

Bolshevik Surveillance in Historiography

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The research topic of *surveillance* as a political practice exercised by the Soviet authorities in 1920s and 1930s is non-existent in the scholarly literature before the opening of Soviet archives. Sheila Fitzpatrick, an Australian historian of modern Russia, explains the impossibility of choosing such topic before the period of *glasnost*.¹ Not only a very few Western scholars were allowed to work in the Soviet archives, the topic of their research had to remain strictly non-political.² Any suspicion of breaking this policy could, at any stage, terminate the already painful multistep-process of obtaining archival access. Even if permission was granted, though, the researchers experienced many difficulties to navigate through the archival material because they were not allowed to use finding aids such as catalogues and inventories. Fitzpatrick stresses that “this was an important prohibition, as it meant that the scholar could not make his/her own selection of material or develop a sense of the universe of material potentially available.”³

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the archives, therefore, meant a turning point for scholars interested in politically charged topics such as the Bolshevik practice of surveillance. Peter Holquist, an American historian, adds that the reports by surveillance organs in the form of summaries of popular moods, excerpts made from intercepted letters, and accounts of overheard conversations became one of the most sought after archival material.⁴ Not surprisingly then, the topic itself appeared in several Western publications. The fact that surveillance as a political tool was extensively used by the Soviet authorities is now universally accepted. The remaining debate is not concerned with the existence of the practice itself but rather with its

¹ The opening of the archives was a gradual process with major changes between 1989 and 1991 as Fitzpatrick mentioned in her article “Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History,” *The Russian Review*, 74, July 2015, 379, 386.

² *Ibid.*, 387.

³ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁴ Peter Holquist, “Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work,” (The essays was published in R.G.Suny’s Book *The Structure of Soviet History* by New York: Oxford University Press in 2003)

origins. While the more traditional cohort of historians believes that this political tool originated in the specifics of Russian political culture or in the Bolshevik ideology alone, the most recent scholarship argues that this practice was not unique to the Soviet case but much rather a common feature of European modernity. Using the concept of modernity as an interpretative framework and archival material as a main source of research, this new generation of historians uncovered interesting facts about the motivations, mechanisms, and products of surveillance. Aside from the opposing arguments stands Sheila Fitzpatrick, a social historian, whose focus is on the “everydayness” of surveillance with its complexities and contradictions.⁵

Richard Pipes, an American historian, belongs to the more traditional cohort of scholars who argue for the uniqueness of the Soviet case with its specific political practices. The completion of his book *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* coincided with the Soviet Union disintegration. Given the access to the archives, nevertheless, did not alter Pipes’s lifelong thesis of Russian exceptionalism.⁶ The author perceives the Soviet case as a very unique experience that originated in the particularities of the Russian political culture. The Bolshevik political practices, Pipes argues, were radical but logical continuity of the general trends within the Russian society. Pipes explained that the major difference between the western and non-western government was the relationship between property and political power. The political authority in Russia was “exercised as an extension of the rights of ownership” much longer than in other countries and the split between the two was not only extremely slow but also very imperfect.⁷ Tensions were logical consequences of maintaining this kind of governing in the face of “steadily increased contact” with the West.⁸ To deal with these tensions, the imperial government employed practices resembling those of modern police state. Pipes believes that surveillance employed by the Bolsheviks, even if concentrated, only represented a further extension of the practices previously established by the tsarist officials. Moreover, the longstanding inability to impose any limitations on political authority was another example of similarities between the Tsarist and the Bolshevik regimes. Lastly, Pipes maintains, the profound lack of political, social, mental, and

⁵ Fitzpatrick, Sheila, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁶ Richard, Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), xviii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁸ *Ibid.*

national consolidation that allowed for the Bolshevik seizure of power was also something very unique to Russia. Based on these facts Pipes does not find a common ground on which the Soviet experience could be compared, in any significant way, to the rest of Europe.

