

Rethinking History: The 1964 interdisciplinary Conference

*Frances Nethercott**

Summary: The focus of this article is an officially authorized symposium in which historians and philosophers took up the task of devising a new Marxist-based theory and methodology of history in accordance with party instructions. The author considers the materials of the conference in two complementary ways: first, as a direct response to the paradigm shift in historical pedagogy and research announced by party officials; second, as a vehicle for examining some of the more creative readings of Marx and ways of engaging with intellectual currents abroad. Albeit representing the voice of the few, these bolder arguments attest to initiatives undertaken by members of the academic community themselves to rethink the terms of historical enquiry and the meaning of history. They also point to some potentially rewarding parallels between Thaw-era Soviet historiography and the turn to social and cultural history in the West, which would eventually benefit from analysis in a comparative perspective.

Keywords: *zakonomernost'*; historical facts; Marxism; revisionism

1. Introduction

The uses and abuses of history in the Soviet Union are well documented. Hostage to Stalinist ideology, by the late 1930s, historical enquiry (of the modern era or national history) had been reduced to charting the triumphal rise of Bolshevism in accordance with the template provided in the *Short Course*. Whether the late 1950s and early 1960s truly inaugurated a “thaw” in historical scholarship is also highly debatable. If Khrushchev was intent on exposing Stalin’s crimes, and called upon historians to rewrite the Soviet era, it was not, of course, as “dispassionate reporters”; rather, they were tasked as “fighters” to place history «at the service of the struggle for communism, for democracy and peace [...] and for the happy future of mankind»¹. For the party leadership and bureaucratic cohort, then, the intention was essentially to substitute one authorized version of the past with another.

Exploring the ways in which the academic community responded to these directives is the subject of this article. To do so, I propose to consider materials from the roundtable discussion, «On methodological questions of historical science», a high profile academic event in the broader de-Stalinization campaign marking the official launch, in January 1964, of the interdisciplinary sector of social sciences under the auspices of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences². Attended by established academicians, corresponding members, *doktory nauk*, and a younger generation of *kandidaty nauk*, the conference in many respects, merely rubber-stamped the new party line on research and education³. But, as I argue below,

* fn4@st-andrews.ac.uk; University of St Andrews.

¹ Ponomarev 1964, p. 6.

² Excerpts of the conference appeared in «Voprosy filosofii», 18 (1964), 3, pp. 3-68. The full transcript was published a few months later in Fedoseev 1964.

³ Academicians included the philosopher Petr Fedoseev, historians Petr Pospelov, Milica Nečkina, Isaak Mints, Boris Rybakov, and the slavist, Viktor Vinogradov. Corresponding members in philosophy and natural

in some instances, the handling of certain topics – *zakonomernost'* facts, agency – also attests the creative and quite imaginative ways in which participants managed to co-opt the Marxist paradigm as a framework for new research agendas and methodologies. As such, they may tentatively be conceived as Soviet versions of the turn to social and cultural history, which, during the 1960s, was being heralded as the new direction in West European and North American historiography. I begin, however, with a brief overview of the party line presented at the All-Union Congress of Historians in December 1962, which provided the framework for debate at institutional level.

2. The political leadership and the All-Union Congress of Historians

Khrushchev understood the importance of history. During the Plenum of the Central Committee in March 1962, he voiced a severe critique of practices in higher education, singling out historians for lack of rigor in the formation of cadres and in dissertation vivas. In December 1962, the Central Committee Secretary and Academician, Boris Ponomarev (1905-1995), took up this issue in his inaugural speech at the All-Union Conference of Historians, spelling out “new” terms for the production of textbooks and teaching practices, but also signalling as a matter of urgency the need to revisit the methodological and theoretical premises of historical science itself. Ponomarev’s framework for substantive and methodological/theoretical innovation confirmed the priorities announced at the XXII Party Congress (1961), namely a return to Leninism, the race to reach full Communism within the foreseeable future, and the campaign to establish “friendship of nations”. For the scholarly community this required writing the cult of personality out of history by restoring the role of Lenin, the people and the Party in the nation’s history, renewing the contest with Western (bourgeois) historical science and, in tandem, the introduction of research topics both to support the building of communism as the party leadership now conceived it, but also to address challenges presented by the current domestic and global socio-political climate. Greater emphasis, therefore, was to be placed on, for example, world history, the role of mass movements in pivotal historical events, the peasantry, local party organizations and workers’ movements, national liberation movements (reflecting Soviet interests in the African and

