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To cite this article: James D. White (2021) Leon Trotsky and Soviet Historiography of the Russian Revolution (1918–1931), *Revolutionary Russia*, 34:2, 276–295, DOI: [10.1080/09546545.2021.1983938](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2021.1983938)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2021.1983938>



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Published online: 26 Oct 2021.



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James D. White

LEON TROTSKY AND SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION (1918–1931)

The article examines the part played by Leon Trotsky in establishing the principles on which Soviet historical writing on the Russian Revolution was carried on, including the practice of making programmatic versions of events universally obligatory. It also investigates the manner in which the respective remnants of the two institutions, Ispart and the Institute of Red Professors (IKP), influenced the way the history of the 1917 revolution was presented in the 1920s. The article looks at how Ispart and IKP reacted to the anti-Trotsky campaign and at the debt Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution owes to materials produced by the two institutions. It is in the light of the interaction of Trotsky's History and Soviet historiography that Stalin's 1931 letter to Proletarskaia revoliutsiia is to be understood.

When I chose 'M. N. Pokrovskii and the Origins of Soviet Historiography' as the subject for my PhD thesis I had two considerations in mind. One was that I wanted to explore the theoretical aspects of history; the other was that, since I would be teaching the Special Subject on the Russian Revolution, I would be able to use my findings on how Pokrovskii approached the 1917 revolution as material for the course. As it turned out, one of my first discoveries about Pokrovskii was that he had written practically nothing about the Russian Revolution, leaving me with the paradox that the leading Soviet historian had practically ignored the most important event of his times. Also, contrary to what one might expect, there was no substantial Soviet history of the Russian Revolution in existence, nothing that was comparable to Leon Trotsky's famous work. The present paper examines the peculiarities of the evolution of Soviet historiography that led to these results.

Brest-Litovsk

It was in fact Trotsky who laid the foundations of Soviet historiography of the Russian Revolution. In his memoirs he describes how between sittings at the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk he dictated to stenographers a historical sketch of the October

Revolution intended primarily for foreign workers. According to Trotsky, he and Vladimir Lenin had repeatedly discussed the necessity of explaining the events of 1917 to an international audience but had been prevented from doing so through lack of time. Periods of leisure at Brest-Litovsk had provided the opportunity for Trotsky's literary activity. The completed manuscript of the *History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk* was approved by Lenin and translated into a dozen European and Asiatic languages.

This modest pamphlet has been overshadowed by Trotsky's later *History of the Russian Revolution*, but it is nevertheless a work of considerable ideological significance. An indication of this is that also taking part in the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk was Mikhail Pokrovskii. As a trained historian Pokrovskii was quite capable of writing a short history of 1917 and, presumably, had the same amount of leisure time as Trotsky. It is possible that Lenin entrusted Trotsky with the task, because Trotsky was a participant in the revolution in Petrograd, whereas Pokrovskii's experience was of the revolution in Moscow. But a more likely explanation is that what was required was not a scholarly account of the October Revolution, but a particular political presentation of it that Trotsky's skill as a writer could best communicate.

As Trotsky makes clear in the preface to his pamphlet, its main purpose is to present the October Revolution in such a way that would encourage the workers of Germany and Austro-Hungary to emulate the Russians in overthrowing their capitalist governments.¹ To do this he has to counter the accusations of Karl Kautsky and other moderate socialists that the Bolsheviks had infringed democratic principles by dispersing the Constituent Assembly and refused to broaden the base of the government by coming to terms with the other socialist parties or even by surrendering power altogether to 'democratic elements who had the support of the majority of the common people'.² Correspondingly, Trotsky's pamphlet had to show that the Bolsheviks had not carried out a *coup d'état* behind the backs of Russia's working class, that they had not established a party dictatorship and that they had done everything possible to draw all the socialist parties into the government. These are all themes which figure prominently in Trotsky's pamphlet in addition to the explicit polemic against Kautsky's accusation that the Bolsheviks had violated the principles of democracy.

The picture of the revolution which emerges from Trotsky's pamphlet shows the Bolsheviks on the defensive. The events from February until the autumn of 1917 are glossed over, and the real starting-point of Trotsky's account is the aftermath of the Kornilov Affair. No special significance is attributed to 25 October, but it is regarded as part of a continuum which included the unsuccessful negotiations the Bolsheviks conducted with the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries after that date with a view to forming a coalition government. The quite extensive account of the Bolshevik attempts to form a coalition government makes it clear that the negotiations failed not through lack of will on the Bolsheviks' part, but through the intransigence and treachery of the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries.

Trotsky is emphatic that the Bolshevik party acquired state power not because it was effective in organizing an armed insurrection, but because it enjoyed wide popular support. His argument is, indeed, that the Bolsheviks would have come to power quite legitimately by election had they been allowed to do so by their opponents. It was the actions of the latter which forced the Bolsheviks to form defensive organizations, and, by doing so, to lay themselves open to accusations that they intended to disrupt the

democratic process and seize power by an insurrection. In this way Trotsky attributes the Bolsheviks' reputation as insurrectionaries to the smears of their opponents.

Trotsky's pamphlet had enormous political significance. In answering the Bolsheviks' critics, Trotsky was at the same time providing a legitimization of the Bolshevik regime. This existed not because it had come to power by force, but because it had been put there by Russia's working classes; because it had a popular mandate. Trotsky's pamphlet highlights the ideological importance of the October Revolution: it was how this event took place that the legitimacy of the Soviet regime depended. This consideration continued to operate during the whole of the Soviet era and set apart the history of the October Revolution from the rest of Russian history.

