

## INTRODUCTION

### A Conservative Agenda

SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON the Soviet system undertaken in the now-distant 1970s and 1980s frequently carries the tags “history from below,” “social history,” and “revisionism.” These descriptives are partly self-applied and partly attributed to students who wanted to break with the heavy concentration on politics, the state, and power that absorbed the attention of the scholars who founded Soviet studies. Yet, just how deeply these revisionists examined the past and its contexts proved difficult to quantify. Similarly, hardly anyone now gives a thought to the meaning of the word *social* when it comes to studies of Soviet history completed in the 1970s and 1980s. Granted, the *histoire économique et sociale* of the *Annales* school influenced this young cohort. Nevertheless, though they would not care to admit it, revisionists took on the same issues as their predecessors. Truthfully, there was nothing else to revise. Revisionists, in essence, wrote a social history of the political sphere whereby they explored society primarily within the context of political processes.<sup>1</sup>

Society as such proved difficult to study. The available sources did not allow for much more than broad generalizations and panoramic sketches of partially defined groups and incompletely described trends.<sup>2</sup> All of this work was still most welcome, however, since scholarship addressing social problems was scant. But, ultimately, research into society concentrated on the system in general. Its depiction, certainly, became incomparably more nuanced than before. Yet, crucial problems of social history, such as everyday life or mentalities, could not be treated in depth.

The new research examined labor policy, state campaigns in the 1930s (e.g., agricultural collectivization and Stakhanovism), or membership screenings and purges in the party and state apparatuses.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, peasants, workers, activists, and party cadres—that is, Soviet society—played a key role in these works. For all that, the nature and limits of state power—that is, politics—still stood at the center of attention. Students concluded that the fate of important central decisions likely depended on how those decisions were or were not implemented locally and that unpopular initiatives necessitating the cooperation of huge masses of people were implemented in ways other than intended. It was hardly a startling revelation that regional and local officials often deliberately failed to satisfy the Kremlin's demands. Who could be surprised to discover that these same officials also tried to protect themselves when threatened with censure, or even worse, prosecution for failure?

Earlier scholarship focused on the input side. The decisions made by top agencies or the Supreme Leader held crucial importance in these scholars' analyses, which focused on party and state power and arbitrariness. The younger generation, by contrast, focused on the output side: how people executed directives, how things happened, and what results various policies produced. Younger researchers found it unproductive to concentrate on state power in a society in which the leadership repeatedly proved incapable of generating desired results, even when it came to rather simple issues such as rationalizing industrial production or keeping records on party members.

The younger generation of scholars has never denied that the leadership had a total claim on the rest of society. For younger scholars, however, the problem lay in the limits of this claim. The more the authorities tried to act on it, the more they risked provoking tensions and the more they encouraged, in response, little tactics intended to avoid having to complete burdensome and unwelcome tasks. These responses to the exercise of power almost never came out into the open. They were rarely acknowledged by the social actors themselves, and, if they were, they were likely explained in terms of subversion and wrecking. Nevertheless, little tactics and evasions, and the tensions they engendered, were omnipresent and impossible to eliminate even by means of terror and physical annihilation.<sup>4</sup>

Revisionists arrived at vaguely similar conclusions, but not only because they were interested in policy outcomes. They also undertook a close reading of previously unexplored Soviet texts: from seemingly insignificant articles in daily newspapers to obscure party propaganda pamphlets; from boring legal articles to exciting—but oddly neglected—documents in the Smolensk Archive. These sources were not entirely unknown. Unlike earlier scholars, however, who approached them from the perspective of the party-state's strength, the younger generation understood that sources are usually unreliable if read sim-

ply for what they spell out. They can often shed more light if read as negative imprints of problems and as parts of discursive strategies.

To be sure, up to the early 1990s Soviet historians faced serious limits on the questions they could pose and the answers they could find. The available documents channeled more attention toward issues the authorities stressed rather than research agendas defined by scholars themselves. Researchers could miss key sentences in seemingly innocuous texts or give too much importance to a couple of words. Above all, they did best to scrupulously avoid speculating about questions the available sources could not answer. One of the most important among these questions concerned the dimensions of mass terror, an issue that always ignited heated discussions. Yet, as we now know, given the document base, plausible estimates could not be reliably established.

