The Historiography of the October Revolution in America and Russia, 1918-2023: A Comparative Review

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I. Introduction

In the fall of 1917–October according to the Russian calendar at the time, November according to the one used today–members of the Soviet Military-Revolutionary Committee seized control of the Winter Palace in Petrograd, ousting the dysfunctional government which had been formed earlier that year. The Bolshevik Party entered power, sparked a civil war, and eventually established the first communist state. Coming twelve years after the start of the first Russian revolution and mere months after the revolution which had ended tsarist rule, October was merely one part of a greater upheaval in Russian society, yet it created something far more radical than the revolutions which came before it. The seizure of power took only days and, unlike the events which preceded and succeeded it, was largely bloodless. Yet the event became mythical, both in the newborn Soviet Union and in the West, and eventually came to overshadow the rest of the revolution. This short-lived moment, while anticlimactic on its own, was far from inconsequential. The title of the American socialist John Reed's memoir of the revolution reveals exactly how it was viewed in its own time: *Ten Days that Shook the World.* It was history from the moment it happened, in America and the Soviet Union. In the United States it became the key to understanding the Russian mind. In the U.S.S.R. it became the inevitable catalyst for an inevitable global revolution, and the confirmation of everything the Bolsheviks believed. These narratives evolved over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from the birth of the U.S.S.R. to its collapse and beyond. The narratives of October told by historians tell us more about the Soviet-American (and subsequent Russo-American) relationship than the event itself. These histories are historic sources and cultural artifacts in and of themselves. They tell the story of a history that was contested from the very beginning, in Washington and Moscow, and remains that way today. Comparing the historiographies of October from both sides of the Bering

Strait illuminates an elusive part of intellectual Cold War history, from its origins to its vestiges today.

II. Istpart and the Early Soviet Historiography

From the moment the revolution was over, the intellectual leaders of the Soviet Union were interested in the history of what they saw as the most pivotal event in their national history. Leon Trotsky notably made the first foray into the history of the revolution when he published *History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk* in 1918. In September of 1920, Vladimir Lenin created the "The Commission for the Collection and Study of Materials on the History of the October Revolution and the History of the Russian Communist Party" (also known as "Istpart") with the already accomplished historian Mikhail Pokrovsky at its helm.[1] Istpart was the center of revolutionary history during most of the 1920s. While Istpart was intended as a center for scholarly research, it was placed firmly within the control of the Bolshevik Party. This conflict of interest would define the institution, as the party increasingly used Istpart as another arm of its propaganda campaign. From the very beginning, the historiography of the October Revolution was deeply political.

Istpart was plagued by financial difficulties throughout its existence. The Soviet state publishing house, Gosizdat, regularly lost or delayed manuscripts.[2] What books did come out often sold poorly, and the entire commission operated off of a budget of 52 million rubles, or, according to one Istpart employee, about one tenth the cost of a single ballet in Moscow.[3] Despite financial difficulties, the ambitious historians of Istpart took their work seriously. The

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[1] Larry E. Holmes, *Revising the Revolution: The Unmaking of Russia's Official History of 1917* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press): 14-15.
[2] Ibid, 91.
[3] Ibid, 28.

early Soviet historians believed that history could serve both scholarly and political purposes. These historians, best represented by figures such as Pokrovsky and Mikhail Ol'minsky, thought the arc of history naturally bent towards a proletariat revolution, and saw genuine scholarship as a means of forwarding political radicalization rather than hindering it. To them, a marxist worldview was naturally compatible with the pursuit of truth. The mission statement was made clear in a 1922 issue of Istpart's primary journal, *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia* (*Proletariat Revolution).* As the journal states, its content "must have the characteristics neither of an apologia (especially of an institution) nor of agitational literature." The goal was to separate propaganda from scholarship while maintaining "a strictly Marxist evaluation."[4] What exactly a marxist evaluation was came to be hotly debated as the Bolshevik Party and forces within it sought to shape the historical narrative.

The attempt by Soviet historians to weld together politics and scholarship drove the early debate in soviet historiography. However, regional tensions were also at play, as can be seen in the early debates between Istpart's second director Mikhail Ol'minsky and Vladimir Nevsky, an historian operating out of Petrograd (renamed Leningrad in 1924). From Petrograd Nevsky launched *Krasnaia Letopis' (Red Chronicle),* the primary competitor to *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia,* which was published in Moscow. From the beginning Nevsky's journal maintained a focus on research articles, in contrast to *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia* which dabbled heavily in the publication of memoirs.[5] The tensions between the two editors boiled over when Nevsky attacked Ol'minsky at the second Istpart conference held in 1923, where he stated that the study of history "requires highly skilled personnel," but unfortunately, "not all of our comrades are able to promote historical work. They lack the acumen, the training, and the necessary

[4] Ibid, 15.
[5] Ibid, 20.

knowledge." The attack was implicitly understood by those at the conference.[6] Ol'minsky would get his revenge in 1924 when Nevsky published *Essays on the History of the Russian Communist Party*. Ol'minsky attacked the work for its use of non-bolshevik sources. A reliance on sources from the old regime, and especially from the tsarist police, made the work unacceptable as a piece of marxist scholarship.[7] While Nevsky continued to publish throughout the 1920s and remained influential in the sphere of revolutionary history, Ol'minsky successfully lobbied for his removal from Istpart that same year. Critics agreed with Ol'minsky that archives of the tsarist police were not an adequate source, as they were inherently biased against the revolution.[8] The infighting between Nevsky and Ol'minsky may seem insignificant to the historiography of the October Revolution, but it presaged the much more important political fractures which would occur within the historiography throughout the 1920s.