science included: Mixail Iovčuk, Jurij Francev, Fedor Konstantinov, Bonifatij Kedrov with Mixail Dynnik and Vladimir Xovstov in history. *Doktory nauk*: Grigorij Glezerman, Arsenij Gulyga (philosophy); Boris Poršnev (history); *Kandidaty nauk* in history included Sigurd Šmidt, Mixail Gefter, and Konstantin Tarnovskij.

Asian continents)⁴. The call to strengthen «fraternal friendship among the workers of all the Soviet republics» was coded acknowledgment of mounting nationalist sentiment across the border republics and of the need for measures to contain it. In this vein, Ponomarev encouraged the commemoration of key dates such as the 300th anniversary of the «reunification of Ukraine with Russia»: «The celebration of such dates», he wrote, «promotes the dissemination of correct concepts of the past among the broad masses of the population»⁵.

Interdisciplinarity was high on Ponomarev's list of instructions. Historians were encouraged to collaborate with philosophers and economists, and – interestingly – with literary specialists. In view of the importance the Soviets typically invested in history as science (the laws of which – as the *Short Course* elucidated – are ultimately comparable to those in natural science), Ponomarev's insistence on the inclusion of creative literature both as a model for historical narrative and as a historical source might read like a radical departure from the established canon. I would argue, though, that he was, in fact, merely fostering a long standing trope of Russian culture dating back to the age of Puškin, namely, the power of fiction as a tool for raising mass historical awareness:

Although the persons assembled here are primarily representatives of historical scholarship, I do not believe that anyone will challenge the fact that the concepts held by many Soviet people of the epoch of Peter I or the Civil War, for example, were shaped not only by their school texts and specialized studies but also by the novels of Aleksej Tolstoj and Mixail Šoloxov and by certain other works by Soviet writers. It may be stated boldly that historical novels on the Soviet era and on our Party's history, written on a high level of literary competence, may become a deep source of the people's love and understanding for their own history.⁶

Conscious of the potential of historical knowledge to instil a “communist ethic”, Ponomarev insisted that research findings be made accessible to a wide audience. There was to be no two-tier system of high science (which he labelled “academicism”) and popular history:

Some historians have developed an erroneous view of popularized works as a kind of lightweight activity, work of secondary importance. It is untrue that a popular book – that is, a book for the general reader – is necessarily a by-product of one's major scholarly activity. Books for popular consumption may and should be written directly on the basis of primary study of the data, using of course the accumulated fund of scholarly knowledge. This would increase the social benefit gained from historical scholarship [...]. «A worker who behaves like Ivan I-don't-remember toward the

⁴ The insistence on the international character of communism signalled the posthumous rehabilitation of Mixail Pokrovskij (1868-1932)

⁵ Ponomarev, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibi*, p. 10.

history of his movement cannot be regarded as class-conscious». These words of Lenin are timelier than ever for us today.⁷