Soviet studies reached a turning point with the partial opening of party and state archives in the early 1990s. Research possibilities expanded and scholars' knowledge of Soviet history grew exponentially. Some researchers continued the work begun in the 1970s and 1980s, developing it in accord with newly discovered information. They gave detailed accounts of social and political interaction and examined terror from this perspective.<sup>5</sup> New sources and interpretations enabled scholars to place society, politics, daily existence, and terror within the overall context of a culture that produced enduring violence and also to locate it in a space that transcended Soviet borders.<sup>6</sup> The new material made new insights into the decision-making processes possible by lifting the veil on the origins of and responses to the regime's projects and initiatives. Research on popular opinion, the politics of adaptation to and uses of official discourses and cultural patterns, behavioral models, official campaigns, penal strategies, social groups, economic and labor policies, resistance, the Sergei Kirov assassination, and ethnic issues received a tremendous boost.<sup>7</sup>

New issues and new approaches came to the fore, but to a certain extent they contributed to the further development of the revisionist agenda. Describing the Soviet system in terms of a new civilization or as a rural world engulfing the urban amounts to explicating the relations between society and politics in much the same way as does an archaeology of daily life, another field of study that emerged at this time.<sup>8</sup> In the same way, applying subjectivity models to Soviet history is enlarging and deepening the agenda of the *histoire des mentalités*, which, for lack of adequate materials, could not be successfully accomplished thirty years ago. New research along these lines goes even further, showing how Soviet citizens internalized power relations and how these relations then solidified into a sort of infrastructure determining their personalities.<sup>9</sup>

The present book continues the tradition of the most conservative revisionism. It revolves around the old theme of the politics of social practices and explores how patterns of daily action influenced political processes. This does not

mean that this study does not benefit from the insights of postrevisionist works, particularly those that explore Soviet subjectivity.<sup>10</sup>

Newly accessible sources allow us to see more precisely the central problems that this book addresses. They throw light on previously obscure domains where the great projects designed by the high leadership encountered the established routine of the lesser mortals (responsible officials and humble citizens) who were required to carry them out. The documents also allow us to understand better the imageries—positive and negative—of the Soviet universe that both leaders and the led shared. This material offers new insights into the motives and manifestations of political engagement, disillusionment, and revolt. It also sheds light on behavioral models that deviated from regime norms yet remained or became integral parts of Soviet culture. In addition, it contributes to the formulation of questions relating to the Soviet strategy of modernization, as well as to the methods employed to integrate society and to adapt it to the Soviet project.

The party-state expended enormous energy on programs that resembled social engineering in the hopes of introducing what the leaders understood as the blessings of modernity. Masses of citizens responded enthusiastically to these programs and their promises. Many of them strove to fashion their personality in accord with what was seen at the time as the triumphal march of progress. This is the input side that recent scholarship has analyzed in far greater depth than previous research has. The output side is that, despite these programs and individual exertions, the Soviet Union ultimately collapsed. This study seeks to locate early signs of this outcome and to relate them directly to Bolshevik social engineering, to Soviet-type modernization, and to the self-image of committed citizens.

Granted, this approach is decidedly ahistorical, but so is historical research, notwithstanding appearances. The curiosity of scholars is profoundly influenced by problems of their time, and usually they are aware of this influence.<sup>11</sup> In our time, people detect in all walks of life the technologies of identity formation, surveillance, normalization, and social engineering. They are among today's preoccupations and are often understood as the dubious achievements of modernity. It is just as understandable that historical research should seek to focus on them within the context of a system they marked, as is scholarly interest in their contribution to the eventual failure of that system.

One may wonder if Bolshevik strategies to shape the Soviet universe, their questionable successes, and the feeling of uncertainty they provoked were not likely to elicit anguish among the elite, as well as in the rest of society, and lead to policies hardly more successful than earlier ones. It is conceivable that not all people greeted this social experimentation with enthusiasm and that some individuals reacted quite vehemently. It is equally plausible that strategies of nor-

malization and control prompted people to find particular ways to cope with the consequences and that the little tactics of both leaders and the led would interact with the ensuing responses of the regime to produce situations not entirely expected by the authorities and the rest of the population. It is quite conceivable that this bewildered many citizens and amused some of them, and it is reasonable to suppose that the result made some individuals remarkably angry. These are the main assumptions and themes of the present work.

Part one explores the unacknowledged anguish that party and state policies provoked among ordinary people and officialdom. It describes how recourse to state terror campaigns arose from a misreading of systemic problems, how and why the targets of violence changed, and how violence abated with the passage of time. Part two examines popular reactions to official policies by citizens, especially youths, who remained faithful to what they understood as the original revolutionary project despite the obvious abyss between Bolshevik promises and the Soviet world, and by those who contested the regime's legitimacy. Part three describes how officials and citizens coped with regime pressures, their efforts to make sense of them, and the outcome of their everyday practices. The goal is to trace change in the Soviet system over the *longue durée* and to identify the agents of that change.

One limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on Russia, an unfortunate consequence of the author's ignorance of languages and cultures in which it would otherwise be interesting to test his hypotheses. Another limitation is, at one level, a terminological uncertainty. At another level, however, the problem has more to do with conceptual uncertainties inseparable from speech patterns and discursive conventions. They arise as soon as historians try to name the subjects and objects of political processes and place them in their sociocultural framework.

Students face no difficulty if they attribute political action to individuals or specific institutions, since they have decided in advance that the latter are distinct from society as a whole and dominate the political sphere. But students find themselves on shaky ground when they reason that even powerful persons and administrations are integral parts of society and affected by the ramifications of their own actions, because their reactions to situations cannot be isolated from widespread social practices and the mentalities that underlay them. In this case, it is impossible to view leaders and organizations merely as directing agents. And it is simplistic to treat society exclusively as an object shaped by state strategies intended to standardize and control the population.

Historians are sometimes conscious of these dilemmas, and the names of individuals and institutions in their work function as shorthand expressions for everything social practices imply within establishments, leaderships, and regimes. The efforts of this study's author to convey the complex interplay of

cultural patterns, social action, and politics may remind some readers of the contortions achieved by apprentice yogis. They are, however, unavoidable because they are necessary if one is to confront the necessary range of issues: from questions concerning the origins and essence of authority to the limits of sovereignty; from problems inherent in the sources to the roots of anthropomorphic metaphors associating personal and impersonal agency and relating them to the structural constraints of societies.

Researchers of the Soviet past run a good chance of losing sight of their subject in the jungle of disciplines and methods that lead to the ethereal sphere of pure theories. This danger can force even the most reluctant historian to employ shorthand expressions. No one can be naive enough to believe they can avoid all ambiguities. In the present study, decisions and actions will be attributed to specific persons, when possible, and, when not possible, to “Moscow” or the “Kremlin” if they originate at the highest political level. Fairly often, however, actions or attitudes will be attributed to “officialdom,” “cadres,” or “the elite,” as well as to “people,” “citizens,” or “individuals.” The intention is to convey the fact that the actors are collectives who share certain characteristics that influence their routine behaviors. If need be, groups can be specified as “peasants,” “activists,” “grassroots cadres” or “managers.” This book does not focus on particular groups or the intricacies of social stratification. Still, the terms are used with subaltern and superordinate categories in mind and, frequently, in relation to conflicts between and among them. This practice can lead to some ambiguity in cases when “citizens” are likely to include “cadres” or “dignitaries” and “the elite.” The context, as well as expressions such as “ordinary citizens,” the “rank and file,” or the “masses,” should make the usages reasonably clear, but the author trembles at the idea that this will not be always the case.

Designations like the “Procuracy” or the “secret police” speak for themselves, but others, such as the “administration,” will sound rather vague. The latter encompasses different institutions that would be too long and sometimes too complicated to enumerate in detail. The term “party-state” does not denote an omnipotent organization. It stands both for an all-encompassing administration—the party and state apparatuses—and its officials. To a certain extent, it is interchangeable with the word *regime*. Yet, it must be kept in mind that social practices influencing the operation of all of these institutional arrangements—whether “administrations,” the “party-state,” or the “regime”—and the ways people understand them make them parts of society, all the more since their practices, representations, or their models by and large coincide with those of “ordinary citizens,” “officialdom,” and so on. From a political point of view, the “regime” and the “rest of society” together form what will be referred to as the “system.” The terms *bureaucracy* and *bureaucrat* will be scrupulously avoided. In contemporary societies, they imply established and, most often, codified

rules and regulations, and their lawful uses serve as prevailing norms, even if bureaucrats themselves do not necessarily adhere to them. In Soviet practice, most of the rules remained highly uncertain even if they happened to be explicit or formally enacted. Their importance as norms was relative. Bureaucratic routine has an internal logic, and even functionaries who depart from standard regulations recognize this problem. Different orders of logic characterized Soviet bureaucratic routine. In practice, officials found it necessary to ignore some regulations and observe others that they deemed politically or administratively useful at any given moment.<sup>12</sup> This arbitrariness marked Soviet administrative performance, frustrating and angering policy makers and populace alike.

