 1930s–1960s, the text not only emasculated the mildest criticism of what had gone on in the historiography of the time, but actually had words of praise for the Short Course.27 The book also praises the campaign against “cosmopolitanism” instigated by the Central Committee, one of the most disgraceful campaigns ever waged, in the social sciences or indeed in the country at large. Now we read: “Because the contradictions between imperialism and socialism were becoming more acute, it became necessary to deploy clearly and logically the Marxist–Leninist principles of proletarian internationalism as a counterbalance to the ideas of bourgeois cosmopolitanism and nationalism. And historians contributed to this great political task.”28 These words were written by Academician L. V. Cherepnin, the expert on Russian feudalism, and CPSU member since 1957, who died in 1977.

This is not all that surprising. Even in today’s perestroika venerable Soviet historians, hardened by the experience of survival, are stressing the need for “the truth” but are trying to avoid perestroika, which for them would mean deleting all their historical works. How much simpler it is to hang on to the customary formula—the Party is always right. Academician Maxim Kim pinpointed the problem at a round-table discussion of the editorial board of Kommunist, the Party’s chief theoretical journal, when he said: “For that reason our Party’s and leadership’s position is absolutely right, we need to revive history, and scrutinize both the negative and the positive element from all angles.”29

One can understand Yakovlev’s irritation when he remarked that: “The social sciences are one of the outposts of conservatism, the guardians of the embers of dogmatism.”30 The question now is whether even the most virulent criticism from the CPSU leadership is able to penetrate the ossified armour of the Soviet historical establishment.

Although he was criticizing social scientists, the Central Committee secretary failed to mention that all the sins he accused them of—the vulgar sociologizing, the swaying with circumstance, the tendency to improve on the past and the present, their refusal to research in depth, replacing it with denunciations of “pseudo-scholarly bourgeois historical ideas”—not only were the fault of the historians themselves, but also brought about their downfall. At all times they had, enthusiastically or obediently, followed the directives of the Party machine.

If one looks carefully at the Soviet historical journals and studies the discussions, the conferences and the research agenda, one is left in no doubt that so far there have been no radical changes in Soviet historical science. All one can say is that one or two historians have become a bit bolder, and started to defy orthodoxy.31

**Historians’ Attitudes to the State of their Discipline**

The rector of the Moscow Institute of Historical Archives, Yury Afanasev, said at a conference of historians and writers in April 1988: “There probably is not a country in the world with a history so falsified as ours is.”32 And with what result? In the latest elections to the Academy of Sciences the great majority of newly elected historians were those famous for their obedience and conformism.33

There are, however, historians of the younger generation coming forward. We might mention the 22-year-old Dmitry Yurasov, who has carried out unique archival research on Stalin’s victims; the newly forged young historians’ group at Moscow University; the youth section of the informal organization Memorial at Moscow school no. 86; the participants in the political theatre of Moscow school no. 962; and there are undoubtedly others who are interested in the true past of the Soviet Union. Perhaps hope for the future of historical studies in the USSR lies with these young people.

As always, just in case perestroika turns out to be a failure, historians are doing what they always do to avert reproaches now and accusations later, they are relying on Marx, Engels and Lenin, whose works are certainly not short of apt quotations to suit any situation. One historian quotes Engels’ remark that “in the interests of the Party” criticism “is required to display the greatest frankness”.34 The word “required” demonstrates not only the writer’s loyalty to Party ethics, but also the possible direction of his thoughts. Yury Afanasev says, on his own behalf: “We are the governing Party, nothing in the country opposes or threatens us apart from our own self-satisfaction and fixed opinions. For that reasons we must be, as it were, our own opposition.” Although the thought is not original (it has already been expressed in various ways by Gorbachev himself and other Party leaders) it is a device which permits attack on dogma and those who “place principle before fact, and answers before questions”.35 Afanasev finds vivid metaphors for the system: “We have for a long time lived in a state of...”

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28 Ibid., p. 12.
29 Kommunist, no. 12, 1987, p. 78.
35 Ibid., p. 58.
deliberately monolithic, almost hypnotic unity... This false unity has begun to splinter into all sorts of phenomena, facts, processes, groups, gatherings: rockers, Pamyat, Alma-Ata..."