Already embodied in Trotsky's pamphlet was the programmatic feature that would be characteristic of later Soviet works of the kind. Because of its significance as a means of legitimizing the regime, it was essential that all other works on the October Revolution should adhere to the same interpretation as Trotsky's. One can see this in John Reed's book *Ten Days That Shook the World*, published in 1919. A comparison of *Ten Days That Shook the World* with the *History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk* shows that Reed adopted Trotsky's interpretation of the October Revolution. Reed, like Trotsky, treats the events of 25 October as part of an extended process in the transference of power to the soviets, not as the decisive day on which the Bolsheviks seized power. This approach indeed is emphasized by the title Reed chose for his book.

Most significant of all is the identical view of Reed and Trotsky on the cardinal point of interpretation – the role of the Bolshevik party in the October Revolution. Both agree that the initiative for the insurrection did not come from the party, but from the workers themselves. Reed conveys this idea in a graphic account of the meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee on 10 October. This is as follows:

There were present all the Party intellectuals, the leaders—and the delegates of the Petrograd workers and garrison. Alone of the intellectuals Lenin and Trotsky stood for insurrection. Even the military men opposed it. A vote was taken. Insurrection was defeated!

Then arose a rough workman, his face convulsed with rage. 'I speak for the Petrograd proletariat', he said harshly. 'We are in favour of insurrection. Have it your own way, but I tell you now that if you allow the soviets to be destroyed, we're through with you!' Some soldiers joined him ... And after that they voted again —insurrection won ...³

When the minutes of the meeting in question were published in 1922, it could be seen that this was a closed session of the Bolshevik Central Committee, with no participation of workers, rough or otherwise. Reed's anonymous rough workman helps to establish that in taking power the Bolsheviks were not acting against the desires of the workers, but with their full approval.

Istpart

By the time the Second Congress of the Comintern met in July 1920 the tide had turned in favour of Soviet Russia in the civil war. The regime no longer felt itself

on the defensive but poised to carry the revolution into Western Europe. The Russian communists believed, moreover, that they were entitled to enjoy predominance in the Comintern because they and they alone had proved that they knew how to make a successful revolution. They were in a position to insist that their tactics were a model on which all socialist method must be based. This new confident stance demanded a fresh interpretation of the October Revolution, and from 1920 onwards there emerged one which contrasts strongly with that elaborated by Trotsky in 1918.

The basic premiss of this new interpretation was that the initiative for bringing about the October Revolution had been taken by the Bolshevik party. It held that the Party, by its theoretical and organizational expertise, had led Russia's workers, overthrown the capitalist system, and established the dictatorship of the proletariat. It had accomplished, in fact, what every socialist party strove to achieve, and in so doing had become an example for them all. The basic tenets of this interpretation were set out by Lenin in his pamphlet *'Left-wing' Communism. An Infantile Disorder*, which was distributed to delegates to the Second Congress of the Comintern.

The proposition that the Bolshevik party had organized and led the first successful proletarian revolution was one principle upon which Lenin's interpretation of the October Revolution was based. The other was that the success of the revolution was due to the experience of 'Bolshevism' which 'as a trend of political thought – and as a political party had existed since 1903'. Bolshevism, which consisted in 'the strictest centralisation and iron discipline', had arisen on the 'granite theoretical foundation' of Marxism and had passed through fifteen years (1903–17) of practical history, which in wealth of experience 'had had no equal anywhere else in the world'.⁴

At the time Lenin outlined his interpretation of the Russian Revolution in *'Left-Wing' Communism* it was not supported by any historical works published to that date in the Soviet Union. For Lenin it was important that a means should be found to promulgate it. He began to explore ways of doing this in the summer of 1920 in discussions with Pokrovskii and Vladimir Adoratskii on the possibility of establishing an organization concerned specifically with the collection and distribution of materials on the history of the Bolshevik party and the October Revolution. The organization's terms of reference were thus meant to correspond to the scheme elaborated in *'Left-Wing' Communism*. Although Pokrovskii argued in favour of treating the history of the revolution separately from that of the party, Lenin would not hear of it and insisted that both functions be given to the same organization, in this way building into its very structure the idea that the Bolshevik party was responsible for the success of the first proletarian revolution. The new organization was called the 'Commission on the History of the Russian Communist Party and the October Revolution' or Istpart. It was chaired by Mikhail Ol'minskii, with Pokrovskii as vice-chairman and Adoratskii as secretary.

The establishment of Istpart had the effect of designating an area of special ideological significance and removing it from the province of academic historical study. The people on the staff of Istpart, therefore, were not chosen for their historical scholarship, but for their political reliability. By the same token, however, the remainder of Russian history, including the social and economic conditions which led up to the 1917 revolution, was left for scholarly study. This was an area in which Pokrovskii's post 1917 academic activity was concentrated.

