

# H-Net Reviews

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Stephen G. Wheatcroft, ed. *Challenging Traditional Views of Russian History*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xxi + 234 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-75461-0.

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## Notes from Down Under

This collection arose from a series of conferences at the University of Melbourne, and the authors are all real or honorary Australians. The book provides a little something for everyone. For the student of medieval Russian or world history, there is David Christian's article on the Kaghanate of the Rus and the non-Slavic sources of Russian statehood. Two articles on the late tsarist period deal with the upsurge in mass executions after the 1905 revolution and the transfer of weapons-making expertise from Russia to the United States during World War I. Four articles on the Stalin period deal with the Soviet famine of 1932-33; patronage relationships between political elites and cultural figures; waves of mass killings during the 1930s; and the characteristics of victims of the Great Terror in Leningrad. Finally, three articles deal with more recent issues: the dissident roots of Glasnost; recent appropriation of historical patriotic narratives about the conquest of Chechnya; and the changing balance between organizational norms and personalist relationships in the Soviet power structure. While these articles are all interesting, and some are truly groundbreaking, the volume reads like a set of conference papers. Some articles assume a specialized knowledge of their narrow subject, and they vary in format from engaging narratives to reports with numbered paragraphs.

In the first article, David Christian of San Diego State University, drawing on a new synthesis of archeological and other data, highlights the eastern roots of early Rus. Before the 900s, Rus was referred to as a Kaghanate and was in the orbit of the Turkic Khazars. Fortifications and chronicle accounts suggest that, before the center of Rus

relocated to Kiev in the mid-900s, "the Viking Rus' learnt their statecraft as apprentices and eventually rivals of the Turkic Khazars." (p. 21)

In the second article, "The Crisis of the Late Tsarist Penal System," Stephen Wheatcroft applies his careful scrutiny to statistics on imprisonment, exile, and execution in the decades before 1917. He argues that improvements in the penal system following the Great Reforms were reversed in the crackdown after the 1905 Revolution. Wheatcroft situates his position between optimistic views of late tsarist Russia—he mentions in particular Bruce Adams—and the pessimistic argument by Richard Pipes that Russia was a police state from as early as the 1870s. In his own assessment of the prerevolutionary roots of Soviet excesses, Wheatcroft argues that "it is here, in the reversal of this liberal trend in the post-1905 period, that we can see the roots of the monstrous developments that were to come during the First World War, Civil War, collectivisation and the Ezhovshchina" (p. 44).

Perhaps the most groundbreaking contribution in the collection is "The Russian Army and American Industry, 1915-1917: Globalisation and the Transfer of Technology" by Fredric S. Zuckerman of the University of Adelaide (his name is misspelled in the book). In contrast to usual portrayals of Russian backwardness and American technological superiority in the early twentieth century, Zuckerman reports that during World War I it was the Russians who taught the Americans about technology in arms manufacturing. When the Russian government sought to purchase arms from the Westing-

house Company, Russian inspectors were unpleasantly surprised by the quality of the American mass-produced goods. “The still-vibrant Russian artisan mentality demanded that specifications for the rifles meet the most fine tolerances.” The Americans could not even measure such tolerances; they lacked craftsmen who could meet them; and they could not even make patterns and jigs that exactly duplicated the hundred component parts of the complex Russian rifle (p. 59). A General Fedorov was sent to Westinghouse and allowed to “restructure production and deal with the labor force directly. Fedorov decided all technical problems on the spot and issued technical instructions to factory floor supervisors on the best and quickest method of manufacturing the rifles.” Thus, “[b]oth the Russians and Americans learned that American manufacturing could be improved upon by Russian experience” (p. 62). Zuckerman relies mainly on documents stored in the Provisional Government files at the Hoover Institution in California. His research underlines the value of the Hoover archives in giving nuance to Russian-American encounters by examining their cooperation in practical endeavors.[1]

Turning to the Stalin era, in the fourth article Stephen Wheatcroft joins R. W. Davies in analyzing the causes of the 1933 famine. They contend that it was not purely manufactured by the Stalin regime’s withholding of available grain from starving peasants. Rather, Davies and Wheatcroft argue, the harvests of 1932-1933 were genuinely poor. As sources for this, they reject published Central Statistical Administration figures, relying instead on collective farm annual reports and on centrally compiled grain-fodder balances from the archives. The authors adduce various practical reasons for the short harvest, many of which indeed stemmed from disastrous Stalinist policies. The view that the famine resulted from a shortage has been argued for some years by Mark Tauger, using the same annual report data.[2] Finally, the authors point out that the Politburo quietly approved some grain loans to feed farm workers and children’s institutions in famine areas. The authors acknowledge, however, that “considerable research is required to establish exactly how the food loans of the famine months were distributed” (p. 87).

