The "Old" Interpretation

The official interpretation of the histories of the nations of the USSR emerged between 1934 and 1953 on the basis of decrees signed by Stalin and/or the Central Committee. This interpretation subsumes the histories of the non-Russian Republics within the "history of the USSR" that begins not in 1917 or 1922 in Moscow, but in prehistoric Asia. The official view recognized the non-Russian nations and republics as separate historical entities, yet imposed upon their pasts a Russocentric statist framework while denying the Russians a separate history of the RSFSR. Within this scheme the history of non-Russian nationalities before they became part of the tsarist state was built around the idea of "oppression" of "the people" and their "struggle" against native and foreign ruling classes. Russian and non-Russian "working people" were assumed always to have been "fraternal" while non-Russian political leaders, before and after incorporation, were judged according to their sympathy and/or loyalty to Russia. Russian political and cultural tutelage of non-Russians was stressed and activists in nineteenth-century national movements were labelled "reactionary" if they were not radical socialists. Official historiography admitted that non-Russians suffered political and cultural oppression but not economic colonialism under tsarist rule. In keeping with the logic of Lenin's The Development of Capitalism in Russia, the official view argued that tsarist economic development was "progressive" for non-Russians because it centralized production and tied "outlying regions" of the empire to the world market. Accordingly, the non-Russian "national bourgeoisie" were "reactionary" because both threatened the integration supposedly demanded by the forces of production. By contrast, during the twenties and the thirties, Russian/non-Russian relations in the Tsarist Empire were presented in terms of Lenin's Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism. Historians argued that tsarist centralism impeded the development in non-Russian provinces and that "national liberation movements" were "progressive" responses to Russian economic colonialism.3

The official view claimed that annexation of non-Russian territories to the Russian state was "progressive" because it permitted the Russian and non-Russian "people" to struggle together against common class enemies for social and national liberation. The same criteria, it should be added, did not apply to Russian history. Thus, historians condemned foreign attacks on Russia and did not claim the Polish occupation of 1610–12, or the French invasion of 1812, were "progressive" because these countries had been on a "higher plane of development" than Russia, and that the presence of their...
armies gave the Russian “people” the opportunity of fighting alongside its Polish or French class brothers against a common exploitive ruling class. Official texts did not refer to the “progressive” nature of Tsarist Russia’s integration into the world capitalist economy but condemned it as “dependency on foreign capital.”

With respect to the Eastern Slavs the old view claimed that a “desire for reunion” determined the course of Ukrainian and Belorussian history from the thirteenth century when an alleged ethnic and political unity was shattered by the Mongol invasion. Ukrainians “reunited” with Russia in 1654. In the nineteenth century Ukrainian leaders worked closely with Russian “revolutionary democrats” and due to the disinterested assistance of the Russians and their party, the Bolsheviks, Ukraine, alongside the other peoples of the empire, attained freedom and statehood thanks to the Revolution.4

Between 1956 and 1973 the Party loosened control over the humanities, and historical writing became less determinist and less Russian nationalist in tone. With the excesses of the Stalin period condemned scholars re-introduced professional standards into their work and had greater latitude to publish and discuss. Some criticized Russian colonialism and argued that non-Russian histories should be written independent of categories and periodization derived from Russian history.5 The “thaw” allowed historians to incorporate some new information into the official interpretation and noteworthy was the admission, in monographs, as well as general surveys, of Russian economic colonialism in nineteenth-century Central Asia.

For example, the 1967 edition of the Istoria Ukrainskoi RSR, unlike the 1953 and 1955 editions, no longer ignored Ukrainian cultural ties with the West, gave more attention to the nineteenth-century national movement, and admitted that in 1917 the Central Rada had popular support for a time. However, much information that appeared in specialist literature was still excluded from new surveys. Thus, although articles in the sixties drew attention to the Russification of the proletariat in early twentieth century Ukraine and its indifference to the national question, this was not mentioned in the new surveys. Similarly, while some articles classified the Central Rada and West Ukrainian People’s Republic as “progressive” bourgeois governments they remained “reactionary” in survey histories.6