In 1924 the death of Lenin kicked off an ultimately deadly power struggle within Soviet leadership which in turn included increased politicization of historical materials. The so-called "literary debate" began when Trotksy published the essay "Lessons of October" as a preface to a greater work in 1925. Trotsky was no stranger to politicizing history. His first work on the Russian Revolution, the aforementioned *History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk* was designed to shape opinion of the revolution abroad.[9] With "Lessons of October," he attempted to shape the narrative within Russia to his advantage, using the October Revolution to do so. The book, which is generally in line with Trotsky's other works on the topic, posits the revolution as part of an international struggle for communism.[10] More importantly, however, Trotsky emphasized his own position and downplayed the influence of the ruling triumvirate, particularly

[6] Ibid, 22.
[7] Ibid, 24.
[8] Ibid, 26.
[9] James D. White, "Early Soviet Historical Interpretations of the Russian Revolution 1918-1924," *Soviet Studies* 37, no. 3 (July 1985): 332.
[10] Leon Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, trans. John G. Wright (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1937), 2.

Kamenev and Zinoviev. Trotsky implicitly accused Kamenev of attempting to lead the revolution "into a blind alley," and he accused Zinoviev of attempting to forestall the revolution.[11] Overall, Trotsky's preface had very little to do with the actual history of the revolution, but it was important for beginning the chain reaction of historical politicization that followed. The response was immediate, and the majority of party leadership aligned themselves against Trotsky. Istpart followed suit, and in 1925 an article written by Segei Piontkovsky and published in *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia* characterized Trotsky's piece as an "attack on the theoretical foundations of Leninism."[12] Trotsky embellished his own role in the revolution, and in response his critics severely minimized it.[13] The October Revolution was now more polarizing for Soviet historians than it had ever been before.

The fallout of this event is well known. Trotsky went into exile and Stalin consolidated power over the Bolshevik Party, becoming General Secretary of the Soviet Union until his death. This was far from the end of historical politicization, however. As Stalin's power extended to Istpart, he sought to influence the narrative of 1917 further. It is not entirely fair to blame Stalin alone for the increased partisanship and falsification which occurred after 1925, as Soviet historians themselves supported this turn towards authoritarianism, often as a way to jockey for power. In 1927 Pokrovsky spoke out against the "parliament of opinions" he saw within academia.[14] Around the same time, Piontkovsky framed history as a "revolutionary science" rather than a humanistic discipline.[15] The zeitgeist of Soviet historiography was clear, and properly articulated at Istpart's fourth conference in 1927 by Sergei Gusev. At the fourth conference Gusev stated explicitly what was already implicitly understood by most Soviet

[11] Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, 11; 32.
[12] Holmes, *Revising the Revolution,* 20.
[13] Robert H. McNeal, "Soviet Historiography on the October Revolution: A Review of Forty Years," *The American Slavic and East European Review* 17, no. 3 (October 1953): 270.
[14] Holmes, *Revising the Revolution,* 104.
[15] Ibid, 105.

historians at this point: "We are bolsheviks, not academics." Gusev also announced measures to further politicize *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia,* and bring it totally in line with party orthodoxy.[16] Istpart's scholarly independence was sabotaged from within as party orthodoxy and the desire for bureaucratic power superseded a commitment to independent scholarly work. By the end of 1929 Istpart, already on its last legs, was merged with the Lenin Institute.[17] By the time Istpart was dissolved, the brief period of independent marxist scholarship had come to an end as well, and the Stalinization of Soviet history was in full force.

III. The Stalinization of Soviet History

Beginning in the late 1920s the Soviet government became increasingly heavy handed in its enforcement of an orthodox way of thinking on Soviet historians. During this period Stalin himself began to correspond with historians, such as Pokrovsky, and interject into historical debates.[18] All of the events which occurred in 1917 became increasingly tied to the proletariat and the Bolshevik Party. In *The Peasantry in 1917* (1927) Sergei Dubrovsky (a student of Pokrovsky) emphasized the "direct bond" between the proletariat and peasantry.[19] Throughout Soviet historiography, the peasantry began to blend into the proletariat revolution. According to Andrei Shestakov, "The peasant revolution formed a single current with the revolution of urban workers and soldiers."[20] The works of these historians further united the entire revolution under the banner of the Bolshevik party and the proletariat class. These historians derived their ideas from Pokrovsky, who wrote in 1925 that the October Revolution had completed the revolution in February.[21] The result was a history centralized around October 1917 and the proletariat action

[16] Ibid, 106.
[17] Ibid, 131.
[18] Ibid, 141.
[19] Ibid, 55.
[20] Ibid, 56.
[21] Ibid, 115.

within it, ultimately serving to position the Bolsheviks as the only true revolutionaries, and sideline the contributions of the Mensheviks, Kadets and other liberal and socialist groups. This narrative did, however, make room for the events which had preceded the October Revolution. Even if the actions of the peasants were only understood through a marxist lens, they were still analyzed. In a letter to Pokrovsky written in 1927, Stalin derided this interpretation of events. In Stalin's interpretation, the October Revolution represented a clean break from the past. It completed the revolution in February only as a "by-product" of establishing a truly revolutionary socialist state.[22] Stalin took issue with Pokrovsky's more sociological view of history in general, as well as his underemphasis of the individual. These ideas were incongruent with the cult of personality Stalin was establishing at the time.[23]

Stalin's interference in the scholarship of the October Revolution continued into the 1930s. In a letter to the editorial board of *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia* penned in 1931, Stalin stated that:

> The task of the editorial board is, in my opinion, to raise the questions concerning the history of Bolshevism to the proper level, to put the study of the history of our Party on scientific, Bolshevik lines, and to concentrate attention against the Trotskyist and all other falsifiers of the history of our Party, systematically tearing off their masks.[24]

While Stalin insists that he is only giving his opinion, the message is clear: the editorial board has an ideological mission which supersedes any commitment to historical fact. In the same letter, Stalin accused the historian Yemelyan Yaroslavsky of "a number of errors of principle and history."[25] This criticism was aimed at Yaroslavsky for his role in editing a series of volumes on the history of the communist party published between 1926 and 1929. Within these volumes the February revolution was portrayed as a spontaneous event which the Bolsheviks failed to

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[22] Ibid, 115.
[23] Harvey Asher, "The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of M. N. Pokrovsky," *The Russian Review* 31, no. 1 (January 1972): 53.
[24] Joseph Stalin, "Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism," in Works, vol. 13 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 104.
[25] Ibid.

respond to. The work also mentioned many Bolshevik leaders who had disagreed with Lenin's distrust of the provisional government which February brought into being. Among these dissident Bolsheviks was Stalin, who, according to the book, " took a mistaken position regarding these fundamental issues."[26] Even though these pages had been written by a different historian (a young academic named David Kin), Yaroslavsky became the target of Stalin's attack. Yaroslavsky apologized for his transgression, and the volumes were denounced as "Trotskyist libel" by the Institute of Red Professors, an institution founded by Pokrovsky.[27] Stalin's reproach of Yaroslavsky and the rallying of academics behind him definitively closed the book on the early period of Soviet historiography which was defined by relatively high levels of academic freedom within a marxist framework.

The official Stalinist history finally arrived in 1939 as *A Short Course in the History of the Soviet Communist Party*. The book was instrumental in establishing the party orthodoxy regarding 1917. As the title implies the Soviet textbook linked the October Revolution directly to the Bolshevik Party, which is presented as the savior of the revolution from Mensheviks and Socialists who would have compromised with the bourgeoisie and betrayed the revolution. On the February Revolution the text states that:

> The Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries tried to direct this incipient revolutionary movement into the channels the liberal bourgeoisie needed. The Mensheviks proposed that a procession of workers to the State Duma be organized on February 14, the day of its opening. But the working-class masses followed the Bolsheviks, and went, not to the Duma, but to a demonstration.[28]

The February Revolution was decisively cast aside as a bourgeoisie revolution which had done nothing but continue the status quo. February had brought "the bourgeoisie itself" to power, a group that was "unable to think of anything better than to continue the policy of the detested tsar

[26] Holmes, *Revising the Revolution,* 143.
[27] Ibid, 137; Asher, "The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of M. N. Pokrovsky," 50.
[28] Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Short Course* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 175.

in all its essentials."[29] February was deemed reactionary, and detached from the October Revolution as much as possible. This represented a departure from the works of Dubrovsky and Shestakov (who attempted to create a cohesive narrative around 1917 that was inclusive of both revolutions) and a consolidation of the narrative along party lines. Considering this alongside Stalin's previous comments to Pokrovsky and reproach of Yaroslavsky, one can see how thoroughly party control penetrated the new historical narrative.

Events within the *Short Course* are laid out plainly and chronologically with the scientific precision endorsed by Piontkovsky, but often prefaced with a remark explaining how the event in question either exposes the treachery of the Mensheviks, Socialists and Trotskyites or demonstrates the courage and righteousness of the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks (or at least the ones still in Stalin's good graces) are idealized to the point of absurdity, while Stalin's opponents are slandered and denigrated. Trotsky himself is framed as a "centrist" who "opposed Lenin and the Bolshevik Party on all the important questions of the war and Socialism."[30] Kamenev and Zinoviev are cast aside as bourgeoisie sympathizers who dreamt of "a bourgeois parliamentary republic."[31] *A Short Course* was not a serious piece of academic literature. It did not contribute to the historiography of the revolution in any way besides completely stifling it. It represents the apogee of Stalin's accumulation of authority over the historical narrative within the Soviet Union, which began when he took power in 1924. The result of this, as is shown in later sections, was the total destruction of serious Soviet historiography for over half a century.

The transformation which took place in Soviet historiography throughout the 1920s had repercussions outside of the historiographic discourse. Many historians were exiled or executed as a result of Stalin's purges. Piontkovsky, Kin and Nevsky were all sentenced to death between

[29] Ibid, 212.
[30] Ibid, 165.
[31] Ibid, 205.

1937 and 1938, alongside other historians not mentioned in this essay.[32] As mentioned above, Pokrovsky had fallen out of favor with the Soviet elite, but his influence within Soviet historiography was still unmatched upon his death from cancer in 1932.[33] Still, considering the fact that the purges targeted many of his students, it is not unlikely that he may have been executed as well had he survived. Through political jockeying, a commitment to increasingly authoritarian Bolshevik dogma, and the shunning of dissident opinions, the academic community which sprouted from the October Revolution had destroyed itself. When the authoritarian regime that historians had helped to create turned on them, they had no recourse.