He calls the present the "death throes" of the administrative system. Afanasyev is of course sufficiently experienced not to offend the Holy of Holies—the System as a whole. In the introduction to the Readings in the Historical Archive Institute, of which he is the head, Afanasyev says among other things: "History has ceased to be of help to the Party in solving problems of social development and policy-making. "... But what is the reason? Inability? Unwillingness to look truth in the face? Or perhaps a conscious policy?

The servility of Soviet historiography is so well-known that it cannot be doubted even with all its plaintive reiterations of the need for "historical truth". S. Osmachko, a rank-and-file teacher of CPSU history, understands the tasks of Soviet historians through the Party's viewpoint: "We need the truth today... interest in history today is no less acute than in the historic concerns of today (author's emphasis)." A very business-like approach: we need history now, because it meets the political needs of the present. What's new in the world, you might well ask? Has it not been the same every ten or fifteen years with every new policy? As A. Budkov, worker and CPSU member, says in his letter to Sovetskaya Kultura: "This, after all, isn't our first perestroika, in 1956 we started to fight the cult of personality, in October 1964 we were fighting subjectivism and voluntarism. Now, it appears, we haven't fought enough."

Soviet historians are in a difficult position, since almost everything they have written over the years has been branded as defective. You would imagine that their long-term professional interests would dictate the necessity to cast off their fear of self-criticism, to save themselves from an ambivalence so ingrained it is practically hereditary, to stop measuring out equal doses of "white" and "black". But self-seeking short-term considerations prevail, impelling them to vapid manoeuvring. There are plenty of examples of this, but here are two of the most striking ones. In the agenda for a comprehensive study of the problem of "Revolution and Social Progress", compiled by a group of historians led by Academician I. I. Mints, we read: "In order to reinforce the propaganda value of Soviet historians writing on this problem, it is necessary to unmask the falsifications of bourgeois historiography by means of argument." Some very familiar formulas there have obviously migrated from the Stalin era and been adapted to perestroika through the inclusion of the word "argument". And here is another appreciation of perestroika, from Academician S. L. Tikhomirov, secretary of the Historical Section of the Academy of Sciences. "Soviet historians must analyse their own work critically, and get a fresh viewpoint of their role in the realization of Party policy." Abusing bourgeois scholars is much easier than arguing with them. As a nurse in a kindergarten tells the children why they mustn't use bad words, so G. L. Smirnov (director of the Central Committee Institute of Marxism-Leninism) admonishes historians "to listen patiently to the arguments of their opponents and reason back, without any name-calling". Although he had little hope of getting through to his overgrown miscreants, he did think it necessary to warn them: "Anyone who does not live up to these requirements must abandon scholarship... that kind of person should not be a scholar." Smirnov's warning is aimed particularly at the "guardians" who have for decades been the Party's ideological bastion. They are in command at the Main Archive Administration, in faculties of Party History, and elsewhere. Their strength comes from their cohesiveness and their web of connections across the Party apparatus, state security, and the media. Being socially astute as well helps them to figure out the best way to neutralize, if not defeat, "revisionists", "leftists", and "cosmopolitans" of all types. Some of them are hardened enemies of perestroika, while others, the majority nowadays, are trying to adapt to it. The debate over "We are the descendants of October", which ran in the Soviet press for nearly a year and a half, showed that the "guardians" of history have no intention of yielding in their defence of the "purity of Marxism-Leninism", i.e. Stalinism. Their power is shown by the fact that Pravda itself, the central organ of the Party, published articles by Vera Tkachenko, Nikolay Gribachev (editor-in-chief of Sovetskii Soyuz), and other articles and letters attacking sincere and logical proponents of glasnost and democracy.

And there was of course the bombshell of the "Andreyeva letter"...
Her continuing campaign shows that the “guardians” do not intend to capitulate.48

New Plans for Soviet History—the Role of Literature

A S THE ACUTE PROBLEMS of Soviet history have received greater and more striking coverage in newspapers and magazines than in the professional periodicals, so readers have grown more interested in historical literature. They have turned to literature because professional historians have refused to discuss Soviet history seriously, because their thoughts on the ingredients of the national tragedy (such as the fate of Soviet POWs during World War II, the deportations from the Caucasus and Crimea), were flat and insipid. On the other hand, writers and artists have taken advantage of the impotence of Soviet historians and “boldly” invaded their territory. They may discuss history unpensively, but their justification is that they are looking for the same “historical truth” which professionals, even though they understand its essential nature perfectly well, like to keep a decent distance from.