An important activity of Istpart was the publication of the journal *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, which Ol'minskii edited, and in which, in addition to scholarly articles, there

appeared memoirs and documents relating to the Russian revolutionary movement. Local branches of Istpart were established throughout the country, each with its own historical journal.⁵ Leningrad had its *Krasnaia letopis*, Tula province had its *Revoliutsionnoe byloe*, and so forth. In 1924, V. I. Nevskii published a volume on the early history of the Russian Communist party based largely on materials from the local journals. The book was denounced by Ol'minskii, presumably because the section on Tula featured Alexander Bogdanov and that on Nikolaev featured Trotsky, both men by that time politically out of favour.⁶

In 1922, however, Trotsky was still at the height of his powers, and was the natural choice to organize the production of a new programmatic history of the Russian Revolution that would incorporate the Istpart doctrine on the October Revolution. On 22 May 1922 the Orgburo of the Party Central Committee commissioned Ia. A. Iakovlev to write a textbook on the history of the October Revolution under Trotsky's editorship.⁷ The resulting short pamphlet, entitled *On the Historical Significance of October*, was the first work to deal with the February as well as the October Revolution.

Iakovlev began his account by considering the causes of the 1917 revolution. The main ones he thought to be popular demands for land, peace and an end to national oppression. These had led to the overthrow of the tsar in February 1917. The Provisional Government, however, had been incapable of carrying out the necessary bourgeois-democratic reforms, leading to its downfall in October 1917 when the well-organized Bolshevik party had carried out an armed insurrection. The Bolsheviks had immediately issued decrees on peace, land and national equality thus carrying out the bourgeois-democratic revolution that the Russian bourgeoisie itself had been incapable of implementing. According to Iakovlev, this bourgeois-democratic revolution was inseparably connected with Russia's revolutionary exit from the imperialist war, which transformed the war of workers against workers waged in the interests of finance capital, into a war of the worker against capitalists in the name of socialism. This peculiarity of the October Revolution determined its inevitable 'growing over' from a bourgeois-democratic into a socialist revolution. This formulation was in effect a restatement of Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution'.⁸

Iakovlev argued that the workers could have come to power in February 1917 if they had been led by the kind of disciplined organization the Bolshevik party provided. For Iakovlev the events of the February Revolution demonstrated that the efforts of workers acting independently were doomed to failure; that to achieve their aims they were required to be organized. According to Iakovlev:

February showed that it was one thing to bring down the tsarist regime in street battles but quite another to organize revolutionary workers' power in its place. For the latter task the workers lacked the organizational basis ... The fact that the class which had carried out the revolution lacked an organization which would have enabled it to take power into its own hands not only explained why Miliukov came to power on the backs of the workers but also defined the cardinal contradiction of the whole February Revolution.⁹

In this way, Iakovlev drew a contrast between the February and the October revolutions. Both had been bourgeois-democratic, but only the October Revolution had

been successful in bringing about the required transformations, its success being due to the operation of Bolshevik methods of party organization.

The interpretation of the October Revolution which stressed that its success was due to the organization and discipline of the Bolshevik party had a significant corollary. This was that because it did not deliver political power into the hands of the working class, the February Revolution could not have been led by the Bolshevik party and consequently could not have been organized. From this point of view, the suggestion that the Bolsheviks in Petrograd had given direction to the movement during the February days would have implied that a revolution with Bolshevik leadership had failed to secure victory for the workers. This would have undermined the legitimacy of Bolshevik party rule and was therefore unacceptable to the regime. Iakovlev's and subsequent Soviet interpretations of the February Revolution in the 1920s maintained that the February Revolution was spontaneous.

The dissenting voice was Alexander Shliapnikov's. Because Shliapnikov's memoirs, *The Year 1917*, published in 1923–25, provided material capable of undermining the official interpretation of the February Revolution, the Soviet leadership found them highly objectionable. This was reflected in an article published in *Izvestiia* on the tenth anniversary of the February Revolution. There Iakovlev reproached Shliapnikov with having 'immeasurably exaggerated the degree of organized leadership by the Bolsheviks' in the February Revolution. There were, he insisted, no definite leaders, no definite organizers; the Bolshevik groups in Petrograd, the Bolshevik inspiration of the February Revolution was, Iakovlev stated, of a more general kind, and lay in the fact that:

hundreds of thousands of workers who were schooled by the Bolshevik *Pravda* in 1912–14, who had undergone the lesson of 1905, who knew of the implacable position of the Bolsheviks in relation to the war, ... formed spontaneously the spontaneous movement of hundreds of thousands, uttering genuinely revolutionary slogans, lifting the red flags aloft, leading the crowd against the police and the officers. Such was the type of Bolshevik leadership in the February days.¹⁰

The interpretation of the October Revolution promoted by Istpart justified the status of the Bolsheviks as the ruling party in the country. It followed that those in power were the people who had organized and led the October Revolution. In other words, the status of figures in the Soviet leadership depended on the role they had played, or alleged to have played, in the October Revolution. These were the presuppositions that underlay the discourse of the political struggles of the 1920s. The obvious example is the reputation of Trotsky. While Trotsky was in favour, he was credited with being a principal organizer of the October Revolution; after he fell from grace, not only was he stripped of the honour of being a leader of the October Revolution, but was accused of having striven to obstruct the accession of the Bolsheviks to power.

In September 1924, in response to the attacks made on him by Lenin's successors in the Soviet leadership (Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev and Stalin), Trotsky took the opportunity of the publication of the third volume of his collected works to write an introductory essay entitled 'Lessons of October'. Under the pretext of analysing the lessons that the younger generation and foreign communists could learn from the

experience of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution, Trotsky gave prominence to the mistakes made in 1917 by Zinoviev and Kamenev, and by implication, Stalin.

In introducing his subject, Trotsky drew attention to the fact that to date there was not a single work which would give a general picture of the October Revolution, identify its most important political and organizational aspects. This was to be expected, because the main functions of Istpart had been to publish documents, memoirs, and minutes of congresses rather than works of research. Istpart, after all, started out with the interpretation of the October Revolution it wanted; research could only serve to question it.

