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Learning the Scholar's Craft

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Becoming a historian was perhaps over-determined in my family. My father, Brian Fitzpatrick, wrote books on Australian economic and labour history; my mother Dorothy taught history; and my younger brother, David Fitzpatrick, would become a distinguished historian (of twentieth-century Ireland) in his turn. But both David and I tried at first to avoid our fate, he with mathematics and I with the violin. I was well-trained as a historian at the University of Melbourne, although I did not fully appreciate this until later in life, but what hooked me was writing my history honours essay in my fourth year.¹ The topic was Soviet music and my question was whether, as claimed, it had in fact succeeded in overcoming the growing chasm between popular and “serious” music evident in the West. I concluded that it hadn’t, which may have been partly wrong (if a reasonable conclusion at the time), but the search for an answer fascinated me. Decades later, working in the archives of the Soviet Society for Foreign Cultural Relations (VOKS) in Moscow, I stumbled upon my own letter of enquiry to VOKS, the Soviet society for foreign cultural relations, carefully typed on a blue aerogramme and sent from Melbourne in 1960. (They answered.)

I had chosen a Soviet topic to try out my Russian, having taken two years at the university as my mandatory foreign language. That thesis topic meant that when in 1964 I set out, as a Commonwealth Scholar, on the well-trodden path from the Melbourne University history department to Oxford, I said that my chosen field was Soviet history. Had the Commonwealth Scholarship people only known, there was at that point no real sub-discipline of “Soviet history”: Russian historians did not consider it a proper object of study, ostensibly because of lack of access to archives but basically, in many cases, because they did not think the Soviet Union should exist in the first place.

My Oxford destination was St Antony’s College, Oxford, a recent foundation (early 1950s) that was sometimes called a “spy” college as a number of its original fellow had worked in British Intelligence during the war. It was a curious choice on my part. I have no idea why I didn’t apply to go to Cambridge and study with E. H. Carr, a pioneer in the Soviet history field whose work I admired.² I knew about St Antony’s “spy” reputation, but apparently that didn’t deter me. St Antony’s provided me with a literary scholar, Max Hayward, as a supervisor, a trial for him, although he did his best to understand my

¹ Sheila Mary Fitzpatrick, “Soviet Music: The Composer, the State, and the Public,” B.A. Honours Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1961.

² Of E.H. Carr’s monumental *History of Soviet Russia*, the volumes out and known to me in Australia before my departure in 1964 were *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923* (3 vols., London: Macmillan 1953), *The Interregnum, 1923-1924* (London: Macmillan, 1954), and volume 2 of *Socialism in One Country, 1924-1926* (London: Macmillan, 1959). Vols. 1 and 3 of *Socialism* came out in 1964, followed a few years later by *Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926-1929*.

curious preoccupation with primary sources and archives.³ Leonard Schapiro, at the London School of Economics, took me under his wing early on (he was not strictly speaking a historian, but the next best thing, as a scholar of government in the British scholarly system who had used primary sources for his work on early Soviet politics).⁴ Carr, at Cambridge, did the same at a slightly later stage. For a variety of reasons including the suspicion that he was soft on Soviet communism, Carr's name was mud at Oxford. Schapiro shared the Oxford attitude and Carr fully returned this dislike, but both were kind and helpful to me.

Within a year of arriving in Oxford, I was desperate to get to the Soviet Union for research, but it was difficult because, in those days, you could only go on the official British exchange, and I was Australian. I finally managed it, arriving in Moscow in September 1966. I was given a literary scholar as a supervisor (again!) for my dissertation research on the topic of Anatoly Lunacharsky, People's Commissar (i.e., Minister) of education and culture in the first Soviet government. But the person from whom I learned most was Igor Sats, member of the editorial board of the Soviet boundary-pushing journal *Novy mir*, who, as a young man, had been literary secretary to Lunacharsky, his brother-in-law. Igor was a self-described Old Bolshevik with an insider's view of Soviet history as black comedy.⁵ I had a tremendous struggle to get into Soviet archives, not surprisingly as they scarcely ever let a foreigner into archives of the Soviet period, but finally succeeded, albeit the state archives where Lunacharsky's ministry records were held rather than what I was aiming at, his personal papers held in the Communist Party archive. This was a lucky break for me, as it enabled me to see close up how the Soviet political system had operated in the 1920s.⁶ This was the basis for my dissertation and subsequent first book, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*.⁷