Yury Afanasyev’s bitter criticisms of the leaders of the historical department of the Academy of Sciences have, for a long time if not for ever, barred his path to the Academy. He accused them and many other historians of dogmatism and careerism at the expense of their professional duty. “One has to be brave,” he said, “one has to be able to resist temptation when confronted with a choice between the truth and one’s career. I assure you very few have chosen the former”.49

Historians have also been attacked by their rivals—writers—and literature has done a great deal to reveal the nature of the Soviet system. Andrei Platonov, Vasili Grossman, published first in the West and now in the USSR, and the novels and stories of Yury Trifonov, Sergei Zalygin, Anatoli Rybakov, the little-known authors like Moris Semashko, with his Gu-ga, or M. Kurov, with his Kapitan Dikshtein, say much more to Soviet citizens about their past and present than hundreds of monumental tomes by Soviet historians. The Soviet publicist Yury Pompeyev, author of a novel about the October revolution, is alarmed by the possibility that émigré historians and writers might overtake their Soviet colleagues in illuminating the history of the Soviet Union. “We should not forget that the present Emigration is convulsively trying to fill in the blank spots which we have forgotten.”50

Pompeyev is wrong: those Soviet historians and writers who have been forced to emigrate have actually been keeping the flame of historical truth burning, so as to fill the gaps left by the confiscation of the country’s memory of its past. Pompeyev is pointing to the historical illiteracy typical of Soviet society, illustrated by readers’ letters.51

As ever, a touchstone is needed, and we find it in descriptions of the lives and works of Stalin’s ministers. Many years ago Alexander Bek, author of the famous war story Volyokolamskoye Shase, wrote a novel about a Stalinist minister entitled Novoye Naznachenie (“The New Assignment”) which came out first in the West and only recently in the Soviet Union. Its hero is Onisimov, a staunch Party man ready to carry out any order. The life of this minister of Stalin’s revolves exclusively around the best way to carry out any given order without counting the cost. The novel provoked heated argument. Some attacked the Onisimovs, others, like V. A. Kozlov, defended them: “It is very easy to condemn or justify. But Onisimov and his colleagues lived in bitterly difficult and heroic times”.52 Such talk of “difficult and unrepeatable times” shows how much the CPSU needs a theory to explain Stalinism and make it acceptable to a generation which had wasted its life realizing Stalin’s directives. But because Soviet history is not just the history of the Soviet élite, such a theory would have to relate less to historical events and more to the experiences of the “little man”, the worker, the peasant.

Most of the prominent writers supporting reform, including of course Yury Afanasev, Fyodor Burlatsky, and the dramatists Mikhail Sharov and Alexander Gelman, have joined in the task of “correcting” Soviet social history. Their standpoint is that, considering the “extreme conditions” for the creation of Socialism in One Country (age-old backwardness, the opposition of the kulaks, capitalist encirclement, the growth of German fascism), the style of the Onisimovs was justified. But what Kozlov elegantly terms “style” was not just exhortation, organization and mobilization, it was the toil and death of millions of prisoner-slaves, illegality, terror (nowadays referred to euphemistically as the Stalinist “command administration”), bureaucratism, and the suppression of initiative from below. The “new” outlook, which suits both “progressives” and “conservatives”, says that while socialism was being built in one country that style was justified, but afterwards, it was not. What is this supposed to mean, since they are constantly changing the date when socialism was built and the building of Communism began (the term “Communism” itself increasingly falling out of use)? Repeated debates by venerable academies on just this issue, the precise periodization of Soviet society, have actually

48 Moskovskie novosti, 2 October 1988.
49 Afanasev, "Sotsialnaya pamyat' chelovechestva", p. 54.
50 Yury Pompeyev, "Tok istorii", in Sovetskaya kultura, 10 November 1987.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., p. 120.
been strictly opportunistic and not in the least academic. According to the Congresses and Plenums of the CPSU, Communism is still a long way off, and there is a whole intervening period due in the meantime, which means that the periodization of history has to be re-thought in a way that allows the “exceptional circumstances of the times” a place in the legal scheme of things.