IV. The American Consensus

In the United States, the earliest attempts to understand the October Revolution's place in history came from journalists and memoirists who had experienced the revolution in one form or another first hand. It was not until the 1930s that interest in the subject accelerated among American historians. By that point, however, American opinion on the revolution had already been shaped by newspapers and memoirs. The October Revolution had become an important symbol in the minds of Americans, though its meaning varied with political affiliation. For American Socialists, the event presented an inspiring vision of a better future. One of the most famous anglophone memoirs was written by the American socialist John Reed. His book *Ten Days that Shook the World* presented a sympathetic view of the Revolution when it was published in 1919.[34] On the other end of the political spectrum, the American government sought to influence the perception of the revolution from the right. The Sisson Papers, released in 1918,

[32] Holmes, *Revising the Revolution*, 161.
[33] Asher, "The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of M. N. Pokrovsky," 55.
[34] John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (Urbana: Project Gutenberg), https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3076/pg3076-images.html.

purported to show "mutual action" taken between the German Empire and the Bolsheviks.[35] The papers were proven to be forgeries in 1958, but the narrative remained popular in America up until that point.[36] Many historians and journalists were persuaded that foreign influence must have been at play. This narrative proliferated throughout the 1930s, but still existed as late as 1964 when Joel Carmichael claimed "that the Germans played an important role in bringing Lenin and the Bolsheviks to power" in his *A Short History of the Russian Revolution*.[37] After 1945 this narrative had the benefit of aligning the United States' former nemesis, Germany, with their current one, the U.S.S.R..

Despite the conspiratorial tones, by the 1930s western historians had eclipsed their Soviet counterparts, who were either muzzled by Stalin's regime, or killed in the purges. Historians in North America and Western Europe were able to exercise a significantly greater degree of scholarly freedom and independence in their work. The seminal book to come out of this early period was William Henry Chamberlin's *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921*. The book became an instant classic when it was first published in 1935, filling the hitherto empty niche for a comprehensive and accurate English history of the revolution.[38] Chamberlin's history was deeply traditionalist. In the introduction to the 1953 edition, it asserts itself as an accurate and chronological account of the facts. Drawing on both communist and anti-communist sources and maintaining a tone of neutrality, Chamberlin can make a better claim to accuracy than most of his contemporaries, but to modern historians, many of his approaches are questionable at best. Chamberlain referred to Lenin as a "genius of revolutionary leadership" and viewed him as the

[35] United States of America, Committee on Public Information, *The German-Bolshevik Conspiracy* (Washington: Committee on Public Information), 3.
[36] George F. Kennan, "The Sisson Documents," *The Journal of Modern History* 28, no. 2 (June, 1956): 142.
[37] Robert D. Warth, "On the Historiography of the Russian Revolution," *Slavic Review* 26, no. 2 (June 1967): 261.
[38] Ibid, 259.

primary architect of the revolution.[39] But Chamberlain does not go so far as to attribute the October revolution to the will of a single individual. He sees the revolution as a blend between western revolutionary theory and the "peculiar" east in which it was able to take hold. Chamberlin does not take Lenin to be the singular force behind the revolution, but he does view him as a unique figure of a kind not seen since the reign of Peter the Great, and an allegorical parallel to the revolution's blend of east and west. Lenin is described as having "western Education… blended with some very characteristic Russian psychological traits."[40] Chamberlin attributes much of the revolution to psychological differences between the east and west. On the peasant revolt of 1917, he states that to understand the revolution one must "[bear] in mind that the Russian peasant, as a result of a very different social and economic background, possessed a different psychology from that of the small land proprietor in France or Germany."[41] Across the board Chamberlin insists that a psychological difference between Russia and the West had an important impact on the success of the Russian revolution. He does, however, attribute this psychological difference to the "social and economic background" rather than any intrinsic character. Besides providing the most often cited history of the revolution for decades to come, this can be considered his most important historiographical contribution.

Chamberlin's history was uniquely important because of its perennial status within Russian and Soviet studies from its publication until the late 1960s. Chamberlin enjoyed access to a much greater quantity of archives than his successors, who began their research after the archives were closed to the public.[42] This advantage allowed Chamberlin's history to remain a core text consulted by students during the postwar period, and his continued influence was clear

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[39] William Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution 1917-1921* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 121.
[40] Ibid, 121-122.
[41] Ibid, 242-243.
[42] Ibid, v.

palpable throughout the twentieth century. In a 1967 article by Robert Warth, Chamberlin's history is described as "a model of objectivity."[43] Warth notes, however, that in spite of Chamberlin's work, a "thorough study of the Bolshevik Revolution" still did not exist by 1967.[44] American historians as a whole focused primarily on monographs discussing only one element of the Russian Revolution. The doctoral thesis of Oliver Radkey, for example, focused on its namesake: *The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism*. Writing in 1958, Radkey ultimately comes to the conclusion that the Bolshevik's rivals were largely responsible for their own downfall. The aforementioned Robert Warth dealt with foreign relations in *The Allies and the Russian Revolution* and John Shelton Curtiss discussed religion in *The Russian Church and the Soviet State, 1917-1950.*[45] American historians had dealt with factors from foreign relations to religion, but were interested in the Russian Revolution as a whole, and dedicated proportionally little time to October itself. Where discussions of the October Revolution did exist, they were often one-sided, due in part to a lack of sources and a reliance on Chamberlin's work.