The time I spent in the Soviet Union from 1967 to 1970 was my formative period as a Soviet historian. The 1970s, working in the United States, was my formative period as a participant in politicised academic debate and reluctant polemicist. The Cold War had had a strong impact on American Soviet studies ('Sovietology') in the US, with the totalitarian model (based on equivalence of Nazi and Soviet regimes) imposing a value-loaded straitjacket, and lack of access to archives and primary sources making empirical research difficult. In America I became a "revisionist," meaning a challenger of the totalitarian model, but actually I was not interested in models, thinking them more appropriate for political science than for history.⁸ My real interest was in opening up Soviet history as a field of historical research; and with the gradual opening up of the Soviet Union to foreign researchers, that was just beginning to be possible.

³ For more on Max Hayward and St Antony's, see Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, and London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 1-38.

⁴ Leonard Schapiro, *Origins of the Communist Autocracy. Political Opposition in the Soviet State: First Phase, 1917-1922* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

⁵ On Sats, see Fitzpatrick, *Spy in the Archives*, 142-68. He is one of the dedicatees of my book *The Cultural Front* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) as well as of my forthcoming *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* (Melbourne: Black, Inc/New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

⁶ See chapter 5, "In the Archives," in Fitzpatrick, *Spy in the Archives*, 169-212.

⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁸ For my take on this see Fitzpatrick, "Revisionism in Retrospect: A Personal View," *Slavic Review* 67:3 (2008), pp. 682-704. More dispassionate accounts are in David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy. The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009), 186-308 (ch. 11: "Left Turn in the Ivory Tower," 206-308) and Mark Edele, *Debates on Stalinism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020, 89-117 (ch. 4: "Unrevisionist Eevisionism," 89-117 and passim).

I also, like many young historians of my generation, wanted to write social history, although nobody was quite sure if or how that could be done when the society in question was generally supposed (both by Western scholars and Soviet ones) to be managed “top down,” with the possibility of initiative from below excluded *a priori*. My first effort along these lines was policy history rather than social history, but at least the policy in question was a social one – the Soviet version of an affirmative action programme on behalf of workers, peasants, and national minorities, conducted in the late 1920s and early ‘30s.⁹ The formulation of my “upward mobility” theme owed much to political scientist Jerry Hough, to whom I was married in the second half of the 1970s and early ‘80s.¹⁰ It got me into some trouble, not only with mainstream Sovietologists (who seemed to think that upward mobility was peculiarly American and a democratic prerogative) but also with the Marxist labour historians who were just beginning to emerge in the field in the West.

In the ‘80s, I moved – not without difficulty – from social policy history to social history, with a two-part study of rural and urban society in Russia in the 1930s focussing on everyday practices and survival and advancement strategies.¹¹ I did not really have any models to follow for this, although I liked Erving Goffman’s sociological work.¹² My home-spun approach was really a kind of historical ethnography; I couldn’t work out how to incorporate the “change over time” aspect that normally preoccupies historians. The question of class puzzled me, too. Class in the Marxist sense seemed to provide a poor template for a society like the Soviet one, in which pre-revolutionary class structures had been so thoroughly dismantled or distorted, but at the same time it was impossible to avoid, being embedded not only in Soviet and Western discourse but in Soviet statistics as well. Finally, it occurred to me that what mattered in Soviet society was not class as a structural principle but class *labelling*: if you were officially recognised as a “worker” or “poor peasant,” that improved your life chances, whereas being labelled as “bourgeois” or “kulak” sharply diminished them.¹³

My move to the University of Chicago in 1990, when the vogue for Theory was at its height, probably helped to solve the class problem, as did a passing acquaintance with Pierre Bourdieu in Paris. But what I gained most from Chicago was a substantial number of Ph.D. students, having arrived on the scene just as the Soviet Union collapsed and its archives and oral-history and fieldwork possibilities opened up to Western scholars. This was an extraordinarily exciting time to be a Soviet historian, and I experienced that excitement not only as an individual but also, for the first time in my life, as part of an intellectual collective, as my Chicago students and I grappled together with the huge influx of data coming in and the changes in perspective it brought.¹⁴

⁹ Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ I discuss the question of mutual influence between me and Jerry in Fitzpatrick, “Hough and History,” (essay for memorial forum on Jerry F. Hough), *Kritika, Explorations in Russian and Eurasian history* 22:3 (2021), 535-556.