Such a scheme does not face up to the central question of historical responsibility. The Onisimovs consciously refrain from straight thinking, suppress their conscience, and banish all doubts. As soldiers of the Party, they do its will, which for them is paramount.

But anyone can see, even without the help of the volumes of research on the law and its definitions, including those of the Nuremberg Tribunal, that responsibility for an order and its execution is borne by two sides: the source of the order and the person who obeys it. In this case that means the Party and Onisimov, which is why discussion of his responsibility must face up to the problem of the Party’s responsibility.

The Soviet past is being discussed more and more openly by writers, but only with the greatest reluctance by professional historians. They suggest various ways to come to terms with the unfortunate episodes, the 1930s and particularly 1937 itself. Eduard Beltov, writing in Literaturnaya Gazeta, seems to be wondering: “What can we remember about 1937 if we know nothing about it?” And, to make the reader who has stumbled on the events of 1937 scratch his head, Beltov reminds him of Iona Yakir who (as Khrushchev reported in the Secret Speech at the XXth CPSU Congress 33 years ago) exclaimed seconds before his death: “Long live Stalin!” Beltov continues: “With the same name on his lips died the man at whose hands the flower of the Party and the state had been destroyed, General Commissar of State Security and People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR, Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov.”

Advice on how to approach 1937 has also been given by V. M. Chebrikov, former head of the KGB and now a Central Committee secretary, when reporting the deaths in the 1930s of twenty thousand “honest Chekists”.

All those executed were members of the Bolshevik Party, their arrest warrants had been confirmed by Party offices, and the death sentences of high-ranking state and Party officials had been signed by all the members of the Politburo. These facts were made public at the XXIIInd CPSU Congress in 1961. But who had sanctioned the repressions against millions of ordinary Soviet citizens?

These deliberately obfuscated matters can hardly be explained merely by the “exceptional times” factor. An alternative theory of “revolution from above” comes into play. One of its variants is expressed in Fyodor Burlatsky’s dialogues, published first in Literaturnaya Gazeta, and later televised. According to Burlatsky, after the death of Lenin the Party had two choices: economic reform by force, the Stalin option, and gradual peaceful reform, by implication the option of Bukharin and the “rightists”. However, Burlatsky does not mention that the option of Building Socialism in One Country had been favoured by Lenin, who had considered it a real possibility, through the dictatorship of the proletariat, the one-party system, and a policy of restricting the activity of the remaining bourgeoisie. Sociologically, the peasantry was regarded by the Bolsheviks as a petty-bourgeois force, and economically it was viewed as an inexhaustible supply of food, raw materials, and cheap labour. But for Lenin all this was seen in the perspective of revolutionary developments abroad.

Any historian claiming to be objective cannot ignore the fact that until 1928 Bukharin, a former “leftist” Communist, accuser (on behalf of society) of the right SRs at their trial in 1922, and Stalin’s ally against Trotsky, had supported Stalin many times. In the mid-1920s he had publicly supported the restriction of intellectual freedom, and the creation of a new generation of intelligensia instead of the old which could be stamped out in the way “details are stamped out in a factory.” This ideal was indeed attained. In his capacity as editor of Pravda and Politburo member Bukharin shares Stalin’s responsibility for the Soviet domestic and foreign policies of the time. Their differences date from when Stalin changed his policy of gradual reform and adopted Trotsky’s methods, widespread coercion and force, particularly in relation to the peasants. The “restructured” Party supported Stalin and his policy, and the right wing, including Bukharin, was defeated. Soviet historians have yet to work out why this happened, what the Bukharin Party of the time stood for. Historians of the CPSU have made a mish-mash of the whole question of the social structure, the political and moral standing of the Party, and have avoided clarifying the causes of Stalin’s elevation. Bukharin’s policy, if we are right in calling it that, was defeated in the struggle within the Party for the additional reason that the “rightists”, unlike the “leftists”, had not struggled for power. But that struggle had been one of the main elements of Party history until the establishment of Stalin’s unlimited dictatorship in 1934. How did Bukharin conduct himself later? He went on to tread every step of a thorny path from political capitulation, through admission of his own mistakes, to moral surrender. But it was, I think, Stalin’s personal motives that led to

54 Ibid.
55 Pravda, 10 September 1987
56 Fyodor Burlatsky, “Politicheskoe Zaveshchane”, in Literaturnaya Gazeta, 23 July 1987
Bukharin’s execution: he had once, in private conversation, called Stalin a “Genghiz Khan with a telephone”.