The American narrative of the October Revolution was defined not only by American citizens, but also by Russian exiles. South of the border in Mexico, Trotsky continued to contest the Stalinist narrative of events from exile until his assassination in 1940. His books *History of Russian Revolution* and *The Revolution Betrayed* continued to be influential in Marxist spheres long after his death, though they have since waned in historiographic importance. On the other end of the political spectrum, the Cadet turned exile historian Sergi Melgunov wrote his own history of the Russian Revolution which western audiences found quite persuasive. Melgunov was a staunch anti-communist, and argued that the Bolsheviks were a small and disorganized

[43] Warth, "On the Historiography of the Russian Revolution," 259.
[44] Ibid, 262.
[45] Ibid, 261-262.

group who did not represent the proletariat as a whole.[46] In his book *The Bolshevik Seizure of Power*, originally published in France in 1953, Melgunov framed the storming of the Winter Palace as a coup d'etat enacted under threat of violence.[47] He rejects the "mass participation" of either soldiers or workers, instead framing the revolution as a coup initiated by the Bolshevik party, and supported by only a small group of sailors and workers.[48] The revolution spread through Petrograd as a "takeover of government offices" by Bolshevik party members rather than a grassroots uprising.[49] The interpretation of events espoused by Melgunov quickly became the dominant narrative of the October Revolution in the United States. October was viewed as a violent takeover forced on the Russian people (including most workers) from above. This view became incredibly prominent among American historians, and combined with the work of Chamberlin, helped to form the American consensus which dominated American historiography throughout the 1960s and 70s.

In the era of the New Deal and McCarthyism, perhaps it was inevitable that the American historiography of October would become heavily politicized. This consensus was more nuanced than maybe inferred from the few historians cited here, but the dominant themes of the period are clearly illuminated. Americans were shocked by the Bolsheviks taking power, and sought to understand it by examining the differences between Russians and themselves. Whether the revolution was portrayed valiantly, such as in Reed's work, or as a bumbling disaster, such as in Melgunov, depended largely on the writer's political disposition. While political overtones and themes of Russian otherness did dominate the American historiography throughout most of the Cold War, partisanship did not take complete control as it did in the Soviet Union under Stalin.

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[46] Ibid, 263.
[47] Sergei Petrovich Melgunov, *The Bolshevik Seizure of Power,* ed. Sergei G. Pushkarev, trans. James S. Beaver (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio Inc., 1972), 62; Warth, "On the Historiography of the Russian Revolution," 263.
[48] Melgunov, *The Bolshevik Seizure of Power,* 65.
[49] Ibid, 66.

American historians remained relatively free to examine the historical themes they wanted in whichever way they pleased. This situation allowed for new ways of examining the October Revolution to emerge in the 1970s, and ultimately supplant the previous consensus in the 1980s and 90s.

V. New Directions

The death of Joseph Stalin in the Spring of 1953 inaugurated a new era of Soviet history. Two years later, the new leader of the U.S.S.R., Nikita Kruschev, gave his famous "secret speech" at the 20th party congress denouncing Stalin's more vicious policies, including the purges that had claimed as its victims the aforementioned Soviet academics of the 1920s and 30s (among, of course, many others). Kruschev's speech, as well as the broader shift away from authoritarianism within the U.S.S.R., emboldened a new generation of Soviet historians, as well as some old ones. In at least one way, however, historians actually beat Kruschev to the punch, as the editors of the journal *Voprosy Istorii* (*Questions in History)* criticized the Stalinist line on the October Revolution shortly after his death in 1953.[50] In another instance, an article regarding soldiers in Petrograd during 1917, originally published in the scholarly journal *Istoricheskie Zapiski* (*Historical Transactions)* in 1952 was reissued three years later with some references to Stalin removed.[51] This testing of the waters did not go over well with the Soviet establishment, even after 1956. *Voprosy Istorii* had its entire editorial board removed in 1957 in response to their challenges to the reigning orthodoxy.[52] Soviet leadership wanted to redefine the revolution on their own terms, without the input of academics. While historians gained more freedom after 1955 than they enjoyed under Stalin, the overarching narrative of Soviet history was still not

[50] McNeal, "Soviet Historiography on the October Revolution," 272-273.
[51] Ibid, 273.
[52] Ibid, 274.

malleable. The October Revolution became an act of patriotism, one which, according to most Soviet historians, saved Russia from "economic and national catastrophe."[53] The academic discourse surrounding October remained limited, as political control over the narrative remained an unspoken but obvious truth.

While this initial movement was short lived, it marked the beginning of an era defined by academics much more willing to ruffle feathers and test party orthodoxy. Discussion of the October Revolution remained stifled, but under Khrushchev Soviet historians were better able to discuss the historiography which had emerged since the founding of the Soviet Union. The historians of the 1920s, now mostly deceased, were reevaluated in a new context, and key among them was Pokrovsky, who had become damnatio memoriae under Stalinism.[54] Dubrovsky, having survived Stalin's reign, was a key player in Pokrovsky's rehabilitation. He claimed that Pokrovsky had fought against those who "refused to recognize the laws of historical development and history as a true science."[55] Clearly Piontkovsky's theory of a "revolutionary science" was still alive and well. Dubrovsky was joined by younger scholars as well, such as Oleg Solokov, who pointed to Pokrovsky's correspondence with Lenin to debunk the Stalinist narrative which painted him as a traitor of the revolution.[56] Pokrovsky's rehabilitation came with caveats, and most Soviet historians still noted numerous flaws in his work, both on scholarly and ideological lines, but the tone of the conversation had shifted, and pressure of ideological conformity had lessened significantly. In 1961, following the lead of historians like Dubrovsky and Solokov, the Communist Party officially sanctioned Pokrovsky's rehabilitation in a number of speeches at the 22nd Party Congress.[57] Pokrovsky's rehabilitation was a microcosm for the

[53] Ibid, 280.
[54] Asher, "The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of M. N. Pokrovsky," 55.
[55] Ibid, 58.
[56] Ibid, 59.
[57] George M. Enteen, "Soviet Historians Review Their Own Past: The Rehabilitation of M. N. Pokrovsky," *Soviet Studies* 20, no. 3 (January, 1969): 314.

very slow and incomplete reform that the sphere of Soviet history underwent after Stalin's death. This reform was allowed only insofar as it served the interests of the Communist Party and their destalinization efforts, but it did exist and had tangible benefits for those involved. At the very least, Soviet historians no longer had to fear that their careers may end in an execution.