“Destalinization” did not change analytical categories and concepts. For purposes of this article the most important of these was the idea that Russian and non-Russian histories must be conflated within a “history of the USSR,” a term imposed by Stalin in 1934. In 1945 the ideological secretary, G. Aleksandrov, expressed this idea as follows: “The history of the nations of the USSR is a single organic process. The history of a separate nation can be properly studied and understood only in connection with the history of other nationalities and first of all with the history of the Russian nation.”7 In the 1960s ideological chief Boris Ponomarev explained: “It would be impossible and incorrect to depict the history of the country as if it were a mosaic, as a summary of the surveys of the history of each separate republic. Such an approach diminishes the significance of centuries of interrelationships and would not illustrate how the
friendship of working peoples of separate nationalities was formed during their struggle against a common enemy.”

Stalin’s “history of the USSR” actually perpetuated an understanding of “Russian history” that confused the history of the Russian nation on its ethnic territory with the history of the tsarist state. This russocentric statist model led historians to minimize or ignore differences and conflicts between Russians and non-Russians, to stress similarities and beneficial influences, and to depict non-Russian national history within the framework of Russian regional studies. Roman Szporluk referred to the official interpretation as an aspect of “intellectual colonization” intended to eliminate from written history and memory significant chunks of the past, to circumscribe the non-Russians’ knowledge of their pasts, and to justify the notion of a “Soviet nation.”

After 1985 new information about post-1917 history and critical historical thought began to be expressed in the popular press and at All-Union conferences. During a December 1986 conference there were calls for an end to administrative interference in scholarship. In a July 1987 conference on non-Marxist historians speakers claimed “bourgeois” scholars seek the truth and stated all Soviet historians had to know Western historiography of their respective subjects. In the proceedings we find doubt expressed about what “bourgeois scholar” means, reference to “57 varieties of Marxism,” and condemnation of the intellectual isolation of Soviet scholars that has made them incapable of understanding terms used by Jacobson, Levi-Strauss, Braudel and Foucault. One speaker pointed out that Soviet scholarship is determined by Stalinist schemas and that by defending them “we do not defend Marxism-Leninism but its negation.” An editorial by the new editors of Voprosy istorii in 1988 called for an end to political editing of conference proceedings.

In the published proceedings of a round-table discussion sponsored by Voprosy istorii in January 1988, participants demanded an end to “spiritual serfdom” in academic institutions, the formation of an independent historical association and noted that Soviet historians had forgotten about categories such as good, evil and the price of progress. Three months later Iuryi Afanasev pointed out: “there is not, nor has there ever been a people and country with a history as falsified as ours is.... In the course of falsifying Soviet history historians also had to do the same with our pre-October past.” E. A. Ambartsumov asked: “And what trash, [sor] what half-truths or outright lies historians-authors of school texts have driven in children’s heads?! V. D. Polikarpov reminded the audience that since Stalin’s letter of 1936 no serious work had been done on anything Stalin had pontificated on. In December 1989 a “Thesis” on the state of the Social Sciences compiled by the Social Sciences Sector of the All-Union Academy and the Ideological Section of the Central Committee included many ideas expressed during the above conferences. Yet although it called for methodological pluralism and asserted the primacy of human over class interests, it did not specify terminating party influence in the social sciences.

Critical remarks about the official view of pre-1917 non-Russian history were voiced
in 1987 in Tallin when speakers noted that tsarist imperial policies could not be idealized. Speakers called for more publications on this subject and the establishment of a strict scholarly terminology for dealing with the issue. Others stressed the need to determine the “objective progressive significance of the entering of the nations of our country into the structure of the Russian Empire.”

Estonians proposed an alternative curriculum for secondary schools that included a separate course on Republic History and no “History of the USSR.” In the proceedings of the 1988 Voprosy istorii Conference Anisimov called for a new approach in the study of tsarist colonial policy, noting that Stalin in 1934 had endorsed apologia for and idealization of the tsarist empire. Novoseltsov asked whether it was correct to tie the history of the Caucasus to Russia closer than the evidence allowed and pointed out that most disagreements about the past of non-Russian republics stemmed from historians in the center deciding questions of Russian history without regard to historical truth. K. F. Shatsillo noted that nineteenth-century non-Russian national movements are “blank spots” never studied from the perspective of Lenin’s dictum that Tsarist Russia was the prison of nations. “Today we declare our unity in history books” stated an Estonian in 1988, “and because of this the Russian pupil often doesn’t understand why Estonians speak Estonian.” At the same conference another speaker pointed out that pages from the tenth-grade history of the USSR contained such nonsense as to be worthy of publication in the satirical magazine Krokodil.