The other interpretation of Soviet history has been put forward by a representative of the “guardians”, Dr. Volkogonov, who is a Colonel-General and Director of the Institute of Military History. His long article “The Stalin Phenomenon” asserts that the conflict over options was conducted between Stalin, Trotsky, and Bukharin. Delegates to the XIIth Party Congress had not heeded Lenin’s warning that Stalin should be removed from the post of General Secretary. The methods advocated by the vanquished Trotsky, the “tightening of the screws”, had been taken over by the victorious Stalin. Bukharin, who had proposed the “gradual development” of socialism, finally admitted his “errors” and “actively participated in the realization of the Party’s aims”. Volkogonov’s description of the penitent Bukharin is much closer to historical truth than Burlatsky’s interpretation. But for Volkogonov, Bukharin’s “active participation” in Stalin’s policy is necessary for his basic conclusion: “Stalin was the most consistent and determined defender of the Party’s policy of affirming and reinforcing the world’s first socialist state . . . there was no alternative leader.” Volkogonov does not say that Stalin was actually the continuer of Leninism, but that is what he implies.

Although Burlatsky and Volkogonov stand at different points on the spectrum of perestroika, their tasks are quite similar. Both need to prove that, in spite of mistakes, miscalculations, and sacrifices, the building of socialism continued and triumphed. But official Soviet history demonstrates precisely that. The reasoning may be slightly different but the conclusion is predictable. Volkogonov is of course far to the “right” of Burlatsky, and his loyalty to Stalinism shines through everything he has published. He reprimands those who “doubt the real achievements of socialism” for being “politically mistaken” and “morally dishonest”, and thus illustrates the way that even repentant Stalinists are totally unable to cast off their old habits in which historical truth has been permanently replaced by political calculations.

Details have recently been published of the case of the alleged “military plot”, in which Mikhail Tukhachevsky and others were executed, and nearly the whole of the senior high command of the Red Army was destroyed. The confessions of the accused were obtained by terrible tortures. The cases of the Komsomol workers, Alexander Kosarcev and others, have also been publicized. For the first time public opinion has learned the details of the fate of the eminent doctor Professor Pletnyev, condemned to twenty-five years of prison, but shot in September 1941. In September–October 1941, when the Red Army was retreating from the Wehrmacht, political prisoners were shot wholesale. They included the famous communist Kristian Rakovsky and the well-known SR leader Maria Spiridonova who had long before ceased to be politically active. This typical page of the tragedy of the Soviet past has only just been glimpsed, and we have no idea when the contents of the sealed envelopes in the safes of prison governors will finally be published. These envelopes used to contain instructions on how to deal with prisoners in exceptional circumstances. How many of them have been destroyed? So far, no answers exist.

The problem of legality in the Soviet state has only just begun to be discussed openly. It has been broached in an article by the journalist Yury Feofanov on Peoples’ Commissar of Justice Nikolai Krylenko, who after the revolution was Supreme C-in-C of the Russian Army and Fleet. Krylenko, himself executed in June 1938, did nothing in 1934 to hinder the passing of the law on special trials in cases of “terrorism”, or the law of 14 September 1937 which gave a cloak of legality to the accelerated procedures adopted for cases of “sabotage”. Feofanov caused a stir in the Soviet legal world by demonstrating the lawlessness which had prevailed in the Soviet state for decades.

In February and June 1988 the Supreme Court of the USSR finally reviewed the sentences passed on Bukharin and others fifty years ago. The death sentences, it is stated, had been passed “on the basis of evidence falsified during investigation and cross-examination”. It also became known, officially this time, that Stalin and Voroshilov had promised the accused on behalf of the Politburo that they and their families would be spared on condition that they agreed to make dreadful false confessions publicly. They signed, and were shot immediately after the trial. In addition, the whole of Lev Kamenev’s family was murdered—his wife (sister of Trotsky), his children, his grandson (after a spell in Kolyma), likewise his younger brother and his wife.