In spite of the Communist Party's best efforts, the 1960s saw Soviet historians attempt to move in a "New Direction," and reexamine the dominant narratives surrounding their history which had emerged in the 1920s. They did this with little, but not nonexistent success. The New Direction historians attempted to study the Russian Revolution cohesively, including the bourgeoisie and non-Bolshevik elements, as well as the economic structure of the Russian Empire. This movement was "condemned, routed, and ostracized" for its efforts, according to one member.[58] The beginning of the Brehzniv era in 1964 marked a sharp decline in academic freedom. As the process of destalinization came to a close, Soviet leadership no longer found utility in scrutinizing their past.[59] The New Direction of the 1960s and onwards was a manifestation of the strong desire from Soviet historians to break free from the party orthodoxy, even if they were unsuccessful in doing so. The eventual end of historical censorship which came with Glasnost in 1985 did not merely happen to Soviet historians, they had fought for it both covertly and actively in the decades prior.

In the United States, Chamberlin's history remained the most popular work of scholarship on the Russian Revolution throughout the 1960s.[60] By the early 70s, however, American historians had begun to question the consensus that had persisted since the 1930s. This new generation began working during a time of warming academic relations between the United

[58] Pavlov V. Volobuev and Kurt S. Schultz, "Perestroika and the October Revolution in Soviet Historiography," *The Russian Review* 51, no. 4 (October 1992): 567.
[59] Asher, "The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of M. N. Pokrovsky," 62-63.
[60] Warth, "On the Historiography of the Russian Revolution," 259.

States and the U.S.S.R.. The "U.S.-U.S.S.R. Exchanges Agreement" which was signed in 1958 allowed a limited number of students from each country to study at universities in the other.[61] It also granted Americans greater (but still limited) access to Russian archives and documentary material, which allowed historians to gain a more cohesive view of the October Revolution.[62] The exchange system was expanded in the mid-1970s when the State University of New York and Moscow State University entered into a direct exchange agreement, which was soon followed by other universities.[63] Methodologically, this new cohort of historians was heavily influenced by the French *Annales* school, as well as the work of British historian E.P. Thompson.[64] This new movement was revisionist in nature, and heavily aligned with the aims of social history, namely, studying history from the "bottom up." These new social historians moved away from the sociological narrative of Chamberlin which had characterized Russians as psychologically different from the West, and towards a more nuanced view of the Russian masses. They minimized the role of individual actors, while considering the roles of groups such as organized labor and women in greater detail. The first comprehensive social history of the October Revolution was Alexander Rabinowitch's seminal work *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, published in 1976. Rabinowitch emphasized the success of the Bolshevik party in appealing to the working class and soldiers, whom he viewed as important drivers of the revolution. For Rabinowitch, the October Revolution could not have succeeded without the support of the Russian public. He did not, however, parrot the determinism which permeated Soviet literature on the Revolution, nor did he posit that a communist victory in October was inevitable.[65]

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[61] Robert F. Byrnes, "Academic Exchange with the Soviet Union," *The Russian Review* 21, no. 3 (July 1962): 214.
[62] Teddy J. Uldricks, "Petrograd Revisited: New Views of the Russian Revolution," *The History Teacher* 8, no. 4 (August 1975): 611.
[63] Gregory Guroff, "US.-Soviet Exchange Initiative: Fact Sheet," *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali* 58, no. 4 (October-December 1991): 541.
[64] Richard Pipes, "1917 and the Revisionists," *The National Interest*, no. 31 (Spring 1993): 68.
[65] Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), 311.

While social history began to influence the historiography of the October Revolution in the 1970s, the 1980s brought it to the forefront. Social history supplanted the old consensus and became the dominant historical narrative surrounding October. Diane Koekner built on the foundation of Rabinowitch while focusing more specifically on the working class. Her 1981 book *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* provided an incredibly detailed view of the economic and material conditions workers faced in 1917 while taking into account a broad swath of qualitative data. Koekner built on Rabinowitch's thesis by arguing that the Bolshevik seizure of power was either "supported or ignored by most workers."[66] Social historians also took into account the experiences of women in the revolution to a much greater degree than their predecessors. Barbara Evans Clements extended social history to the working class and peasant women of the revolution. She characterizes the women and peasants of the revolution as agents acting in their own interest, but noted the diversity of interests both between and within groups.[67] Clements takes great care in understanding why the Bolsheviks appealed to certain groups of women and not others, and considered the role of religion and social pressures in the lives of Russian women, especially the peasantry.[68] She also notes that many Russian peasants became urban workers during World War I, blurring the line between proletariat and peasant.[69] While social history broadened the methodologies and perspectives American historians used to understand the October Revolution, it was not without its shortcomings, and many revisionists made similar mistakes to their predecessors. In one essay, the historian Ronald Grior Suny claimed that:

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[66] Diane Koekner, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 259.
[67] Barbara Evans Clements, "Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917-1923," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 2 (Winter: 1982): 216.
[68] Clements, "Working-Class and Peasant Women," 224.
[69] Clements, "Working-Class and Peasant Women," 229.