To the student of Soviet culture and politics, Ponomarev's view of the social function of the historian and the task of historical scholarship is all too dismally familiar. Informed by Lenin's maxim that the highest form of objectivity may be equated with partisanship, Ponomarev's reminders to his audience of the historian's sacred duty «to permeate all [his] activities with the ideas of the Party Programme» hardly differed from past practices⁸. That said, once Ponomarev addressed questions of historical theory and methodology, the substance of his remarks, whether inadvertently or by design, offered a degree of interpretative leeway, which during the previous three decades had been more or less unthinkable⁹. Over and above the accepted criticism of Stalinist historiography as a fundamentally non-Marxist, subjective patchwork of tendentious labels and “quotism”, Ponomarev's comments combined – in a strikingly incongruous way – formulaic statements derived from the stock of Leninist views with references to issues which form the warp and weft of historical enquiry itself: the problem of historical truth, facts, agency, and the nature of progress. His remarks concerning the concept of *zakonomernost* is a case in point. On the one hand, he spins the well-worn ideological-*partiinnost*' rhetoric designed to “rally the troops”: «a knowledge of history, a correct understanding of the laws of historical development, will play a major role in shaping the qualities of the new man and in solving the problem posed by the Party of inculcating the entire population with the spirit of scientific communism»¹⁰. But, further into his speech he also counselled the academic community to rethink the meaning of *zakonomernost* for history, and by the same token the relationship between historical materialism, theory and methodology of history. As he put it: «Historical materialism provides the theoretical foundation for all the social sciences, but all of them, including historical scholarship pose *theoretical questions* of their own»¹¹. It was, though, his

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibi*, p. 4. Equally, little change was envisaged regarding the actual production of historical research; as before, the emphasis was on works of synthesis undertaken by scientific collectives. Stipulated topics included: a new biography of Lenin; textbook history of the Communist Party, a history of the Second World War, the Civil War. Ponomarev also welcomed works of syntheses on the history of Ukraine, Belarus, Baltic States, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, together with histories of the communist parties in the constituent republics.

⁹ Ponomarev mentioned a number of works by Marx, Engels and Lenin as «classic examples of historical scholarship» worthy of emulation: Marx's *Kapital*, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*; *The Civil War in France*; Engels' *The Peasant War in Germany*, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*; Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, *The Historical Fate of the Teachings of Karl Marx*, *Pages from the History of the Workers' Press in Russia*, *In Memory of Herzen* in addition to numerous articles and essays on the Paris Commune, 1905, the agrarian history of Russia and the Emancipation Act of 1861 (*ibi*, p. 5).

¹⁰ *Ibi*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibi*, p. 10.

reminder of the importance of engaging with facts that had possibly the most far-reaching repercussions for debate: «Under Stalin», he noted, «the scientific value of sources and data from the archives was put in doubt. As a rule, material in the archive was employed only to illustrate commonly known propositions. Respect for facts, without which history as a science is simply unthinkable, was lost»¹².

3. «If there are no problems – there is no research» (*Net problem – net i issledovanija*)¹³

Ponomarev's speech provided the main topics of the keynote paper at the 1964 conference, «Devising a Historical Methodology». Co-authored by Petr Fedoseev (1908-1990), Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences, and Corresponding Member Jurij Francev (1903-1969), it was circulated prior to the event as a benchmark for the forty or so papers, reports and discussions that followed over the course of three days. Fedoseev and Francev reiterated the official condemnation of quotism, dogmatism and “Stalinist subjectivism”. Like Ponomarev, they signalled the posthumous rehabilitation of the Marxist-internationalist, Mixail Pokrovskij (1868-1932), possibly the most notorious historian in the early years of Bolshevik rule before his fall from grace in the early 1930s, and they echoed the call for renewed emphasis on the history of the class struggle, world history (communism as an international phenomenon), and studies on the crisis of capitalism¹⁴. Stalin, they claimed (again, consistent with Party instructions) had misguidedly reduced the history of society to the study of the development of production and of the masses as producers of material goods. He had wilfully ignored the classics of Marxism-Leninism, which offered a comprehensive picture of the historical process in all its complexity and contradictions, and multifariousness. History, of course, takes shape thanks to production, they wrote:

But this does not mean that the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism reduce history to a history of production. People make history. And in our understanding, the history of society is the history of people. This does not mean that there can be no history of things or ideas as specific branches of historical science. Such a simplistic view would preclude economic history, history of

¹² *Ibi*, p. 8.

¹³ Fedoseev, Francev 1964, p. 20. Quotations from the position papers are taken from the full transcript. See note 2, above.