63 Pravda, 10 July 1988.
64 Dmitry Shelestov, “Pyat konvertov, a v nich poshibi vssyo, chiyo ostalos ot sem Kamene-
Those rehabilitated also include Yury Pyatakov, one of the organizers of the industrialization drive (shot in 1937), and Karl Radek, sentenced to ten years in prison (perished in a camp). In June 1988, Party officials murdered on Stalin’s orders were posthumously rehabilitated. All this took place on the eve of the XIXth Party Conference and was intended as confirmation that under Gorbachev justice and truth are victorious. In the latest developments, Leon Trotsky has also been cleared of the accusation of treason. There has been a public acknowledgement that Trotsky was murdered by an agent of Stalin. Whether his works will be issued in the USSR remains an open question.

Soviet writing described for the first time the interiors of Lefortovo and Sukhanovo, the two worst Moscow prisons, which had contained the private offices of the People’s Commissars for Internal Affairs Yezhov and, later, Beria, who was not above taking a personal part in the torture of prisoners under investigation.

Many a Soviet citizen is likely to have shuddered when reading the letter from the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold about his abominable tortures: “. . . they laid me face down on the floor, used an iron rod to beat the soles of my feet and my back, when I was sitting on a chair they beat my legs with it . . . the pain was so fierce that it was like having boiling water poured on the painful parts (I screamed and sobbed with pain) . . . the investigator kept threatening me: ‘If you don’t write, we’ll beat you again, we’ll just leave your head and your right hand, the rest of you we’ll turn into a piece of shapeless bloody meat . . .’” The letter was addressed to Academician Andrei Vyshinsky (State Prosecutor of the USSR) and honorary Academician Vyacheslav Molotov, Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars. Meyerhold evidently was hoping that mention of their academic rank, with the implied reference to their moral duty, would arouse their sympathy. His answer was the death sentence for himself, followed by the bestial murder of his wife, who had her eyes put out by her murderers. When her father approached a famous actor who was also a deputy to the Supreme Soviet with a request to be allowed to bury her, he answered mockingly: “Public opinion refuses to sanction your daughter’s burial . . .”

But the most important materials for the history of the Stalin era are to be found in an article about the “Ryutin case”, an obscure episode of Stalin’s struggle to establish his own unlimited dictatorship.

Martemyan Nikitovich Ryutin was a peasant by birth, a Siberian from the Irkutsk province. After joining the Bolshevik Party in 1914 he worked his way up during the revolution and civil war, and came to be a Party Secretary to the Krasnopresnensky Local Committee in Moscow—an important post in those days.

A candidate member of the Bolshevik Central Committee, Ryutin openly and sharply criticized his party’s policy at the 1930 Party Plenum. At Stalin’s insistence he was sacked from the Party and then arrested, but in January 1931 he was freed because there was no corpus delicti (for which Stalin was unable ever to forgive the then Chairman of the OGPU, Yagoda). More than that, he was actually reinstated in the Party. That kind of thing was still possible in 1931. But Ryutin did not stop there. In 1932 he wrote an “Address to all the Members of the Bolshevik Party”, which was discussed by a group of Party members.

In that document Ryutin emphatically condemned the “dangerous speed of industrialization”, “the hazards of collectivization”, and “the expropriation of the land” which had brought the country to “the severest economic crisis, monstrous pauperization of the masses, and famine”. He went on to say: “the whole country has been muzzled . . . revolutionary legality has been flouted . . . the rights of the Party have been usurped.” After that Ryutin was denounced. He was arrested again, but a search failed to bring to light either his “Address . . .” or his manuscript “Stalin and the Crisis of Proletarian Dictatorship”, which has not been found to this day. Stalin’s insistence that Ryutin be shot was opposed by several members of the Politburo, so he was sentenced to ten years in prison. But after Kirov’s murder Stalin got his revenge. Ryutin was brought to Moscow, where he was submitted to the farce of a new cross-examination by State Prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky. Ryutin was accused of terrorism. although he had been an agent of Stalin. Whether his works will be issued in the USSR remains an open question.

Kuropaty—the Quintessence of Socialist Construction in the USSR

Those dreadful events, the monstrous tortures and the mockery, have to be described now in order to allow Soviet citizens to heave a sigh of relief: instead of the cruelty of Stalinism, they are now experiencing a liberal period of perestroika, and there is no comparing the present with the torments to which ordinary people, peasants and workers, were subjected at other periods of Soviet rule.