Because of this absence of a substantial historical account of the October Revolution, the version proposed by Trotsky was to have a profound and lasting impact. Of all the 'lessons' Trotsky might have drawn about the October Revolution, the ones he focused on were those which concerned the actions of his political opponents, Zinoviev and Kamenev. These concerned two main episodes. The first of these was in the period before Lenin returned to Petrograd in April 1917. At that time Kamenev advocated for conditional support to the Provisional Government and urged that the war effort be maintained as a defensive war. These positions were roundly condemned by Lenin on his return to Russia. The second episode was in October 1917 when Zinoviev and Kamenev had argued in print that the attempt of the Bolsheviks to take power was a reckless and dangerous adventure. Lenin had reacted furiously and demanded that the pair be expelled from the party.

In 'Lessons of October' Trotsky declared that his intention was not to criticize individuals, but to analyse objectively the experience of the October Revolution. But given the dynamics of Istpart, Trotsky would be aware that what he was doing would undermine the status and the reputations of Zinoviev and Kamenev as Soviet leaders. The ruling triumvirate reacted in kind, unleashing what was known euphemistically as the 'literary debate' in which Trotsky's former Menshevik affiliations and his past conflicts with Lenin were unearthed. To illustrate these conflicts Ol'minskii brought out a collection of Lenin's anti-Trotsky writings.¹¹ In an article entitled 'Leninism or Trotskyism' Stalin denied that Trotsky had played any special part in the October Revolution, in this way deploying the same device as Trotsky had used to diminish the political standing of Zinoviev and Kamenev.

The Institute of Red Professors

Besides Istpart, an institution which influenced Soviet writing on the Russian Revolution was the Institute of Red Professors (*Institut krasnoi professury*, IKP). This was an elite graduate school established in 1921 with the aim of producing teachers and lecturers to staff the Soviet institutions of higher education. Originally IKP had three departments: philosophy, economics and history, and in 1923 it added departments of law and literature. A department of Party history was added in 1927. Unlike pre-revolutionary academics, the graduates of IKP were required to be proficient in Marxist methodology, and even while studying were encouraged to teach in the community and to publish works in their chosen subject area.¹²

Pokrovskii was the rector of IKP and head of the history department. It was the history department of IKP that produced the scholars who were later to become

prominent in the historiography of the Russian Revolution: A. M. Pankratova, I. I. Mints, S. M. Dubrovskii, N. N. Vanag, A. L. Sidorov, E. B. Genkina, N. L. Rubinshtein, B. B. Grave, P. E. Gorin, and many others.¹³ Although Pokrovskii and his students wrote on various aspects of Russian history up to and including the February Revolution of 1917, they studiously refrained from mentioning the October Revolution, and thus avoided encroaching on the sphere of Istpart.

Teaching at IKP was by seminar, the method by which Pokrovskii himself had been taught by Paul Vinogradov at Moscow University in the 1890s. Lectures were infrequent and functioned as introductions to topics. When free from other commitments, established Marxist scholars, including David Riazanov, Theodore Rothstein, Karl Radek, and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii led the seminars.¹⁴

Trotsky had enormous influence among the IKP students, as he did among Soviet students in general. His *New Course* pamphlet of 1923 recognized this, and in it Trotsky regarded the Party youth as the force to counter the bureaucratization of the party, perpetrated by the old guard. The students rallied to Trotsky's support, but they were unable to overcome the Party apparatus that Stalin controlled. A purge ensued of real and suspected Trotskyists in IKP, which weeded out in particular non-Party members among the student body.¹⁵

The anti-Trotskyist campaign at IKP had particularly tragic consequences for Pankratova, whose husband G. Ia. Iakovin—also an IKP graduate—became a leading figure among the Leningrad Trotskyists. Instead of supporting Iakovin in his political convictions, Pankratova dissociated herself from him and denounced him publicly. After several spells in prison and exile Iakovin was shot in 1938 along with a number of other Trotskyists.¹⁶

In 1925, graduates of IKP and other institutions of higher learning formed the core of the Society of Marxist Historians with Pokrovskii as chairman. The first issue of the Society's journal *Istoriik-marksist* came out the following year. The Society intended to mark the anniversaries of key historical dates, such as the Pugachev rebellion, the birth of Mikhail Bakunin, the Decembrist revolt and the 1905 Revolution. Preparations were naturally made to mark the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution in 1927.

The Debate with Trotsky

In 1922, the same year Iakovlev published his *On the Historical Significance of October*, Ol'minskii had suggested to Trotsky that he publish a translation of his book on the 1905 Revolution that had come out in German in 1909. The introductory section of the book, *1905*, contained an exposition of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. The scheme of Russian history that Trotsky outlined was of an economically backward country whose growth of native industry had been stifled by the influx of foreign capital. With no basis in the economic life of the country, the state apparatus, the autocracy, existed independently of social development. This scheme was a threat to Pokrovskii's standing as a historian, because for the whole of his professional career he had opposed the idea of a supra-class state, both as a liberal of the Vinogradov school and as a Marxist. There was a danger, moreover, that with Istpart's backing, Trotsky's view of Russian history would become programmatic. Pokrovskii, therefore, put every effort into the attempt to refute Trotsky's conception of a supra-class autocracy. He

would have found this more difficult to achieve but for the circumstance that his anti-Trotsky articles became part of the literary debate provoked by Trotsky's 'Lessons of October', and Pokrovskii was held to be the victor of the exchange.