¹⁴ Other direct echoes of Ponomarev's speech included a list of prescribed themes for the study of contemporary social history, all of which were predicated on the idea of progress. For example: overcoming the divisions between town and country; between intellectual and physical labour; between nations and states; the inequality of women; how the ideas of internationalism spread and confirmed friendship of nations; changes in family life and marriage; on the development of moral norms, customs, and culture (cfr. *ibi*, p.7).

material culture, literature, social thought and so on. These are all branches of historical science, which study economic or mental processes in conjunction with the movement of the life of society.¹⁵

Each science has its own laws. Again, taking their cue from Ponomarev's speech, but "in dialogue" with Marx and Engels, Fedoseev and Francev argued in favour of the specificity of historical laws and theoretical generalizations with which the historian engages:

General laws in history do not occur in pure form, but in a concrete historical configuration [v *konkretno-istoričeskom svoeobrazii*], the analysis of which is a major task in historical research. [...] [E]xplicating this *zakonomernost'* embedded within multiple singular phenomena is a challenge, especially as [the historian] must explain the role of contingent phenomena, without which, as Marx put it, history would acquire a mystical aura. To repeat: to demonstrate how necessity carves its path through a crowd of contingencies [*neobxodimost' prokladyvaet sebe dorogu skvoz' beskonechnoe množestvo slučainostej*] is the time-honoured task of the historian. Such a task includes analysis of the zigzag path along which history moves, its digressions, setbacks, but also those factors, which speed up the tempo of the historical process. [...]. Studying the mechanism of these laws in concrete circumstances requires detailed analysis of the role of subjective factors, together with the consciously goal-driven actions of people in the historical process.¹⁶

This in turn raised questions concerning the relationship between historical materialism and *zakonomernost'*. There is, they contended, a multitude of historical *zakonomernosti*, which albeit linked to general sociological laws are not reducible to them (*ne iščerpjvajutsja imi*):

The researcher may uncover specific historical *zakonomernosti* by studying the interrelation between economic, political and ideological processes in social life. General sociological laws disclose the material base of these interrelations; they throw light on the role that the economy, politics and ideology play in historical development. But, the explanation of these processes in their interplay with one another in given concrete circumstances – this is a matter of historical science.¹⁷

If, on the one hand, Fedoseev and Francev's call to engage with concrete, singular phenomena and events simply registered official criticism of Stalinist schematism, on the

¹⁵ *Ibi*, p. 26.

¹⁶ *Ibi*, p. 9. Fedoseev and Francev's argument here seems to have been cued by Engels' letter to Joseph Bloch (21/22 September, 1890), in which he (re-) qualified the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure: «According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and the reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if someone twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure [...] also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner interconnection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible), the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary» (cited in *ibi*, p. 6). *Pace* Engels, however, it was precisely the study of those "endless host of accidents" and their unfathomable inner interconnections, which, as remarks at the conference bear out, some thinkers believed was integral to historical understanding.

¹⁷ *Ibi*, pp. 9-10.

other, it opened up a reflection on the most basic, yet vexed, questions in historical enquiry: what *are* historical facts? What should be our criteria for selecting them? By way of initiating discussion, they tabled the idea of the typical (*tipičnost'*): the historian has to identify patterns (*tipičnost'*) within a given period (*epoxa*) an aspect of Soviet historical scholarship, which, they claimed, had been overlooked¹⁸. But how do you grasp the typical and convey this to the reader? Fedoseev and Francev recognized that, «feeling around for» (*naščupat'*) patterns/regularities in the complex webs of individual events was not easy, and that, if anything, it brought the work of the historian into the realm of the creative writer. Belinsky was right, they said, when he wrote about the challenges facing the historian wherein the strict study of historical facts and materials and cold dispassion merge with poetic sensitivity and a creative ability to combine events, turning them into a living picture in which perspective, light and shade are observed¹⁹.