The term *state* will also be used as sparingly used as possible. “State” designates a structured and homogeneous whole understood as a sovereign political and historical subject. It is open to doubt if, in general, the concept is of use, but this question is beyond the scope of the present study. Suffice it to say that the Soviet folkways—ingenious maneuvers to circumvent or manipulate administrative arrangements and influence policies—described in different chapters of this book preclude the existence of a sovereign institution. This void does not prevent social actors from believing they represent or face an institution of this sort. After all, they are supposed to carry out tasks and obey rules, as well as risk punishments decreed and meted out, in the name of a set of powerful administrations. They are also confronted with a plethora of organizations staffed by officials who make decisions and act in an arbitrary manner. For all that, daily routine makes obligations, regulations, sanctions, and organizations remarkably uncertain. The lower individuals are situated in the social hierarchy, the more they may be pressed to submit to rules, the more they may feel exposed to penalties, and the more they are likely to feel confronted with an efficient state. But practices within the Soviet administration make the outcome of the interaction between the regime and the rest of society unpredictable. Sometimes it is more the probability of sanctions that motivates anguish, anger, and folkways than the inevitable crackdown by anything usually seen as state power.

State obligations, rules, and the assumptions behind them are treated in this work as the input side. Leaders who establish regulations and duties, together with the officials tasked to execute them and the ordinary citizens expected to obey them, constitute the forces that had to work within a world frequently at odds with the desires and expectations of both leaders and the led. To a large extent, the underpinnings of this world remained beyond their understanding precisely because of their visions of the state and the power they attributed to it. The unanticipated output that resulted bewildered both the leaders and the led and motivated new decisions likely to make institutions and their interplay with the rest of the administration and society more uncertain and unpredictable.

Although individuals and imageries fill this book, ideology and a subjectiv-

ity understandable as distinctly Soviet are beyond its concerns. The most patient readers will be rewarded with some ideas about ideology, and attentive ones will find a word or two about subjectivity. But the practices and their outcomes explored here are hard to grasp simply in terms of ideology and subjectivity. A distinct ideology such as the Soviet one implies convictions defined by an articulated worldview, and a subjectivity influenced by a particular world outlook presupposes a fair degree of awareness by persons as to how their sentiments and opinions relate to what they understand as their social, political, and cultural environment.

The practices at issue in this work elude explanation within the framework of Soviet ideology and are far removed from people's consciously held beliefs. Soviet subjects in this study are not Soviet in the sense that they think they are. Their reactions to situations and the universe they create are very often far from the convictions they profess and from the experience they acknowledge. Their lived world is quite different from the one Soviet ideology suggests. It cannot be deciphered by a subject who has internalized Bolshevik values. The world they actually live in should not be confounded with their self-understanding and with the visions ideology conveys. It is Soviet in a way far removed from the qualities of the ideal Soviet Man and the principles he embodies. The more widely Soviet concepts are disseminated, the less will they account for people's responses to those regime actions intended to realize Soviet ideals. These concepts will not help anyone make sense of folkways and their unpredictable outcomes, of the regime's initiatives, of the anguish and anger they provoke, or of the universe they helped to shape.

Studies that concentrate principally on ideology and personality may actually explain the self-image the regime projects, and people internalize more than what those individuals and groups essentially represent, do, or fail to do, regardless of how they define themselves. Research on subjectivity greatly enlarges our horizon by reconstructing how individuals identify with the objectives and rules of conduct Bolshevik self-understanding presupposes. These issues are important because they are inseparable from the input side of the regime's designs and policies. But it is necessary to emphasize that new research about personality is primarily about committed individuals and not Soviet citizens in general. It is hardly possible to reduce the subjectivity of the latter to a common denominator, even though scholars do not always resist this temptation, forgetting that they are dealing with a fairly stratified, multiethnic society.

Students of the Soviet self run the same risk as their colleagues (this author included) who venture into that uncertain territory occupied by people who react to projects and rules and who become objects of processes they are unable to rationalize. Both of them face a chicken-and-egg dilemma because they cannot easily decide if ideologies and the policies they generate or justify are



autonomous historical agents or part of a chain reaction of responses to historical circumstances that starts deep in the deep and transforms ideologies and policies in interaction with the processes they simultaneously shape. Research on the internalization of ideology through work on the self makes projects and practices appear to originate in acts of will. The study of reactions, on the other hand, avoids the question of origins by postulating a terminus a quo so far back in time that it seems situated before anything we can grasp as history. In the first case, identifying oneself with the Bolshevik cause appears as a sovereign option and produces a Soviet Man who is ultimately above history. In the second, the Soviet adventure is embedded in a series of historical events and phenomena that can be treated as producing an accident but can also be seen as the outcome of a strongly path-dependent process or, at any rate, as part of a long and somewhat chaotic play of circumstances of which path-dependence is not the only factor.