The debate between Pokrovskii and Trotsky revolved not only around the question of the Russian state but also around the country's economic development. Whereas Pokrovskii held that Russia's development was an independent indigenous growth, Trotsky saw it as being dependent on foreign investment in the country. In 1925 Trotsky's conception was given support by the publication of the monograph of the IKP graduate N. Vanag entitled *Finance Capital in Russia before the World War*.

After giving a survey of the various branches of Russian industry, Vanag concluded that foreign capital controlled three quarters of the whole Russian banking system, and of this the biggest share (53.2%) was in the hands of the French banking consortium. The Germans controlled 36.4%, and the British, 10.4%. That is, the Entente powers controlled 63.6% and the Germans 36.4% of all foreign investment in Russian industry.¹⁷

The influx of foreign capital, however, concerned mainly heavy industry since light industry in Russia was not so drastically affected by the recession and did not experience the necessity to attract foreign investment to survive. The main reason for this was that light industry, in particular the textile industry, found a ready market for its products in Persia, China and Afghanistan. It was this sector of the economy which was the last refuge of ethnic Russian capitalism.¹⁸

Vanag's book was followed by several others on the same theme, including L. N. Kritsman, I. F. Gindin, S. L. Ronin, E. L. Granovskii, and A. L. Sidorov, whose conclusions were roughly similar. The only difference of opinion amongst the authors concerned the exact extent to which Russian industry was dependent on foreign capital. Vanag, Kritsman and Ronin represented the extreme dependence wing, whereas Sidorov and Granovskii took a more moderate position.

As might be expected, the academic debate took on a political dimension. According to Sidorov:

the character of imperialism in Russia was linked with the question of the Leninist theory of socialism in one country and of the 'maturity' of Russian capitalism for such construction. Although I was then politically in agreement with Granovskii and Vanag, it is true that Vanag's views found many supporters among the oppositionists. Therefore, the problem of Russian imperialism took on a great political significance in the struggle against the Trotskyists.¹⁹

Pokrovskii accepted Vanag's findings, and although he agreed that Sidorov had introduced a necessary corrective, it remained true that Russian capital before the war to a great extent was a branch of the Entente. Consequently 'Russian imperialism' should appear in quotation marks.²⁰

Studies in the History of the October Revolution

The tenth anniversary of the October Revolution in 1927 was a landmark that could not be missed by Soviet historians and demanded some form of commemoration. In IKP

Pokrovskii devoted a series of seminars to it, the students involved preparing papers on various aspects of the 1917 revolution. E. B. Genkina wrote on the February Revolution, M. S. Iugov on the soviets in the first period of the revolution, O. A. Lidak on the July Days, N. L. Rubinstein on the foreign policy of the Provisional Government under Alexander Kerensky, A. L. Sidorov on the influence of the imperialist war on Russia's economy, K. Sidorov on the workers' movement during the imperialist war, and D. A. Baevskii on the Bolshevik party during the imperialist war. Each of the contributions was the length of a short monograph. Pokrovskii wrote the introduction to the two-volume collection, in which he summarized the results of the research that had been carried out on the Russian economy following the publication of Vanag's monograph.

In her memoirs of IKP, Genkina recalls that, contrary to later Soviet practice, she wrote her seminar paper on the February Revolution without any supervision, though she was given some helpful suggestions by Mints who acted as Pokrovskii's deputy. The presentation of the paper went well, with no serious criticisms from her fellow students. Pokrovskii, however, while conceding that the paper was well written, and was the equivalent of a master's thesis under the pre-revolutionary system, objected that it was not really research since it did not use archival sources. Genkina goes on to say that subsequently Pokrovskii took her in his car to the building where the archives were housed, and there she supplemented her paper with materials of the Northern Front and Stavka archives.

The two volumes of papers were sent to press at the end of 1926 and duly appeared in print at the start of the anniversary year. Genkina was surprised by the speed with which the operation was carried out and marvelled in retrospect that the volumes were published as they had been written, without any editing or reviewing processes taking place.²¹

The resulting work, *Studies in the History of the October Revolution*, was an important landmark in Soviet historiography. It was the nearest that Soviet historians of the 1920s got to producing a history of the Russian Revolution. But, as the title implies, it was several separate studies rather than a systematic history of the period. The title also was a misnomer; the episode of the 1917 revolution that was not covered in the collection of essays was the Bolshevik accession to power in October. In this way the work adhered to the IKP policy of not encroaching on the province of Istpart. Nevertheless, the title page, which declared the collection to be the work of IKP historical seminar, also bore the stamp of Istpart, implying that the *Studies* had been published with Istpart's approval.