The topics that Fedoseev and Francev flagged up for discussion were developed in the position papers. Broadly speaking, these fell into two main categories: those concentrating on the theory of the historical process and/or methods for studying this (approaches privileged by philosophers such as Arsenij Gulyga [1921-1996], Grigorij Glezerman [1907-1980], and the theoretically-oriented historians, Mixail Gefter [1918-1995], Vladimir Xvostov [1905-1972]); and case studies²⁰. The quality of the papers was very uneven. Whether because of the institutional standing of a given academic, generational differences, level of engagement (if not intellectual ability), a significant majority of participants behaved as “willing accomplices”, simply paying lip service to the new historiographical orthodoxy. A few contributors, did however, manage to negotiate the terms of the conference themes in ways that were either relatively free of the burdensome ideological/political scaffolding (the case of Sigurd Šmidt [1922-2013]) or by sleight of co-opting its lexicon to different ends. As I discuss below, Gulyga’s bid to reconsider history as a very “human” science involved offsetting the Marxist-Leninist canon with allusions to Kant and neo-Kantianism.

¹⁸ *Ibi*, p. 16. The concept of an historical epoch was also, they argued, poorly understood, and required careful analysis.

¹⁹ *Ibi*, pp. 10-11. The term *naščupat'* appears on p. 9.

²⁰ For example: Milica Nečkina on 1930s Soviet Russia and Party history; Viktor Danilov on agrarian history. See also below, note 35.

4. People make history, but “people” are made up of individuals each with their own destiny (Gulyga)²¹

«The object [*predmet*] of history», Gulyga wrote, «is the study of the laws of social development in their concrete manifestations»²². With a nod to the keynote paper he iterated (virtually verbatim) the task of the historian to «reconstruct the course that humanity has actually traversed, with all its zigzags, all the diversity and unique individuality of the events that have occurred». However, his supporting claims suggest that his real intellectual loyalties lay elsewhere:

A pattern of the historical process is not yet history, just as the subject and the concept do not yet make a work of art. Each historical event possesses individual attributes peculiar to it alone, and to disclose these and preserve them for posterity is just as much the responsibility of the historian as is the generalization of the materials he studies. [...]. The fact in historical science is not supplanted by the generalization; to a certain degree, it is an end (value) in and of itself [*samodovlejuščaja cennost*].²³

Possibly the most innovative aspect of Gulyga’s piece (and where a Kantian patina is more readily discernible) is the accent he placed on the notion of “thinking in images” (*obraznoe myšlenie*) as a distinctive feature of historical methodology. Since categories of aesthetics belong to reality, they are concerned not only with art, but also with knowledge of reality in general, and, by extension, with knowledge of the historical process. History and creative literature are closely related, he continued, «not when a lack of material forces [the historian] to bring his imagination into play. [...] Rather, he “competes” [*konkuriruet*] with the writer only when a wealth of reliable material affords the possibility to draw a vivid picture of reality»²⁴. Again, invoking one of the points made in the keynote paper – in reconstructing the life of society through single (*edinicnye*), highly characteristic, typical events, historical narrative performs a task akin to art – Gulyga used the “new orthodoxy” to harness an essentially Kantian worldview.

A historical generalization is a peculiar synthesis, a theoretical and artistic appropriation [*osvoenie*] of the world. It is twofold by nature: abstract and sensory-concrete. Concepts coexist with a visual picture of the past. The historian does not have the right to enter into the domain of fabrication and conjecture, but when he comes across a typical phenomenon and speaks about this truthfully

²¹ Fedoseev 1964, p. 82.

²² *Ibi*, p. 81.

²³ *Ibi*, pp. 81, 83.

²⁴ *Ibi*, pp. 86, 87. In this connection, he also picked up on the concept of *tipičnost*’.

[*pravdivo*], his narrative acquires aesthetic value. Insofar as aesthetic categories are part of reality, they are also part of history.²⁵

Like Gulyga, the early modernist and cultural historian, Sigurd Schmidt, also used the official guidelines for de-Stalinizing historical theory and practice in ways that the leadership had probably not intended. Faced with the vast accumulation of facts, Schmidt suggested that we “crystallize” in our minds some stable historical types, (for example, the tyrant, peacemaker, the bourgeois), and he advised historians to look to artistic-literary characterizations in order to do so. Freed from the narrow framework of specific time and place, and turned into something like timeless symbols, historical types function in ways similar to that of literary-artistic images in the sense that, for the general reader, a “Napoleon” or a “Caesar” have entered the vernacular as short-hand metonyms for common experiences and emotions such as fear, deceit, brutality, or ambition²⁶. The link between history and literature that Schmidt advocated thus worked in two ways: works of (realist) fiction are valuable historical sources in that they contain concrete aspects of daily life; however, since they afford insights into the processes by which social phenomena are creatively perceived, and articulated into concepts, images and feelings they are also a valuable resource for the historian interested in social psychology. Ultimately, though, what the historian and creative writer have most in common is their shared aim to convince the reader of the authenticity of their characterizations²⁷.