Martin Malia in *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* supports Pipes's argument of Russian exceptionalism but strongly disagrees with the thesis of continuity. In his opinion, the Soviet regime with its political practices represented a unique and incomparable phenomenon but also a profound departure from the Russian past. First, Malia argues, there is not enough empirical evidence to prove the "transmission from Ivan and Peter to Lenin and Stalin."⁹ He believes that the authors of the continuity thesis might have fallen into the *post hoc fallacy* ("after this, therefore because of this").¹⁰ Similarities, according to Malia, do not prove continuities. Second, the narrative of the revolutionary period itself supports the argument of the radical break from the past.¹¹ Both the participants and the observers of the Russian Revolution believed that the event represented a profound departure from anything that proceeded in Russia or in the West.¹² Malia argues that the only concept satisfactorily explaining the Soviet case is *socialism*. The author perceives socialism as the great adventure of the modern age that combined both the desire for egalitarian society and the post-Enlightened principles and beliefs in technological progress.¹³ Furthermore, socialism, through various stages, became a form of a secular religion. Malia stresses that it was the ideology of socialism alone that was fully responsible for the political practices employed by the Bolsheviks. "The Bolsheviks were out to build socialism; a socialism in the strongest sense of non-capitalism through the heavy-handed suppression of private property, profit, and the market. And such utopian program could be only achieved by force."¹⁴ Malia believes that there were not any common roots on which the Bolshevik political practices could be compared to other European countries. Similarly with Pipes, the access to newly opened archives did not influence or change Malia's argument about the exceptionality of the Soviet case. The

⁹ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*, New York: The Free Press (A Division of Macmillan, Inc.), 1994, 53.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 52-53.

¹² Ibid., 14.

¹³ Ibid., 1.

¹⁴ Ibid., No page number (in Introduction of Malia's book; no author mentioned).

authors insists: "The evidence of the past is never enough to change conceptualization of a problem or an event; such a change comes from a change of our perspective in the present."¹⁵

On the other hand, Peter Holquist, made an extensive use of archival material and his conclusions were drawn from these sources. Holquist does not support either Pipes's thesis of continuity or Malia's theory of Russian exceptionalism. The ideology of socialism itself, Holquist emphasizes, did not originate in Russia but in the West. In the book *Making War Forging Revolution* and in the article "Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work," Holquist argues that modernization rather than socialism was behind the political practices of the Bolshevik surveillance. The author believes that the lack of studies "to identify what was specific to Bolshevism" is related to many false assumptions that "what the Bolsheviks did was Bolshevik because it was the Bolsheviks who did it."¹⁶ Bolshevism with its political practices, he argues, certainly had its specifics but in its motivation and institutionalization this particular form of totalitarianism was conditioned within the broader trends that were common to the rest of Europe. The profound difference between Bolshevik surveillance and surveillance in other European countries was reflected in the all-encompassing approach and in "determining the ends to which surveillance would be used."¹⁷

To understand the broader European context behind surveillance practices Holquist stresses the significance of the Great War (1914-1918) as a "major shift in the goal of ruling; a shift from a territorial concept to a governmental one. As the war became *total* the population was conceptualized as a discrete, aggregate object."¹⁸ In this context, surveillance proved to be an effective political instrument of managing population: "All political movements that had passed through the experience of the WWI emerged from it thinking of surveillance as indispensable form of governing."¹⁹ However, Holquist adds, it would be wrong to think of surveillance simply as a response to wartime situation. The tendencies to manage and transform society

¹⁵ Ibid.,522.

¹⁶ Holquist, "Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work,"51.

¹⁷ Ibid.,58.59.

¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

¹⁹ Ibid.,58.

preceded WWI but the war turned out to be the most fertile soil on which states massively implemented these practices.²⁰

The major issue in historiography of surveillance, Holquist believes, comes from the perception of the Russian Revolution as an *event* taken out of the broader historical context. He maintains: "Analyzing the revolutionary period as a process rather than as an event radically recasts its points of reference."²¹ Holquist argues that the Russian Revolution was not separated from the Great War (1914-1918) but neither was it separated from the following civil wars (1918-1921).²² Therefore, in the Soviet Russia, the wartime mobilization practice of surveillance adopted during the Great War was not abandoned or appended to existing orders (as it was in other countries) because the civil wars simply continued until 1921. Because of that, Holquist claims "the practice became the building block of the emerging Soviet state and socioeconomic order."²³

To prove his thesis that surveillance did not originate in Bolshevik ideology Holquist compared both the anti-Bolshevik and the Bolshevik practice of surveillance in the Don territory during the civil wars. The Don territory in southern Russia was ideal because both the Red and the White Armies controlled this territory at different times and both sides left behind an enormous amount of evidence of their surveillance activities. This evidence allowed for comparative analysis. Through comparison Holquist concluded that even if there were differences between the Bolshevik and the anti-Bolshevik practices of surveillance the similarities were profound. Moreover, he points out the Whites had their surveillance network established before and not after the Bolsheviks. They were not responding to Bolshevik activities of surveillance as previously believed. In their motivation, the anti-Bolsheviks, too, had the vision of creating a new society and the surveillance practice served them as one of the political tools to make this vision possible. In regards to motivation, Holquist makes a line between the practices of *policing* and *surveillance*. He defines policing as targeting the potential or real enemies of the new regime. On the contrary, the motivation behind surveillance was to find out what the population thought in order to act on it and

²⁰ Ibid., 59.