Sergei Baruzdin, editor of Druzhba narodov, condemned two fundamental tenets of the official view of non-Russian history during the All-Union Writers Congress in March 1988. He dismissed the idea of Russian “elder brothers” as Stalinist, and called for rejection of the post-Stalin innovation that all non-Russians had “voluntarily joined” Russia. In February 1989, V. Krikunov noted that not all non-Russians had joined the Russian state voluntarily and he identified three forms of incorporation; conquest, “joining,” and in the case of Ukraine, “reunion.” A. Novoseltsov, head of the Institute of USSR History at the All-Union Academy, added that ruling classes had come to agreements with the tsars which included autonomy, while the tsars were interested in totally subjugating incorporated regions. Novoseltsov also identified three forms of annexation and characterized Ukraine’s “reunion” with Russia as unique. These ideas were developed further in the autumn of 1989 at two conferences devoted to Russia and its empire. Participants questioned the established terminology and conceptual categories and most agreed about the exploitative colonial nature of tsarist Russian relations with Central Asia. There were differences over the appropriateness of the term “reunion” to describe Ukrainian-Russian relations. A Russian historian advocated dropping this term while a “conservative” Ukrainian historian who continues to use the old terminology and conceptual schemes in his publications, asserted his country’s incorporation into Russia was a drawn-out affair involving force that could not be reduced to the “reunion” of 1654. An Armenian, meanwhile, decried the exclusion of present-day eastern Turkey from the Soviet conception of Armenian history.
A New Interpretation

After five years of restructuring, the mainly declarative criticisms summarized above did not have an appreciable impact on academic publications nor did they lead to interpretative changes in survey histories despite some support from the highest political authorities. A. Iakovlev in 1987 criticized the tendency to “embellish” Russian as well as non-Russian history, while the Chairman of the State Committee for Public Education (Izvestiia, Dec. 21, 1988) admitted “socialist internationalism” was not “non-ethnic” and that “to a considerable extent, textbooks on the history of the USSR remain the history of the Russian people and the Russian state system.” The Russocentric bias of official historiography was criticized also by ministers at the June 1989 session of the All-Union Ideological Commission. Noteworthy as well were articles in Party journals pointing out that Stalin’s “dogmatism and subjectivism” still impeded Party historiography, and implicitly the social sciences, as well as the annulment of two of Zhdanov’s post-war decrees.

Nevertheless, it seems reformist Russian historians remained a minority in Soviet universities and academies. As Von Hagen observed, the majority of historians cannot come to terms with the national aspect of their country’s past and their writings “evince no serious reintegration of the nationality question into historical discourse.” To this may be added the observation that Russian reformists in general have yet to consider whether their nation’s servitude was the price of empire. In light of this situation, one might attach greater significance to distinctly “conservative” remarks by leading academic administrators than do many reformists in the USSR.