As a practising historian, Schmidt offered a remarkably refreshing commonsensical way of considering the historian’s task: *zakonomernost’* was not on his agenda. He bemoaned the tendency still prevalent among peers (and evidenced at the conference itself) of applying random comments from Lenin to any period or geographical area. Yes, it was perfectly legitimate to look at a statement by Lenin, but the historian should be considering the circumstances and ideas that prompted him to make it. In similar vein, he took up the topic of the historian and his audience. In order to overcome the artificial division between recondite high science and popular history, it was not just a matter of improving narrative style, rather one of openly engaging with the reader. Honesty and a preparedness to share one’s doubts

²⁵ *Ibi*, p. 88. Gulyga proposed questions of imaginative thought, and the aesthetic apprehension of reality in the work of the historian as a theme for further investigation.

²⁶ *Ibi*, pp. 294-5.

²⁷ The mediaevalist, Lev Čerepnin, advanced a similar argument in his paper on Gogol as a historian; like the artist, the work of the historian affects the feeling and imagination of the reader, not just his mind.

were, in Schmidt's view, the best means to encourage historical reflection on the part of both the historian and his reader²⁸.

5. Historical facts and laws of historical development

The materialist conception of history, Gulyga argued, equips the historian with logical criteria for determining what constitutes a historical fact: those events, which facilitate the realization of *zakonomernosti* are "historical". But so, too, he added, are those events, which hinder it. Once we offset theoretical hypotheses of historical method against historical practice, it becomes clear that the historian collates facts, which may not fit into a simple chain of causality; rather they attest to a past reality that is both complex and elusive, and to a course of historical development, which is neither linear, nor pre-determined. The concept of *zakonomernost'*, then, is not so much a universal standard (*universal'nyi étalón*) as a discernible filament (*dostatočno oščutimaja nit'*) guiding the scholar through the labyrinth of the past:

In order to take this filament in his hands, the historian has to conduct a comprehensive analysis of an event, uncover the connections, which gave rise to it and those that followed. Then, on verification, the dazzling façade of many an event may turn out to be lacking in significance, derisory, and a totally different event that passed unnoticed by the majority of contemporaries will come onto the centre stage of history.²⁹

If Gulyga's attempt to harness the features of historical theory and methodology distinct from historical materialism met with the guidelines that Fedoseev and Francev spelled out in their keynote paper, his view that individual facts and multiple configurations cannot be encompassed by general laws, and that the historian draws on value judgements (*kriterii cennosti*) in the selection of facts did not. For philosopher-peers, he was leading historical theory down a «dangerous path» into «Rickertism» (*Rikkertianstvo*)³⁰. Equally dangerous in the wrong hands, was the rediscovery of facts. While historian-practitioners welcomed Gulyga's call to uncover the past on its own terms, if misunderstood, this risked, as some of

²⁸ *Ibi*, p. 288.

²⁹ *Ibi*, pp. 85-6.

³⁰ *Ibi*, p. 130.

the contributions attested, a «fetishization of facts» and the descent into empiricism³¹. Theory, as the intellect historian Mixail Gefter argued, must go hand in hand with practice³².