²¹ Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914 - 1921*, (Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.

²² Ibid., Holquist does not use the common term "Russian Civil War;" he argues that the term is misleading since there were series of conflicts.

²³ Ibid.,3.

transform it. Furthermore, Holquist adds, "in addition to its enlightenment agenda, surveillance equally exemplified the emergence of a technocratic ideal of governing."²⁴

David L. Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis, the editors of *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* expressed full agreement with Holquist's notion of surveillance as a political practice used commonly by all participants of the Great War. The authors add that the traditional longstanding view of modern Russia is mostly written "as a history distinct from that of the West for Russia did not follow the path to liberal democracy and industrial capitalism."²⁵ The differences between these two concepts simply seemed too profound to look for any significant common roots. But Hoffman and Kotsonis believe the "socialism itself was one of the many ideological products of European modernity."²⁶ Specifically, Hoffmann emphasizes the post-Enlightenment belief that society as a whole can be completely reconstructed on the scientific basis supported by new technologies. To support his argument further, Hoffman cites Anthony Giddens, a renowned English social theorist, whose definition of modernity is widely accepted and applies to the Soviet case. Giddens does not equate modernity with liberal democracy. On the contrary, the author makes connection between modernity and totalitarianism, viewing totalitarianism as a dark side of modernity:

In respect of administrative recourses, tendencies towards increasing democratic involvement have as their dark side possibilities for the creation of totalitarian power. The intensifying of surveillance operations provides many avenues of democratic involvement, but also makes possible the sectional control of political power, bolstered by monopolistic access to the means of violence, as an instrument of terror.²⁷

Giddens's definition highlights one of the issues relating to the debate over the origins of surveillance. It is the disagreement over the definition of *modernity*.

Unlike Holquist who compared Bolshevik and anti-Bolshevik use of surveillance within Soviet Russia, Hoffmann in his book *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices*

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hoffmann, L. David & Kotsonis, Y., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 245.

²⁶ Ibid., 257.

²⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 172.

and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939 compared the practice of Bolshevik surveillance with other European countries. He argues, if considered in a broader international context, it is clear that surveillance was employed by all modern states. Therefore, the nature and the origins of surveillance are not directly linked neither to the Bolshevik ideology nor to the Russian tsarist security police as Malia and Pipes argue. Hoffman brings evidence, relying heavily on archival sources that France, Germany, and Great Britain alike employed surveillance practices to monitor the moods among their soldiers and later the moods of the entire population. In 1915, France established military postal censorship that focused on monitoring moods within the French Army.²⁸ In Britain, the postal censorship staff grew from 170 employees at the end of 1914 to 1,453 one year later and 356,000 letters remained undelivered due the 'sensitive information' in their content and the monitoring of the moods in the army was extended to the monitoring of the moods across the non-military population by 1917.²⁹ The same pattern occurred in Russia. The only difference between Russia and other combatant countries was that reporting on popular moods started two years earlier (except for Germany).³⁰ The perustration of correspondence was a dominant surveillance practice but it was not the only one employed by European governments during the Great War. In 1915, the German War Ministry required reports on the moods of the civilian population from commanders in rear military districts. In 1917, the French Ministry of the Interior began to require similar reports on popular moods. In Britain, the moods of entire population were monitored from the end of 1917 until 1920.³¹ Why is it, then, Hoffman asks that under the Bolsheviks "surveillance quickly became more developed, routinized, and more political," and became the central feature along with propaganda of their system?³² The author believes that it was the immediate danger of anarchy and anti-Bolshevik movements that threatened the leading (but still minor) Bolshevik party that accounted for the use of surveillance in all-encompassing and concentrated manner. Moreover, surveillance turned out to be an effective tool to "their ideological goal of social transformation." Hoffmann repeatedly stresses, though, that it was not the

²⁸ Hoffmann, David L., *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism 1914-1939*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), 183.

²⁹ Ibid., 184.

³⁰ Ibid., 186 "And in contrast to Germany, where the military introduced such a system, in Russia it was the government that concerned itself with knowing the sentiments of the population."