In the fifth article, Sheila Fitzpatrick of the University of Chicago presents “Patronage and the Intelligentsia in Stalin’s Russia,” reprinted from an earlier collection. When it first appeared in 1998, her article may have been “the first attempt at an overview of client-patron relationships between members of the Soviet intelligentsia and members of the Soviet political elite” (p. 94), but since

then valuable new research has been appearing on this subject.[3] In the present article, Fitzpatrick describes who the patrons were and what they could do for their clients, how to acquire a patron, and hierarchies of patronage. Finally, Fitzpatrick considers what benefits the patrons might have derived from their generosity. Setting the Soviet example in the comparative literature on patronage and clientelism, Fitzpatrick points out that in the absence of real voting rights, Soviet clients had little to offer to patrons in return for their protection; indeed, theories of patronage that were originally developed in studies of more democratic societies may need to be refined (p. 94). One of Fitzpatrick’s most colorful sources is the memoir of theater figure Natal’ya Sats, who sought patrons even after being exiled to the provinces in the 1940s. Fitzpatrick describes a scene in which Sats wrote a letter to a potential patron, revising it fifteen or twenty times, seeking just the right degree of brevity and familiarity.

Next, another article by Wheatcroft, “Towards Explaining the Changing Levels of Stalinist Repression in the 1930s: Mass Killings,” identifies the terror of the 1937-38 as the “fourth of a series of great upsurges in mass executions that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century,” beginning with that of 1906-1908, which he described in his earlier chapter in this book. While others have attempted to quantify arrests and incarcerations in this era, Wheatcroft distinguishes those that led to execution. He provides variant series of month-by-month figures for arrests and executions in various regions (p. 125). Interestingly, Wheatcroft cites allegations of an increase in mass killings in March 1935, which if substantiated would contradict the image of that year as a time of liberalization.[4] Wheatcroft concludes by citing the “limits” for arrests and executions decreed in the NKVD’s infamous Operational Order 00447 of July 30, 1937, “[o]n operations to repress former kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements” (p. 136). He might have discussed the meaning of the word “limits”: did they connote maximum figures or minimum targets? This bears on the debate over how much the initiative for the Great Terror came “from above” and how much “from below.”

Unfortunately, Wheatcroft’s article is hard to follow. One section heading, for example, speaks of “Changing the line on repression, June-July 1931, and the first attempts by Akulov,” but that section does not address what Ivan Akulov, the new OGPU First Deputy, actually did (p. 123). (A striking point in that section, however, is that Akulov’s appointment was a softening in policy that the Politburo took pains to conceal). Elsewhere Wheatcroft

barely identifies a secret police figure named Zakovskii (p. 128). More editing would have made this contribution more attractive to Russian and Soviet historians as a whole.

Melanie Ilic of the University of Gloucestershire continues the theme of the Great Terror in the provinces. Her article "The Great Terror: Leningrad—A Quantitative Analysis," previously published in *Europe-Asia Studies*, analyzes lists of victims from the city and province of Leningrad. Her main source is the first two volumes of the *Leningradskii martirolog, 1937-1938*, which drew on NKVD files and on records collated by the Memorial organization. Ilic also uses figures from the 1939 census showing the composition of the Leningrad population in the aftermath of the Great Terror. (She might have discussed the problems with the 1939 census and whether the fragmentary materials recovered from the suppressed 1937 census would have been useful). She uses a data set consisting of every tenth entry from the alphabetical volumes, and also pays special attention to all of the 297 entries for female victims (of whom thirty-six percent were nuns or other church workers). She concludes that the "second wave" of the Great Terror, which in her definition encompasses all of 1937, affected not only Party members and other elites, but also "former kulaks, the national minorities and religious personnel." These were the intended targets of Operational Order 00447 of July 30. One motive, as Oleg Khlevnyuk pointed out, seems to have been "destruction of a potential 'fifth column'" in the prelude to a potential war. However, argues Ilic, the purges were also partly "a social cleansing exercise." They affected vulnerable people such as "the elderly and infirm, vagrants, hospital residents and the otherwise unemployed," that is, "socially marginal individuals" who "did not easily fit into the new Soviet way of life and were, therefore, regarded as easily dispensable by local authorities" (p. 167).