For instance, although the director of the Institute of History of the USSR Academy was removed in 1989, published criticism made no reference to his failure to question prevailing views of relations between Russians and non-Russians before 1917. His successor, S. L. Tikhvinshy, also Deputy Chair of the Institute of Social Sciences of the All-Union Academy—since 1963 the body controlling historical research in the USSR—an editor of Voprosy istorii and member of the Praesidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences, shares similar views. In a June 1987 article devoted to the current Academic Plan he outlined what he expected Soviet historians to do until the end of the century, writing that a major reason for shortcomings in historical writing in the 1970s was insufficient centralization and coordination of research. The new plan proposed a more rational division of labour that would allocate conceptual and interpretative issues connected with each theme to scholars in Moscow or Leningrad and detailed research to Republic institutions. Subjects such as “Lenin on the Transition from Bourgeois Democracy to Socialist Revolution,” part of the theme “The History of the World Revolutionary Liberation Process,” for example, would be studied in Moscow, while Kiev would study “Russian Officers in 1917,” and Lviv “The Ukrainian Working Class in the 19th Century.” Tikhvinshy’s list of shortcomings of 1970s Republic historiography includes “revival of nationalistic treatments of the past of certain nationalities,” and “idealization” of the history of Republic nationalities.
In March 1988 Tikhvinshy accused historians in the non-Russian republics of extending national pasts back further than the evidence warranted, stressing national differences, contrasting national histories and cultures, and not dealing adequately with the fraternal aid Soviet nationalities rendered to each other, and in particular, with Russian assistance. Tikhvinshy took his examples primarily from the Asian Republics but criticized all except the Russian SFSR. He did not single out any official history of the USSR for its treatment of Russian/non-Russian relations. His basic concern was that non-Russian Republic historians exaggerated or distorted certain events by isolating them from “regional” and “All Russian” history, and his panacea was more centralization and coordination: “The time has come to decisively break with the fallacious tendency [porochnaia tendentsiia] of dividing scholarship into Ukrainian or Azeri, central or peripheral. There is one Soviet historical scholarship firmly based on Marxist-Leninist socialist internationalism.” Marchuk, meanwhile, President of the All-Union Academy of Sciences, said in October 1988 that “historical research in a number of fields at the Academy, such as pre-eighteenth-century fatherland history, classical Asian studies, archaeology, Slavics and other subjects, are on a good level.”

Also noteworthy are remarks made by I. Khmil, an important person in the Ukrainian ideological apparatus, who during a conference remarked that historiography was still a “class based” knowledge. From a Soviet Marxist perspective knowledge can either be the product of “society as a whole,” as for example, natural science, or of a class. If it belongs to the former group it is ideologically neutral and subject only to the rules of scholarship. Thus, when Khmil said that historiography belonged to the latter group he meant it was not “neutral” and still subject to Party control.

Will the predominantly “conservative” historical establishment recognize the inadequacy of the prevailing interpretation of the pre-1917 history of relations between Russia and its non-Russians and jettison it? At the time of writing [1990], it is difficult to judge; despite the laudable efforts of reformist historians, a recalcitrant majority either remains indifferent to the history of relations between Russians and their subject peoples, or due to conservative inertia or conviction still burdens professional-academic historical writing with Russocentrism and the “friendship of nations” theme. Disconcerting as well are nominally “liberal” articles that call for study of socio-economic formations and their national specificities, and for freeing scholarship from “bureaucratic serfdom,” yet simultaneously reflect distinctly centrist perspectives. As of 1989 the prospects for change were so bleak that even the “conservative” director of the Ukrainian Institute of History admitted there was no sign of a new conception of the history of the USSR, that the Plan was amorphous and that it was not directed at the most pressing issues.

A hint of the direction a new official interpretation may have taken in Ukraine is provided by a provisional outline of Ukrainian history. The authors pruned away some of the most contentious and nonsensical Russophile assertions and categorized Ukrainian history as “tragic.” They noted the country had been subject to the same “forces” as Europe, did not stress Eastern Slavic ethnic affinity nor highlight Russian
influences and "assistance," and treated the "nation" rather than "working people" as the main historical subject. The outline devoted greater attention to Ukrainian statehood and included frank treatment of the destructive impact of tsarist centralism on Cossack-Ukraine. On the other hand, the authors still claimed that the "reunion" of 1654 was "progressive" despite the ensuing conflict over autonomy—which is presented as a minor issue because it was "merely" a conflict between ruling classes. The authors made no mention of Russian economic colonialism, and still treated the tsarist economy not as the sum of its parts but as an integrated unit and the "All-Russian working class" as the legitimate representative of the proletariat. They did not mention the Ukrainian national movement and still described the "October Revolution" as if it were a common process throughout the empire that represented the interests of the all nations belonging to it.\(^\text{37}\)