³¹ Ibid., 185.

³² Ibid. 187.

socialist ideology (as Malia believes) that was behind the extensive use of surveillance “but rather the *ideologizing* of preexisting surveillance practices.”³³

Adding a different dimension to the debate over surveillance practices, Sheila Fitzpatrick, a social historian, focuses on the 1930s, the period when the Soviet state was ruled by the Communist Party and led by Stalin. As a social historian, she approaches her material from the standpoint of ‘everydayness.’³⁴ And is concerned with the particularities, complexities, and contradictions of surveillance rather than arguing over its origins. Generally, she places surveillance within the framework of totalitarianism and often makes comparisons with the Nazi regime in Germany or other Communist regimes; regimes equally interested in the moods of population. The fundamental contradiction that the Soviet regime had to deal with, Fitzpatrick points out, is its “wary of allowing citizens to express uncensored opinions about matters of public import in public but at the same time being extremely anxious to know what people were thinking.”³⁵ This contradiction is at the basis of the very complex and ambiguous practice of surveillance. “What people ‘really’ thought was hard for the NKVD (the secret police) to get at, as it is no easier for the historians today.”³⁶

Secret police reports and letters written by ordinary people to politicians were, according to Fitzpatrick, two major ways of monitoring the ‘popular moods.’ The reports were gathered by the agents/informants and then summarized on the local level and sent to the NKVD. The NKVD made the final summaries of popular moods and sent them to the Communist leaders. It was not the secret police only, Fitzpatrick stresses, that concerned itself with the ‘popular moods.’ “The party, the Komsomol, the Army’s political administration, the census offices, or local electoral commissions all made regular reports on the mood of their particular constituencies.”³⁷ The nature of these reports is ambiguous in two different ways. First, the people who were under surveillance were aware of this practice and often did not express freely their thoughts and opinions. Moreover, the summaries made by the officials were biased since they

³³ Hoffmann, David L., *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism 1914-1939*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), 211.

³⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

tended to emphasize the negatives.³⁸ Also, Fitzpatrick speculates, the informers most probably hid their own messages to the authorities between the lines of their reports. Another interesting paradoxical feature of one of the forms of surveillance, denunciations, was its capability to manipulate the system from the bottom. "The reason people went on writing the denunciations was that the authorities reacted to them; the responsiveness to denunciations made it readily manipulable by individual citizens."³⁹

Lastly, Fitzpatrick poses a question of how accurately could a social history of ordinary people be written from Soviet State-dominated archives.⁴⁰ Some of the social historians argue that "social historians of the Soviet period are uniquely disadvantaged because of the state's monopolization of archives."⁴¹ Fitzpatrick opposes this perspective by arguing that "documents are never autonomously generated, that is generated independently of institutional or generic context."⁴² Also, she argues that the opening of the archives refutes the previous assumptions of the state's "monolithic identity;" an assumption that is difficult to defend with the archival material now available.⁴³

The historiography of Bolshevik surveillance reveals that the archival material, as important as it, does not always make the difference in research. Often the concept, terminology or particular framework of interpretation through which the archival material is evaluated is crucial.⁴⁴ Both Malia and Pipes did not alter their thesis in the light of new empirical evidence. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to simply disregard the value of this new archival material. The archival access allowed for the method of comparative analysis; a method that was simply not effective before the period of *glasnost*. Also, the products of surveillance opened new venues in the study of popular opinions and started the debate/critique on the nature of these sources. Many more

³⁸ Ibid.165.

³⁹ Ibid. (This observation comes from a historian Jan Gross)

⁴⁰ Fitzpatrick, "Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History," 393.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 494. Fitzpatrick's third argument is not related to the topic of this essay. She states that generally, social historians recovering 'the voices of the voiceless' must rely on other sources than the archival ones.

⁴³ Ibid., 394.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, Malia used the term "modernity" much more often than Holquist but in a different context with a different meaning.

unexplored areas related to the practices of surveillance remain. For example, it would be interesting to explore the mechanisms between surveillance and propaganda and how closely these two pillars of the Soviet regime were connected. The problem, though, the historians of modern Russia have to currently face is the semi-access to the archives under President Alexander Putin and his many laws affecting historical research. Even if not directly related to the practice of surveillance the law signed in 2014 stating that a person can earn a five-year prison sentence for questioning Russia's wartime heroism speaks for itself.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Fitzpatrick, "Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History," 400.