This juncture may seem the place to ask if the most fateful period of Soviet history—the era associated with Stalin’s name—and the logic that dictated the emergence of the Bolshevik variant called Stalinism were inevitable. But Stalin and Stalinism are decidedly not subjects of the present study. The question of Stalin and Stalinism’s necessity has been posed many times. It proved a suspiciously easy question to answer, since the response depended on the author’s own sympathies and antipathies.<sup>13</sup> Sympathy did not mean approval of Stalinism, whatever scholars meant by the term. On the contrary, the term became distinctly pejorative in the academy, but this circumstance did not make it a useful tool for understanding Soviet history.<sup>14</sup> The label is closely related to hair-splitting and the sometimes bullying arguments Bolshevik leaders advanced in the 1920s to demonstrate that their policies and their interpretation of Lenin’s dictums proved that they, and not their opponents, were the legitimate heirs of the Soviet state’s founder.<sup>15</sup> Students wading into these discussions risked losing their way to the library and the archives and becoming instead unofficial advisors explaining how to improve, reform, or save the Soviet system.

The concept of Stalinism is problematic also because most scholars carefully avoid offering an exact definition of it. As a result, it came to denote a bewildering array of things ranging from theories and economic programs to terror and, frequently, to the entire system, even though students understood that many ingredients antedated or survived the so-called Stalinist epoch.<sup>16</sup> The concept has the dubious merit of linking the person of an extremely unsympathetic politician to anything or everything related to a historical period and beyond. Stalin’s name is quite frequently used when authors simply need a sentence subject to whom they can attribute decisions and actions. They rarely do it with an omnipotent Stalin in mind, but the usage often conceals what the dictator stands for in their narrative. The word *Stalinism* is no less misleading

because its embarrassing polysemy makes it difficult to grasp its connotation in a given context.

Some scholars are inclined to equate “Stalinism” with unbridled terror and to restrict its usage to the years devastated by it.<sup>17</sup> They can be praised for a certain chronological precision. On the other hand, the *reductio ad terrorem* excludes thorny issues like the nonviolent, elitist, manipulative, or conflicting features that flourished during Stalin’s tenure but that appeared long before the Supreme Leader surfaced—even before the revolution—and outlived him and maybe even the Soviet Union. Perhaps more importantly, it risks an excessive focus on Stalin’s person and on his decisions, obscuring the larger social, institutional, and cultural contexts of terror and their influences—influences that did not disappear with the passing of the regime’s overtly violent routine.

It is senseless to advance a definition of Stalinism without linking it to Stalin. Yet, scholars writing about “Stalin’s” peasants, railroad, outcasts, engineers, police, or socialism characterize people, describe institutions, and analyze situations in historical, social, and political contexts they would be the last to see simply in terms of the doctrines and intentions of the dictator and to actions attributable only to him.<sup>18</sup> It turns out that even Nikolai Ezhov, the police chief who was “Stalin’s loyal executioner” and “his” iron fist, was making clever use of his master’s will.<sup>19</sup> Stalin was a powerful politician; his disastrous decisions and cruel deeds weighed heavily. But he did not act in a vacuum. Students invoking the name of the Supreme Guide actually dwell on many issues hard to relate to him, directly or at all, as well as on unintended consequences of his choices. It is fortunate, indeed, that they explore such problems rather than meditating on how they could define Stalinism.

A strict definition restricts research on whatever Stalinism is supposed to mean and obscures most of the things that happen to transcend it. On the other hand, broad definitions make the concept synonymous with nearly everything Soviet and strip it of every heuristic virtue. All recent works demonstrate that it is incomparably more fruitful to formulate research agendas focusing on historical issues rather than trying to solve an elusive terminological problem.

This book is based on a similar agenda. It explores imageries, emotions, and daily practices in a confused and confusing society and specifically focuses on the prewar period when they crystallized but also considers processes that led to the end of the Soviet era. The study grapples with the admittedly banal issue of actions and reactions in circumstances that historical actors simultaneously shape and suffer without necessarily having a clear idea of the reasons for or the outcomes of their actions. No wonder. They are constructing a world with which they are often at odds without being able to account for their universe or the ins and outs of ways they are trying to cope with it. The world in question

is distinctively Soviet Russian, but one suspects that not only Soviet Russian or post-Soviet Russian people inhabit such a universe.

Revisionist works were products of a specific historical moment, although the authors themselves could not of course have been conscious of the ultimate meaning of this. Their research took place at the twilight of the Soviet Union, when Minerva's owl set out to overfly the Soviet universe and possibly also the one defining itself as its antipode.<sup>20</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, we can understand that revisionists could not help posing questions about features of the Bolshevik adventure that led to the terminal crisis of the Soviet system. The present work too is inevitably related to the time during which it was written, to anguish, anger, and folkways in the post-Soviet world and possibly even beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union.