**Conclusion**

In the USSR, the past held a more important place in thought and politics than in the West, and Russian historians can hope for considerable public influence once they re-establish their professional integrity. At scholarly conferences reformists have condemned the established interpretation of relations between Russians and non-Russians but they have offered neither a critical history nor a critique of the official view. Published materials reveal an expected split between "reformist" and "conservative" historians, as well as differences between the more cautious "liberal" professionals in academic institutions and the critical popularizers, most of whom contribute to non-academic publications. The "conservative" mass of professional Russian historians, like most of their countrymen, do not perceive the USSR as having been a Russian-dominated "empire." Their attitudes are probably echoed by Tikhvinsky, but, in general, it seems they simply are not interested in non-Russian history or the history of Russian/non-Russian relations. "Conservatives" in non-Russian republics, on the other hand, desiring to win over readers who regard themselves as exploited colonials, feel obliged to write about previously ignored topics to win credibility. Yet, simultaneously, they seek to avoid interpretative generalizations of which the Central Committee, still their formal employer, might disapprove. A provisional new official interpretation of Ukrainian history produced by this group is less Russocentric in tone but retains the gist, if not the vocabulary, of the old view. Ukrainian reformist writers and historians, meanwhile, who questioned the official treatment of Ukrainian history and criticized the traditional Russian conception of Ukraine as a quaint ethnographic part of "Russia,"\(^\text{38}\) have had little impact on the provisional outline. Because events made this project anachronistic soon after its publication, conservatives had to formulate another interpretation of Ukrainian history. It remains to be seen how they will deal with thorny issues such as "reunion," "fraternal evolution," the idea of a common Eastern Slavic "historical process," and subjects such as Russian economic
colonialism or the role of statehood, while developing the forces of production in non-Russian republics.

Methodology, concepts and organizational categories determine how data is interpreted, and it is a sign of maturity in Soviet Russian historiography that some reformist historians understand this. Afanasiev refers to the issue as one of "conceptual essence" and stressed that the alternative to official interpretations is not another "truth," but merely a better interpretation which itself may be rejected in the future. The All-Union Academy has formally called for methodological pluralism. An indicator of the reality of "perestroïka" will be the degree to which this sophisticated epistemological self-consciousness questions criteria of understanding influences, synthesis and interpretation in reformist historiography. In Ukraine, where the energies of most reformists are currently engaged in publishing documents and reprints of nineteenth-century classics, there is little sign of such sophistication as most still assume that "truth" will be revealed in documents.

At the time of writing, the "old" official interpretation of the pre-1917 past in the USSR was probably still shared by most Russians. Even the radical Alexander Tsipko does not think Russians ought to be ashamed of their past colonial adventures. Although the "old" view has been formally criticized by a minority of reformists, it has generated no acceptable alternative scholarly synthesis and little discussion about how to write it. The observer can only hope that any new interpretation to emerge will bolster social political and national consciousness, mutual understanding and empathy, without arousing nationalist enmity. He can only hope that such a view be formulated and disseminated before the hunger for history that existed in the USSR is gratified by visions of the past that arouse and justify extremist passions among its former members.

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NOTES

2. For example: B. D. Datsiuk (ed.), *Istoriia SSSR* (Moscow: 1963). This argument was first made in 1934 but became the official view after the War. Lowell Tillet, *The Great Friendship* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 360–64.
16. Ibid., p. 83.
17. Ibid., p. 95.
21. “Kruglyi stol v redaktsii zhurnala prepodavanie istorii v shkole,” Prepodavanie istorii v shkole No. 2 (1989), pp. 85–86. A Russian delegate cautioned that “dividing up” the history of the USSR could lead to pupils regarding their national histories as something unique, while a Ukrainian delegate (Vaksman) suggested that teachers’ colleges should prepare a course on “Socialist Internationalism.” pp. 81,83.


29. R. Moroz, “Rosiiska intelligentsia i natsionalne pytannia na tli glasnosti i perebudovy,” Suchasnist No. 7–8 (1990), pp. 171–85. Russian, unlike English, American or French intellectuals, have no tradition of criticizing the colonial activities of their compatriots.


40. Some philosophers have begun to deal with this problem. In Ukraine, see: S. Kosharnyi, “Fenomenolohiia Husserlia i dosvid hermenevtynoho osnovopolohennia humanitaroho 334
znannia v istorychnomu naukovchemi Dilteia,” *Filosofka i sotsiolohichna dumka* No. 8 (1989) pp. 67–76; No. 9, pp. 68–76.