Information published in September 1988 about the terrible Soviet crimes
in Kuropaty (near the Byelorussian capital Minsk) shows that the time is now ripe to judge Soviet socialism objectively. What happened at Kuropaty?

Deep in the forests of Kuropaty about 250,000 people (a preliminary estimate) were shot. The executions took place in an enclosure, day in, day out, round the clock, for four years, from 1937 to 1941. Exhumations have been carried out in the presence of archaeologists from the Institute of History of the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences, who established that the majority of victims were not local politicians or Party members but workers, peasants, low-rank civil servants, and members of the rural intelligentsia. By the end of September 1988 510 mass-graves had been found, each one ten metres long and three metres deep. It was then supposed that the total number of mass graves might reach 900. The victims included not only Byelorussians but citizens of the Baltic states where, as everyone knows, class and ethnic purges began in the summer of 1940 immediately after the establishment there of Soviet power. Evidently the overcrowding in the camps and the burden on the railway system had brought the authorities round to the simplest solution: kill the people on the spot. The locals called the road to Zaslavl “the Death Road”, and there are still people to be found who witnessed the crime and who have kept silence for half a century. The victims included many women. Their belongings have been found and from these it is obvious that they had not been told where they were being taken to or why. Because of the wholesale nature of the crime it is logical to assume that Kuropaty was no exception, that other Kuropatys and Katyns will be discovered elsewhere. Indeed, the latest estimate of the man-made demographic catastrophe has now been put before the Soviet public: from 1927 to 1953 there were 40 million victims of Stalin’s repression with 20 million deaths. These statistics will surely shock the Soviet public as much as they will confute those Western “revisionists” who continue to write of “thousands” of deaths under Stalin. 69

Will Soviet historians and Western “revisionists” explain those events in their usual way, “there were great achievements, but also there were losses”? Or will they have the courage to describe and judge the events even if it means having to judge Soviet socialism impartially?

New Myths About The Soviet Past

FIRST STAGE

HISTORY IS OF KEY importance to today’s leadership. They need to persuade the people that the new policy is a realization of Lenin’s precepts. That in turn means that everything Lenin did or said was justified. Lenin now speaks on television to Soviet citizens, through newscasts, and he speaks from the stage. A new play by Mikhail Shatrov, Onward, Onward, Onward, published in the January edition of Znamya, portrays Lenin not only as a great teacher but also as a merciless accuser. As if at the Last Judgement he examines what happened in the thirty years after his death. Above all he judges the actions of Stalin—who is today again the focus for Party and popular criticism. Lenin seems to confirm Gorbachev’s announcement at the seventieth anniversary of the October revolution: “Stalin’s guilt before the Party and the people, and the guilt of his closest circle, for the mass repressions and violations of legality, is enormous and unforgivable.”71 In Shatrov’s play Lenin speaks like a newspaper editorial: “I am definitely guilty before the workers of Russia. Because of my accused illness, I did not see to it that Stalin was finally removed ... I want everybody to know that I am not shirking my moral responsibility.”72 At each end of the political spectrum both reformist-liberals and “guardian”-conservatives agree on one thing: that Lenin’s heritage must be preserved, he himself must not be touched, and his period may be researched only to demonstrate the greatness of the founder of the Soviet state. But the struggle to “purify Leninism” from the pollution of Stalinism is not as safe as all that for the Party. Being liable to expose the Party’s ideological bridgeheads, as formed over the decades, it thus opens the possibility of an irreparable breach in the defence of the Party’s last bastion, its Lenin period. Some attempts have been made, but the Party is vigilant. 73

No sooner have the old myths about the Soviet past, myths which have prevailed for nearly seventy years, dissolved away, than new ones have appeared. They have arisen in response to the need of the ruling elite to save the most vital part of the past, the Party itself, and represent it as a force for the good.

As always, this responsible task falls on the shoulders of the Party intelligentsia. Since the “Andreyeva letter”, it is the dramatist Alexander Gelman who has been coming to the fore. He was commissioned by the editorial board of the main theoretical journal, Kommunist, to write an article about the return of the Party to its moral roots. The article took a direct line of reasoning. According to Gelman, the Party arose as a moral, spiritual force. After Lenin’s death the Party became alienated from universal human values, as a result of which “mankind was humiliated”. Unity of policy and morality was destroyed under Stalinism (a term hitherto used only by political émigrés). The attempt to return to moral roots after Stalin’s death

\textsuperscript{71} Pravda, 3 November 1987.
\textsuperscript{72} Znamya, no. 1, January 1988.
\textsuperscript{73} Vasily Selivnyi “Istoki” in Novy Mir, no. 5, 1988, pp. 169-80.
failed. Gelman does not say why this was so, he seems to imply that the reader must figure it out for himself. In the period of “stagnation” things got worse: deception, hypocrisy, the birth of the mafias.