¹¹ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and *Dominion and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹³ The main products of this realization are Fitzpatrick, “L’usage bolchévique: Marxisme et construction de l’identité individuelle,” *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 85 (1990); Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class. The Construction of Social identity in Soviet Russia,” *Journal of Modern History* 65:4 (1993) and Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ The range is suggested by the list of monographs produced by my University of Chicago students of the 1990s cohort (to reduce it somewhat, I have included only those whose Ph.D. dissertation committees I chaired): Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin’s Outcasts. Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); James Andrews, *Science for the Masses: The*

After twenty years at Chicago, and having reached the age at which people often retire, I decided to return to Australia, having been 48 years away. I was not sure what the move would mean professionally, and thought it possible that I would stop writing scholarly history books and concentrate on playing chamber music and contributing to the *London Review of Books*, or perhaps more generally writing non-fiction (my first book of memoirs was written as I tested the Australian waters before the definitive move¹⁵). It did not turn out that way. Moving across the world made me interested in migration, and it was tempting to apply my approach to revolutionary self-invention (in *Tear off the Masks*) in that context. As an honorary professor at the University of Sydney, I started a project with Mark Edele (a former student from Chicago who is now Hanson Professor of history at the University of Melbourne) on Soviet “displaced persons” who were resettled in Australia after the Second World War; this was later continued in collaboration with Jayne Persian (now Senior Lecturer at the University Southern Queensland) and Ruth Balint (Associate Professor, University of New South Wales) and my Ph.D. student, Ebony Nilsson.¹⁶ With my appointment as a professor at Australian Catholic University in Melbourne in 2020, Joy Damousi¹⁷ became another close collaborator.

Since returning to Australia in 2012, I have worked on two tracks: Soviet history and migration history. *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2015) is my first book-length foray into high politics, bringing something of my “everyday” approach to a study of the Stalinist Politburo.¹⁸ Another Soviet book, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* will be published early in 2022. My first migration monograph was *White Russians, Red*

Bolshevik State, Public Science, and the Popular Imagination, 1917-34 (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2003); Alan Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town. Forced Labor and its Legacy in Vorkuta* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw. Experience and Memory in Moscow's Arbat* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War. A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); James Harris, *The Great Urals. Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet System* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Steven Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 2013); Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Brian LaPierre, *Hooligans in Khrushchev's Russia. Defining, Policing and Producing Deviance during the Thaw* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); Matthew Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses. Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); John McCannon, *Red Arctic. Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union 1932-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1929* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Mie Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead. The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Matthew J. Payne, *Stalin's Railroad. Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001); Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian nation. Military Conscription, Total War and Mass Politics, 1905-1925* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2003); Kiril Tomoff, *Creative Union. The Professional Organization of Soviet Composers, 1939-1953* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Fitzpatrick, *My Father's Daughter: Memories of an Australian Childhood* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010). I later wrote *Spy in the Archives* (2013) (on Moscow in the late 1960s) and *Mischka's War: A European Odyssey of the 1940s* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, and London: I.B. Tauris, 2017) (on my late husband Michael Danos's experience as a displaced person in Germany after World War II).

¹⁶ Jayne Persian, *Beautiful Balts. From Displaced Persons to New Australians* (Sydney: New South, 2017); Ruth Balint, *Destination Elsewhere: Displaced Persons and their Quest to Leave Postwar Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021); Ebony Nilsson, “The ‘Enemy Within’: Left-wing Soviet Displaced Persons in Australia,” PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2020).

¹⁷ Joy Damousi, *Memory and Migration in the Shadow of War. Australia's Greek Immigrants after World War II and the Greek Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ On the approach, see “Politics as Practice. Thoughts on a New Soviet Political History,” *Kritika* 5:1 (2004).

Peril: A Cold War History of Migration to Australia (2021),¹⁹ dedicated to my brother David: it was written in tandem with his last migration book, *The Americanisation of Ireland*, which I saw through the press after his death in 2019.²⁰ I am currently writing a book on repatriation and international resettlement of Soviet DPs, *Lost Souls: Cold War Conflict over Soviet and Baltic Displaced Persons after World War II*, under contract to Princeton for delivery in December 2022.

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¹⁹ Fitzpatrick, *White Russians, Red Peril: A Cold War History of Migration to Australia* (Melbourne: Black, Inc.; London: Routledge, 2021).

²⁰ David Fitzpatrick, *The Americanisation of Ireland. Migration and Settlement 1841-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). My brother preceded me by many years as a migration historian: see his marvellous *Oceans of Consolation. Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).