> The party of Lenin and Trotsky took power with little resistance and with the acquiescence of the majority of the people of Petrograd. The Bolsheviks came to power not because they were superior manipulators or cynical opportunists but because their policies as formulated by Lenin in April and shaped by the events of the following months placed them at the head of a genuinely popular movement.[70]

Suny exemplifies the revisionist tendency to reduce the leaders of the Bolsheviks to mere pawns pushed into place by the will of the people. His view of the revolution is as fanciful as the traditionalists whose worldview he has merely inverted. While social history greatly expanded the conversation surrounding the October Revolution, much to the benefit of American scholarship on the topic, social historians were prone to overcorrect in some areas, and fell prey to the same pitfalls as the consensus that preceded them.

Some scholars were not happy to see these new perspectives gain prominence, and actively resisted the changes occurring within American historiography. This backlash is best exemplified by the self-professed traditionalist Richard Pipes. Pipes criticized social historians for viewing the revolution from the "bottom up" and overstating the importance of social factors.[71] In his view, they had exaggerated the political involvement of the working classes, who were ultimately more concerned with their day-to-day lives than pursuing a communist revolution. Pipes portrays the working class as ambivalent, rather than radical. By October of 1917 the Russian people were already exhausted by the revolution in February as well as the political drama that unfolded over the summer, and the Bolshevik revolution was nothing more than a political coup d'etat.[72] Pipes also criticized social historians for underplaying or ignoring the role of the Great War in sparking the Russian Revolution, although it is worth noting that many social historians, including Rabinowitch, had already taken this into consideration.[73] He

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[70] Ronald Grigor Suny, "Toward a Social History of the October Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 88, no. 1 (February 1983): 52.
[71] Pipes, "1917 and the Revisionists," 70.
[72] Ibid 71.
[73] Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power,* 311.

also points to the fact that the labor strikes prior to 1914 which social historians believe to be antecedents to the revolution occurred across the rest of Europe, as well as in the United States.[74] While Pipes pointed out many genuine shortcomings of the revisionists, he also failed to acknowledge the shortcomings of traditionalism. He lumped the most radical revisionists such as Suny with historians who openly acknowledged the shortcomings of the Bolshevik Party and the political diversity of the working class, such as Clements, and equated both moderate and radical social historians to the early Bolsheviks.[75] A second wave of revisionism which emerged in the late 1980s addressed some of the traditionalist critiques. Historians like Sheila Fitzpatrick, the leading scholar of this cohort, sought to study the October Revolution from the bottom up, without necessarily attributing its success to the support of the working class. While Fitzpatrick agrees that the Bolsheviks did have the support of the working class in 1917, she also emphasizes the dwindling of that support throughout the 1920s.[76]

The course of the Cold War saw a gradual thawing of academic relations between the United States and the U.S.S.R., as can be seen in the academic exchange programs which occurred from 1958 onwards. The opening of archives to select Americans also allowed American historians to gain a significantly better understanding of the October Revolution, adding much greater nuance to the American perspective and laying the groundwork for the transnational cooperation and openness that would define the historiography in the coming decades. Above all else, this was an era characterized by a splintering of consensus, and a sharp increase in debate. The scholarly conversation in both countries became increasingly more diverse, but the change was more dramatic within the Soviet Union, even if the country still

[74] Pipes, "1917 and the Revisionists," 71.
[75] Ibid, 69.
[76] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution,* 4th ed. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11-12.

lagged behind the United States in academic freedom by the time Glasnost was implemented in 1985.

VI. The Iron Curtain Falls

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party. Under Gorbachev's leadership, the Soviet Union undertook broad liberalization plans in both the economic and social sphere under the names Perestroika and Glasnost respectively. Glasnost in particular allowed for a much wider dissemination of information, and much greater academic freedom than at any point before. These reforms were incredibly influential within both Soviet and American historiography, as they drastically changed the way both American and Soviet scholars saw the history of the U.S.S.R. in general, and the October Revolution in particular. This brief moment in Soviet and American historiography was short lived, as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, taking Glasnost and Perestroika with it. The new post-Soviet world changed the outlook of historians even more dramatically, and presented new challenges and opportunities in both America and the newly formed Russian Federation.

When Glasnost was enacted in 1985 Soviet academics were jubilant. The contemporary historian Pavlov Volobuev described it as having created "fundamentally new working conditions for Soviet historians."[77] Soviet historians were allowed to entertain perspectives outside of the party orthodoxy for the first time. The materialistic determinism which had dominated historical thought was no longer necessary to uphold. Historians were allowed to consider the idea that the October Revolution was not inevitable, and caused by complex

[77] Volobuev, "Perestroika and the October Revolution," 566.

external factors not necessarily relating to the Marxist prerequisites for socialism.[78] They began questioning party orthodoxy openly and frequently. In an inversion of the Stalinist line of thinking, Volobuev asked if the October Revolution was not itself a "national catastrophe" for Russia.[79] Importantly, Glasnost put historians in direct communication with the public for the first time, without any intermediary party. As Volobuev puts it, "historical science has been called upon to take part in the country's public life, and it is participating actively."[80] History in the Soviet Union became a public facing profession, similar to how it had been in the United States for decades. Glasnost also led to a major improvement in the academic relationship between the two superpowers. A landmark moment occurred in 1988, when Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* was officially published in the Soviet Union.[81] The exchange program between the United States and the U.S.S.R. accelerated as well, and by 1991 there were nearly 1200 Soviet academics lecturing in the United States.[82] This discourse between the United States and the Soviet Union was incredibly important to Soviet historians, who were well aware of the setbacks they had incurred as a result of strict political orthodoxy. Volobuev, a former member of the "new direction" of the 1960s and 70s, summed up the state of Soviet historiography on October neatly:

> Taking the current state of Soviet historiography on October as a whole, one can say that we have retreated from pro-Stalinist conceptions and have been able over the past six years to overcome the old legacy. We have not, however, arrived at any new conception. But having learned from bitter experience, we have no pretense of having worked out a "definitive" conception of our Great revolution. On the contrary, we are determined to advance toward understanding it through hypotheses, discussions, and creative exchange with foreign colleagues.[83]

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[78] Ibid, 572.
[79] Ibid, 567.
[80] Ibid, 569.
[81] Pipes, "1917 and the Revisionists," 73.
[82] Guroff, "US.-Soviet Exchange Initiative," 540.
[83] Volobuev, "Perestroika and the October Revolution," 576.

The future was uncertain, but bright, for both American and Soviet historians. Foreign cooperation, progress, and open discussion were the most important characteristics of Glasnost.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 solidified the changes which Glasnost had brought to historiography, both in the United States and the Soviet Union. The revisionist-traditionalist debate which became so prominent in the United States during the Cold War continues to this day, but with significantly less importance. Instead, the period following 1991 has been characterized by a multiplicity of opinion and a general atomization of historical thought, with no clear consensus dominating the discourse.[84] Historians in both the United States and the newly formed Russian Federation were once again faced with fundamentally new working conditions. Russian scholars finally gained unrestricted access to the outside world, and were able to foster new relationships with foreign colleagues. Within the United States historians finally gained access to archives that had been closed for most of a century.[85] Amid this change, however, enthusiasm for the October Revolution has waned. The Russian historian Boris Kolonitskii noted that 1917 "lost its social and political significance" within Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union.[86] This can be attributed, in part, to the fact that many Russians have turned against the revolution, seeing it, in Volobuev's words, as a "national catastrophe." Not only have many Russians come to view the October Revolution as destructive, they have also adopted various foreign interpretations. In an echo of nineteenth century American propaganda, the narrative of foreign interference in October has become popular.[87] In spite of this, many Russian historians continue to study the revolution, Kolonitskii among them.

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[84] Michael Confino, "The New Russian Historiography, and the Old–Some Considerations," *History and Memory* 21, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 16.
[85] Ibid, 21.
[86] Boris Kolonitskii and Yisrael Elliot Cohen, "Russian Historiography of the 1917 Revolution: New Challenges to Old Paradigms?," *History and Memory* 21, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 46.
[87] Ibid, 52.

The historiography of the October Revolution within both Russia and the United States continued to evolve throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The social history which had begun with Rabinowitch in 1976 laid the foundation for cultural history to influence the scholars of the revolution. One of the most important works of cultural history was Richard Stites' *Revolutionary Dreams*, which was published in 1988. Stites' focused on the symbolic meaning of the revolution, and drew a connection between the success of communism in Russia and the utopianism of Russian religion and philosophy prior to the revolution.[88] Historiographic developments outside of the study of the Revolution continued to have an impact on the field, albeit at a delayed pace, including postmodernism and the turn towards linguistics. Kolonitskii's collaborative work with the British historian Orlando Figes examined the role of language and symbolic meaning in the Revolution, and how "symbolic meaning defined and separated the competing sides of the political struggle."[89] Figes and Kolonitskii cast the February Revolution as a symbolic revolt against the old order. In contrast, the October Revolution was embedded with significantly less symbolic meaning, as its orchestrators focused more on achieving concrete strategic goals.[90] The Bolsheviks did, however, place a strong emphasis on symbolic meaning after the October Revolution.[91] Due to the increasing international collaboration of historians like Figes and Kolonitskii, it has become more difficult to delineate Russian and American historiographies as separate entities. Trends occurring within the two nations have, however, undermined the internationalism which has characterized the historiography since the 1990s.

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[88] Daniel T. Orlovsky, "The New Soviet History," *The Journal of Modern History* 62, no. 4 (December 1990): 841.
[89] Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.
[90] Ibid, 43.
[91] Ibid, 50-51; 60.

Since the end of the Cold War the relationship between the United States and Russia has grown increasingly tense. The enlargement of NATO in Eastern Europe, the Russian invasion of Georgia, and the annexation of Crimea have all added significant strain to the relationship between the two nations. These actions culminated in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which brought the rivalry to levels not seen since the thawing of relations in the 1980s. While it is impossible to determine the course of future events, there is no doubt that the increasingly tense relationship between the United States and the Russian Federation threatens the openness which has characterized American russology since 1991. Likewise, political circumstances in contemporary Russia have threatened the openness established by Glasnost. In 2009 a presidential commission "on counteracting attempts to falsify history to the detriment of Russia's interests" was established by President Dmitry Medvedev.[92] Conditions worsened upon Vladimir Putin's return to office in 2012. In 2013 Putin called for a standardized Russian history "that [does] not allow for more than one interpretation."[93] The following year a professor at Moscow University was fired for comparing the annexation of Crimea to Nazi Germany's Anschluss in 1938.[94] With the Russian government turning towards nationalism and politically motivated revisionism to justify the invasion of Ukraine, the academic freedom of historians within the country is increasingly under threat.

[92] Kolonitskii, "Russian Historiography of the 1917 Revolution," 36.
[93] Pål Kolstø, "Dmitrii Medvedev's Commission Against the Falsification of History: Why Was It Created and what Did It Achieve?," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 97, no. 4 (October 2019): 757.
[94] Ibid, 758.

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