In Gefter's view, Fedoseev and Francev were undoubtedly right in calling historians to focus their attention on the interaction (*vzaimodejstvie*) of all aspects (*storony*) and processes, which shape historical progress. But, he added, if progress is the object of historical science then it cannot but include an explanation of the laws of historical development, which, albeit retaining certain general traits, have distinctive features in different periods. Given the growing complexities of social life over time, it follows that the forms in which the material conditions of social life filter into (*oposredujutsja*) the class struggle, politics or culture also change³³. To address this problematic, Gefter introduced the concepts of possibility and actuality, categories of dialectical materialism which, he claimed, had been rarely studied on the basis of historical material, but which were highly relevant to an analysis of social development, and specifically, to the task of reviewing the Stalinist cult of personality with its dogmatic preclusion from textbook histories of alternative paths of development.

Possibility and actuality are categories without which [the historian] is unable to fathom the nature of the interaction between the objective and the subjective, the interrelatedness of laws [*sootnošenie zakonomernostej*], which are independent of people's will, or the nature of historical creativity [*istoričeskoe tvorčestvo*], that is, the activity of men [*samodejatel'nost' mass*] who bring to bear—especially in periods of revolution – their «consciousness, will, passion, and fantasies» (Lenin).³⁴

Gulyga and Gefter's handling of the task to rethink the terms of historical enquiry illustrates very well the limits and possibilities of top-down reform. Instructed to devise a theory and methodology of history, it remained a *sine qua non* that problems generated by the task – notably those pertaining to the nature of facts, interpretation, causality – would be addressed with reference to the Marxist-Leninist canon. If the former was accused of closet neo-Kantianism, it was, ironically, the latter's advocacy of a critical engagement with original Marxist categories so as to pave the way for historical enquiry in a revisionist key, which earmarked him for dismissal from the Academy of Sciences by the end of the decade.

6. Handmaiden to ideology or arbiter of knowledge?

³¹ In some instances, the rediscovery of the “fact” had a “Rankean” ring to it; indeed, the term *istorizm* crops up a lot.

³² *Ibi*, p. 147.

³³ *Ibi*, pp. 145-6.

³⁴ *Ibi*, p. 149. The topic of historical alternatives dominated debates during *perestrojka*.

The reluctance among the majority of scholars to drop *zakonomernost'* is fairly obvious. As a core principle of Marxism it was the source of legitimacy for party rule. The issue, however, was whether it could function as a viable research tool in post-Stalinist historical theory and practice, or whether, perforce, it remained tethered to politics. Indeed, some of Fedoseev and Francev's opening comments may be easily dismissed as ciphered instructions to the academic community as to how it should work with the Party's current agenda. The latter's "liberation" programme regarding the inclusion of less economically developed "candidate countries" into the Soviet fold by, so to speak, "recalibrating" the laws of historical materialism and foregrounding agency, is one such example³⁵. In addition, the attachment to the idea of law-governed history underscored a perceived (i.e., ideologically sanctioned) point of difference with current empirical and relativist historiographical trends in the West, which, it was argued, were unable to account for the process of historical development. «How», Fedoseev and Francev asked, «when analysing causality is it possible to dismiss an underlying law-governed development? How can one explain historical phenomena without making any general claims [*obobščajuščie utverždenija*]? Without these, there can be no historical science»³⁶. It is equally clear, though, that the term *zakonomernost'* was used in so many ways. Yes, it announced a return to Marx, but quite frequently it was used in the vernacular to mean "constants", "the typical" or patterns in historical development embedded deep within the complex fabric of events. With this in mind, then, perhaps a case could be made to suggest if, on the one hand, the conference was ostensibly a vehicle of top-down reform, on the other, it provided a platform for methodological innovations that were already being developed in semi-official contexts. A few incidental but telling references by contributors to methodological seminars organized at sector and institute levels speaks to some degree of grass roots initiative. For example, the Director of the Institute of History, Vladimir Xvostov, mentioned that *ad hoc* meetings had been running for the past year, covering topics such as methodological-historical research in Lenin's works; historical materialism, sociology and historical science; the object of historical science. Planned seminars included: problems of social psychology in historical research; the question of repetition in history; methodology for a study of the history of culture. At the time of the conference, he added, the Institute was in the process of setting up a sector dedicated to

³⁵ See, for example, position papers by Moisej Braginskij (on Africa) and Koka Antonova (East Asia).