It may well be true that Genkina did not experience any political direction when writing her paper on the February Revolution. But she could not escape knowing what the accepted interpretation of the February Revolution was at that time, and it is clear that she followed it. Her interpretation was that the February Revolution was a spontaneous event but carried out by workers who had been propagandized in a general way. In other words, Genkina was adopting the Iakovlev's formula.²²

In his essay on the Bolsheviks during the war, Baevskii too accepted that the workers' movement during the February days had a 'semi-spontaneous or spontaneous character'. He went on to say, however, that since the movement had proceeded under the Bolshevik slogans of 'down with the tsar!' and 'down with the war!' one could and

must speak of the directing role of the Party on the eve and at the moment of the fall of tsarism.²³

Baevskii adopts Iakovlev's formulation that 'the transformation of the revolution against tsarism in the conditions of 1917 implied the growing over of the bourgeois revolution into a proletarian one', since 'the struggle against tsarism was connected with the struggle against imperialism'. Throughout his essay Baevskii conducts a polemic against Trotsky, contrasting Trotsky's attitude towards the war with Lenin's, and arguing that very little separated Trotsky from the position of the social chauvinists, who supported the war.²⁴

Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*

Following the defeat of the Left Opposition in 1927, Trotsky was deported from the Soviet Union in 1929. He settled on the Turkish island of Prinkipo, and there wrote two of his main works: his autobiography *My Life* and *The History of the Russian Revolution*. *My Life*, which appeared in 1930, was reviewed by Pokrovskii in *Bol'shevik* in the same year.²⁵ Pokrovskii's review goes far beyond an analysis of what Trotsky wrote and encroaches on areas that belong to Pokrovskii's own biography—his experiences at Brest-Litovsk in 1918 and his more recent efforts to counteract Trotskyist influence among his students. The review reflects Pokrovskii's troubled relationship with Trotsky and is intensely hostile, but, significantly, it does not challenge Trotsky's account of the behaviour of Stalin, Kamenev and Muranov prior to Lenin's return to Petrograd in April 1917.

In 1931 the first volume of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* was published in Berlin, to be followed in 1933 by a further two volumes. This was to be the work for which Trotsky was most renowned. Because Trotsky's *History* has been ranked among other great works of historical writing, one tends to overlook the fact that it is also firmly rooted in Soviet historiography. It is in great part the product of the preparatory work that had been going on in Soviet academic institutions since the founding of Istpart in 1920. At the time Trotsky published his *History*, the situation had not changed since he remarked in 'Lessons of October' that there were no historical works which attempted a systematic analysis of the October Revolution. Trotsky's *History* does exactly that, taking the reader through the period from February to October over the course of more than 1000 pages. Trotsky's *History* is the work that fills the void left by Soviet historians by providing an account of this crucial period in world history on a scale which the subject demands.

Pokrovskii's review of *My Life* suggests why Trotsky would be motivated to embark on writing a history of 1917. It was easy to dismiss what Trotsky said in his autobiography as the subjective assertions of a biased individual. In his *History*, Trotsky counters this objection by stressing that what he is writing is not subjective reminiscences, as in *My Life*, but an objective historical account. He undertakes not to rely on his own memory, but, in the manner of a historian, to base his exposition upon 'strictly verified documents'. To signal that he is writing history rather than autobiography, Trotsky refers to himself through-out in the third person.

What are these strictly verified documents? According to Trotsky:

The sources of this book are innumerable periodical publications, newspapers and journals, memoirs, reports, and other material, partly in manuscript, but the greater part published by the Institute of the History of the Revolution in Moscow and Leningrad ... Among the books which have the character of collective historical works we have particularly used the two-volume *Studies in the History of the October Revolution* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1927). Written by different authors, the various parts of this book are unequal in value, but they contain at any rate abundant factual material.²⁶

In other words, what Trotsky is using as source material is mainly the publications of Istpart, and in particular the two-volume collection of essays compiled by the participants in Pokrovskii's seminar on the October Revolution at IKP. Trotsky had been following the debates occasioned by Vanag's research, for one finds in the re-statement of his theory of 'permanent revolution' in the introductory chapter of his *History* that it incorporates the findings that:

Foreigners owned in general about 40 per cent of all the stock capital of Russia, but in the leading branches of industry that percentage was still higher. We can say without exaggeration that the controlling shares of stock in the Russian banks, plants and factories were to be found abroad, the amount held in England, France and Belgium being almost double that in Germany.²⁷

The real passion which drives the *History* emerges from the pages of the work itself. It is the desire to pursue the campaign against the Soviet leadership, and especially against Stalin, that was begun in 'Lessons of October' and continued in *My Life*. Trotsky sets out to show that he, along with Lenin, should take the credit for the success of the October Revolution; that he is the best Leninist; and that Stalin and the rest of the Soviet leadership have no claim whatsoever to Leninist credentials. It is this aspect of Trotsky's *History* that had the greatest impact on the Soviet historiography of 1917.

In the first volume of the *History* Trotsky deals with the February Revolution and Lenin's return to Petrograd in April 1917. The impression Trotsky wanted to convey was already foreshadowed in 'Lessons of October' and *My Life*. It was that only Lenin and Trotsky, among all the Bolsheviks, had the kind of leadership qualities and insight that the situation required. This emerges with utmost clarity in the chapter entitled 'Trotskyism in 1917' in *My Life*. There Trotsky states:

In New York, at the beginning of March 1917, I wrote a series of articles dealing with the class forces and perspectives of the Russian Revolution. At that very time, Lenin, in Geneva, was sending to Petrograd his 'Letters from Afar'. And both of us, though we were separated by an ocean, gave the same analysis and the same forecast. On the peasantry, toward the bourgeoisie, the Provisional Government, the war, and the world revolution, our views were completely identical.²⁸

It was not sufficient, however, to show that he and Lenin had formulated the same ideas; it also had to be demonstrated that Trotsky alone and no one else had come up with the same conclusions as Lenin. This was also emphasized in *My Life* and it

allowed Trotsky to make the point that only he and Lenin had been able to orientate themselves in the new situation created by the February Revolution:

I realize, of course, that at various times in their lives they have repeated Lenin's words and gestures after him. But the beginning of 1917 found them left to their own resources. The political situation was difficult. Here was their chance to show what they had learned in Lenin's school and what they could do without Lenin. Let them name one of their number who arrived independently at the position achieved identically by Lenin in Geneva and by me in New York. They cannot name a single one. The Petrograd *Pravda*, which was edited by Stalin and Kamenev until Lenin's arrival, will always remain a document of limited understanding, blindness, and opportunism.²⁹

In Trotsky's *History*, the chapter corresponding to 'Trotskyism in 1917' in *My Life* is called 'The Re-Arming of the Party'. 'Rearming' (*perevooruzhenie*) was the term which Trotsky used in his *History* to denote the change of direction in Bolshevik policy occasioned by Lenin's return to Petrograd in April and the promulgation of his 'April Theses'. But whereas in *My Life*, Trotsky was able to express himself in his own words, in the *History* he was obliged to support his political assertions with documentary evidence.

This evidence was to hand. In the second volume of his memoirs, *The Year 1917*, published in 1925, Alexander Shliapnikov had described how on returning from exile on 12 March Stalin, Muranov and Kamenev had taken over the editorship of *Pravda* and changed its stance on its attitudes to the Provisional Government and the war. The new editors gave conditional support to the Provisional Government and recognized the necessity of fighting a 'defencist' war. Shliapnikov recalls:

The day that the first number of the 'transformed' *Pravda* came out, 15 March, was one of jubilation for the defencists. The whole Tauride Palace from the members of the Duma Committee to the very heart of revolutionary democracy – the Executive Committee – were completely absorbed by a single item of news, the victory of the moderate, sensible Bolsheviks over the extremists. This was the first and only time that *Pravda* evoked the approval of even the inveterate defencists of the liberal school.³⁰

Trotsky quotes this passage in his *History*,³¹ without, however, revealing to his readers what the policies of *Pravda* were prior to its 'transformation', or mentioning that Shliapnikov goes on to say that on these policies were fully in accord with Lenin, and, by implication, with his own. Trotsky's use of Shliapnikov's memoirs is selective. He does not wish to give the Bolshevik organizations any credit for the part they played in the February days. To this end, when posing the question 'who led the February insurrection?' he resorts to Iakovlev's formula: 'Conscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin'.³²

In Trotsky's opinion the events surrounding Lenin's return to Petrograd in April 1917 were not treated adequately in *Studies in the History of the October Revolution*. This was a section written by Baevskii, who emphasized the overall agreement within Bolshevik ranks which followed the acceptance of Lenin's 'April Theses'.³³ According to Trotsky:

There have been plenty of attempts of late years to prove that the April party crisis was a passing and almost accidental confusion. They all go to pieces at first contact with the facts. In the large collected volume issued under the editorship of Professor Pokrovskii, *Studies in the History of the October Revolution*, an apologetic work is devoted to the 'April Confusion' by a certain Baevskii, which for its unceremonious treatment of facts and documents might be called cynical, were it not childishly impotent.³⁴

Trotsky does not engage with Baevskii's arguments, nor do we learn how exactly Baevskii has misrepresented the facts and documents in question.

Trotsky's *History* appeared at a time when Stalin was particularly vulnerable. The rapid pace of industrialization and forced collectivization had led to dislocation of the economy with mass unemployment, hunger and overcrowding in the towns as peasants fled the countryside. Abroad, in the face of an increasing danger of war, Stalin's leadership of the Communist International had left it weakened and ineffective. Internal opposition to Stalin and his methods was growing within the Party itself, and 1932 would see the emergence of the Riutin and Syrtsov and Lominadze groups. In this situation, Stalin had to take the charge of ideological failings contained in Trotsky's book against him seriously.

This was not any ordinary book: it was a substantial work of high literary merit, documented in great part by materials approved by a department of the Central Committee. Moreover, Trotsky's contention that Stalin and the other returnees from Siberia in March 1917 had been out of step with Lenin simply repeated what had been said in the fourth volume of the *History of the VKP(b)* edited by E. M. Iaroslavskii that had come out in 1930. The section of the volume in question had been written by a young IKP graduate D. Ia. Kin, using Shliapnikov's memoirs as his main source.

Presumably, Trotsky's book would have been reviewed by Pokrovskii, in the same way as he had reviewed *My Life*. But Pokrovskii was by now seriously ill with cancer and no longer capable of writing. In this situation, the response to Trotsky's *History*, though an unacknowledged one, was Stalin's letter to *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* in October 1931.

Stalin's Letter to *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*

The ostensible occasion for Stalin's letter to the editorial board of *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* was to protest against its publication of the article by A. G. Slutskii on 'The Bolsheviks on German Social Democracy in the Period of its Pre-War Crisis'. Slutskii had argued that Lenin had underestimated the danger of centrism and had only actively campaigned against it when prompted to do so by Rosa Luxemburg. This, according to Stalin, suggested that in the period before the war Lenin was not yet a real Bolshevik. Stalin considered Slutskii's argument to be anti-Party and semi-Trotskyist, since it alleged that it was Luxemburg who had formulated the Trotskyist theory of 'permanent revolution'.

Stalin was not content to prove beyond any doubt that Slutskii was wrong; he insisted that there were some aspects of Party history that were not open to discussion, since these were 'axioms' that were self-evidently true. On the question of the need for documentary evidence, Stalin was scathing: he considered reliance on written

documents to be the characteristic of hopeless bureaucrats and archive rats. For Stalin a party and its leaders should be judged by their deeds, not by rummaging among fortuitously selected papers.