Gelman reassures those who, as he puts it, “are confused by the revelation of mistakes, illegalities, crimes”. He sees a way out in the idea that after Lenin’s death the history of the Party “divides into two streams”. So it turns out that side by side with Stalinism there was within the Party another current, loyal to Lenin, to “spirituality, and the nobility of mankind”. And in the Party there were “heroes”, “saints”, who were numbered in “thousands”. They did not accept “Stalinism”. What did they do? They “defended those who had been wrongly condemned”, there were cases of collective disobedience which, according to Gelman, “forced even Stalin to retreat”. Another thing in favour of the “second current” was, according to Gelman, the selfless labour of the people in the war with Germany. 24

Of everything listed by Gelman, that is the closest to the truth, for at that time the people were saved by their belief, not in the Party, but in the idea that under German occupation there would be no life at all.

As a matter of fact, the defeat of Germany was achieved largely because by the beginning of the war the Party had not succeeded in creating a “new Soviet man” equivalent to a cog in a massive machine, it had not broken initiative, or replaced human moral values, even if by then they were a bit frayed, with Party values. It is true that during the repressions there were cases when people helped those who had ended up in Soviet prison cells, but this happened under Stalin, under Khrushchev, and under Brezhnev, and had no connection with the Party. Gelman’s assertion that the “spiritual, moral fund built up by the Party among the people was so strong and so deeply embedded in the popular mind that it never abated or diminished” is a gross untruth based on juggling with facts: he counterbalances the limitless crimes against the people committed over a period of seventy years by the Soviet leaders, with the fundamental goodness of the mass membership, exemplified by the actions of brave individuals like Ryutin. In fact, Ryutin, and others who were not Party members, had tried to help the victims because their human decency was stronger than Lenin’s formulation of Party morality, which held that the only thing that was moral was what served the working class and the Party.

His article, which appeared on the very eve of the XIXth Party Conference, was probably meant to dampen down the passions ready to rage at the Conference, and to show to the hierarchy that the Party intelligentsia were not a threat to them. But at the same time it lays the foundation for a new interpretation of the Soviet past: in spite of all the costs (and this time the Party’s mistakes may be mentioned) the gradual advance towards socialism continues.

Gelman and other members of the pro-Gorbachev Party intelligentsia are now creating a new Party mythology aimed at maintaining in power the Party which has several times now brought the country to the verge of catastrophe. However, the truth of the matter is that only the non-Party intelligentsia, the physicist Petr Kapitsa and physiologist Ivan Pavlov for example, intrepidly spoke out in defence of the régime’s victims. Twenty days after the murder of Kirov and the Party’s initiation of a bloody reign of terror, Pavlov wrote to Molotov: “Those who maliciously sentence masses of people like themselves to death, those who satisfactorily carry out these orders, and those who by compulsion become accustomed to take part in this, will hardly remain beings who feel and think humanly. And on the other side, for those who are transformed into timid animals, it will hardly be possible to be made once again into beings with a sense of personal human worth . . . Have pity on our land and on us.” 25

It is probable that policy towards the Soviet past will for a considerable time be determined by Gorbachev’s instruction at the 29 July 1988 Plenum, soon after the XIXth Conference: the delegates sharply condemned “the mistakes and crimes of the past”. But “they rejected vehemently any attempt to cancel out the historic achievements of the Soviet people”. 26 Gorbachev repeated this formula in his speech at the reception for Erich Honecker in the Kremlin, 28 September 1988. 27

The Soviet leaders clearly do not really differ in their fundamental attitude towards the Soviet past. This means that both professional historians and writers will still be concerned less with the truth of history than with a politically balanced version. But some may perhaps dissent and be prepared to risk writing a more objective history of the USSR.

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24 A. Gelman, “Vozvrashchenie k nравственным истокам”, in Kommunist, no. 9, June 1988, p. 20.