³⁶ *Ibi*, p. 13.

historical methodology³⁷. Gulyga also referred to the existence of a seminar at the Institute of Philosophy dedicated to the theory of history in which philosophers and historians participated. Topics included: the object of historical science; research methods for the study of the historical process; social psychology and historical science; the problem of causality. A cursory glance at scholarly publications, similarly, suggests that a handful of historians and philosophers were already taking steps to rethink the terms of historical enquiry well before they were officially instructed to do so³⁸.

Assessing the broader repercussions of this debate goes beyond the scope of this paper since it would require extensive analysis of work published in the wake of the conference. But by way of conclusion, we may usefully cite a few passages from a 1965 article by the mediaevalist, Aaron Gurevich (1924-2006), one of the best-known figures of the Thaw era (and *perestrojka*) for the imaginative way in which he “refracted” the terms of the new orthodoxy by placing the problematic in the arena of contemporary west European historiography³⁹. For Gurevich, categories of historical materialism are “epistemological guides” to research and not a priori, ontological descriptions of reality. If he conceded that the general laws of social formation might be valid for the philosopher, for the historian, they were in most cases simply not relevant to the detail of his analysis:

More often, a scholar is necessarily concerned with a geographically limited and relatively brief phase of the historical process during which a general law may be only partly expressed by merely a few of its aspects or even a single one, or it may not appear at all [...]. It is obvious that history requires concrete explanations of events, and mere reference to sociological laws does not solve the problem.⁴⁰

Further, he challenged the axiom that there are no laws of history other than those of historical materialism; on the contrary, there are many “causal patterns” (a term he borrowed from the French *Annales* school) besides those linked to production:

The concrete historical actions of people depend on the most diverse causes, among which, besides production, one must find a place for the natural environment, national characteristics, psychology, ideology, extrinsic influences, traditions, the level of cultural development, biological and demographic factors, and many others.⁴¹

³⁷ *Ibi*, p. 99. Gefter initiated the creation of the sector which he led until it was disbanded at the end of the decade. See Markwick 1994.

³⁸ See, for example: Gulyga 1962, or the orientalist Nikolaj Konrad (1962).

³⁹ Based in Kaliningrad, Gurevich did not attend the conference, but he did play a prominent role in the Sector of methodology alongside Gefter.

⁴⁰ Gurevich 1965, p. 16.

⁴¹ *Ibi*, p. 19.

And, building on the case Gefter made for alternative paths of development and possibility, he harnessed elements of counterfactual history as a tool to rethink the narratives and causal explanations that had somehow become set in stone. That something happened (for example, the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of the Second World War) does not mean that nothing else could have happened. As he put it: «The historian [...] who begins with the conviction that what in fact occurred was the only possible result of all that came before, mistakenly ignores other, unrealized possibilities, and fails to study other, and perhaps mutually contradictory tendencies of development»⁴².

For Gurevich, then, the fundamental premise of a logical development carving its way through a zigzag course of contingencies, which many contemporaries openly endorsed, was little more than a secularized faith in providential history.

Even if Gurevich's contribution is the proverbial exception that proves the rule, he did, nevertheless, open up the field of enquiry making it current with West European historiography, which, since the early 1960s had witnessed a paradigm shift towards social history with a particular emphasis on the lives and culture of ordinary people. The Marxian-inspired credentials of these approaches – the French *Annales*, or British Marxism led by figures such as Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm – would obviously facilitate a cross-border study of historiographical developments in the Soviet Union and the West⁴³. Last but not least, it may be worth revisiting Edward Carr's famous series of lectures published under the title *What is history?* (1961) in which he grappled with «facts of the past», «historical facts», selection and interpretation in light of the Victorian-era legacy of empirical historiography. His comments serve as a useful reminder that, irrespective of the political and/or ideological context, history as a discipline always had its problems.

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⁴² *Ibi*, pp. 26-27.

⁴³ In this connection, it is worth mentioning the Soviet-Italian Historiographical Conference (Moscow, October 1964). Italian delegates included Marxist historians, Paolo Alatri and Giuseppe Berti, and specialists of the Soviet Union, notably, Franco Venturi.

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