Introducing her section on female terror victims, Ilic says that "the impact of mass repression specifically on women has not yet received serious academic attention," and her footnote cites only the memoir of Evgeniia Ginzburg (p. 151). Ilic might have mentioned a growing body of literature on women in the Gulag, including an article in an edited volume subsequently published by Ilic herself.[5]

Turning to the post-Stalin era, Robert Horvath writes on the dissident roots of Glasnost. He argues that, "[b]y acting openly, dissidents set a precedent for the development of democratic politics" (p. 173) and that they devel-

oped the ideas that would be appropriated by Gorbachev in the mid-1980s. He might have translated terms like "zeks" that may not be familiar to all readers.

The most entertaining article in the collection was that of Julie Elkner, "Rethinking Yermolov's Legacy: New Patriotic Narratives of Russia's Engagement with Chechnya." She examines how the memory of General Yermolov, who conquered Chechnya in the nineteenth century, is being used to justify current policies in that region. This article is a delightful addition to the growing genre of works on narrative and empire.

The final essay, Graeme Gill's "Stalinism and the Fall of the Soviet Union," is an elegant schematic picture of the changing relationship between organizational norms and personalist power in the Stalin era and beyond. However, the essay is accessible only to specialists or advanced graduate students who are familiar with events to which he passingly refers, such as the "famous case of Ryazan in 1959." For more detail on his arguments the reader would have to consult Gill's books on these topics and other works cited in his footnotes.

Some aims of this collection include challenging traditional views of Russian and Soviet history and illustrating the value of recently opened archives. These articles, while not all groundbreaking, do contribute to new bodies of research on topics such as regional studies, the results of NKVD Operation 00447, personalistic relations in the Stalinist system, Russian-American encounters, and narrative and empire. These pieces also do highlight valuable material in the recently opened archives. They show that historical research is alive and well "down under."

#### Notes

[1]. Another example, which also draws from the Hoover Archives, is Bertrand Patenaude, *Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[2]. M. B. Tauger, "The 1932 Harvest and the Famine," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): pp. 80-89; and Tauger, *Natural Disaster and Human Actions in the Soviet Famine of 1931-1933*, Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 1506, 2001. These and other publications are available in PDF format at <http://www.as.wvu.edu/history/Faculty/Tauger/tauger.htm>.

[3]. See Barbara B. Walker, "(Still) Searching for a Soviet Society: A Review of Recent Scholarship on Personal

Ties in Soviet Political and Economic Life,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43, no. 4 (July 2001): pp. 631-642. For case studies see, e.g., the contributions by Michael David-Fox, Kiril Tomoff, Vera Tolz, and Barbara Walker in *Contemporary European History* 11, no. 1 (Feb. 2002). On literary circles and political patrons, see Barbara B. Walker, *Maximilian Voloshin and the Russian Literary Circle: Culture and Survival in Revolutionary Times* (Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

[4]. On 1935 as a year of relaxation, see, e.g., Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 14, 24.

[5]. See, e.g., John Crowfoot, Marjorie Farquharson, Catriona Kelly, Sally Laird, Cathy Porter, and Zaraya Vesvolaya, trans., *Till My Tale is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*, ed. Simon Vilensky (Indiana University Press, 1999), which was translated from a Russian book published in 1989; Emma Mason, “Women in the Gulag in the 1930s,” in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilic (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); V. Shapovalova, “Women's Labour Camp Memoirs: Camp as a Way of Life,” in *Sotsial'naia istoriia. Ezhegodnik, 2003, Zhenskaia i gendernaia istoriia*, ed. N. L. Pushkareva (Moskva, ROSSPEN, 2003). A recent publication is Benjamin M. Sutcliffe, “Documenting Women's Voices in Perestroika Gulag Narratives,” *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, Winter 2002-2003.

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