Why, Stalin inquired, had *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* published Slutskii's article? His answer was that the journal had been induced to do so by its 'rotten liberalism'. And, he insisted, this was a dangerously mistaken attitude, because some Bolsheviks were under the impression that Trotskyism was a variety of communism, albeit one which made mistakes, which did foolish things, and was sometimes anti-Soviet, but which nevertheless was a current within communism. In fact, Stalin declared, Trotskyism had long ceased to be a variety of communism; it was now the vanguard of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. For that reason, any toleration of Trotskyism was a stupidity bordering on treason to the working class.

According to Stalin, there were two lines of approach used by so-called writers and historians to infiltrate their Trotskyist contraband. One was to imply that in under-estimating the danger of centrism Lenin was not yet a real revolutionary, and to become one required to be 're-armed' with the help of Trotsky. The other line of approach was to imply that before the war Lenin did not realize the necessity of the bourgeois democratic revolution passing into a socialist revolution. Here too the implication was that Lenin was not yet a real Bolshevik, and here too needed to be 're-armed' with Trotsky's help. The references to 're-arming' came from the chapter in Trotsky's *History*. They indicate the real stimulus for Stalin's letter to *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*.

In Stalin's view, the function of the *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* editorial board was to put the study of Party history on a scientific, Bolshevik footing, and to unmask Trotskyists and other falsifiers. This was necessary, Stalin observed, because some genuine Party historians were not free from the kind of mistakes which encouraged the likes of Slutskii. 'Here, unfortunately', Stalin continued, 'comrade Iaroslavskii is no exception; his books on the history of the Russian Communist Party, despite their merits, contain a number of errors of principle and history.'³⁵

The problem that the letter to *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* was meant to tackle was that Trotsky's charge of non-Leninism against Stalin was well documented. It was supported by Iaroslavskii's book and Shliapnikov's memoirs (and ultimately by the issues of *Pravda* published prior to Lenin's return). The method Stalin employed was to present matters in such a way that it appeared that it was not Trotsky who was repeating statements by Iaroslavskii and Shliapnikov, but that it was Iaroslavskii and Shliapnikov who were repeating statements by Trotsky. Besides performing this inversion of sequence, it was necessary to put Trotsky beyond the pale, to deny him any claim to be a socialist and to equate him with the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. It then followed that any utterance made by Trotsky had a nefarious and counter-revolutionary intent. Thus, when Trotsky claimed that in April 1917 Stalin was out of step with Lenin, it should be taken as an example of Trotskyist slander. If any Soviet historian should make the same or similar claims, and in this way give support to Trotsky's falsifications, it would count as 'Trotskyist contraband', and could not be tolerated.

Although expressed obliquely, Iaroslavskii either understood, or was told, in what respect Stalin had found his history of the Bolshevik party wanting. He wasted no time in writing to Stalin on 28 October apologizing for Kin's chapter and its use of Shliapnikov's memoirs. In extenuation, however, he pointed out that *The Year 1917* had been

approved by Istpart, and so was a legitimate source for Kin to use.³⁶ This defence of Kin is unlikely to have carried much weight with Stalin, but it illustrated the effectiveness of Trotsky's method of using 'strictly verified documents'.

When on 18 November the communist fraction of the Society of Marxist Historians met to discuss Stalin's letter, it was noted that the main source from which the authors of Iaroslavskii's four volumes 'derived the material for the slanderous, falsifying interpretation of the history of the party was the counter-revolutionary works of Shliapnikov, which could have been written only by an enemy of the party'.³⁷ At this meeting the chairman V. Knorin made it clear that Stalin's letter applied not only to *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, but to all fields of history. Henceforth the main attention of all historians was to be directed towards putting the history of Bolshevism on a 'scientific footing'. This was a directive that eliminated the distinction that had formerly existed between Istpart and IKP. Now all historical fields would be under the same strict party control. Knorin also took the opportunity to point out that the theory that the October Revolution was socialist because it was anti-imperialist was a Trotskyist theory and should not have appeared in Iaroslavskii's *History*. Mints, a contributor to the *History*, was rebuked for his 'confession' that: 'We approached matters not from the point of political expediency ... but from the point of view of that objectivity which is absolutely uncharacteristic of our political history, and is a vestige of bourgeois liberalism'. Mints was given to understand that *partiinosť* (party spirit) was the very essence of objectivity.³⁸

In an address to mark the tenth anniversary of IKP on 1 December 1931 Kaganovich enlarged on the points that Knorin had made. His speech was heavily edited by Stalin in the direction of making less explicit what the objection to Trotsky's concept of 'rearming the Party' might be, and, as a result, leaving Soviet historians somewhat in the dark about how they might avoid the pitfall of smuggling 'Trotskyist contraband' into their works. Nevertheless, Riutin could still discern that what was at stake was Stalin's reputation. In his analysis of the Stalin phenomenon he remarked:

Finally, Stalin's 'historical' article in *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* completely and with supreme cynicism showed his true intentions: to present history in the way that Stalin should occupy in it a 'fitting' place as a great man – such is the subtext of Stalin's article. Now, after 15 years of proletarian dictatorship, all the textbooks on party history are no good, containing as they do 'Trotskyist contraband'.

From now on party history will be written, or more precisely, fabricated, anew. At the Moscow district party conference Iaroslavskii in his repentance speech openly and cynically blurted out the 'secret'. He said: 'I must emphasize that in some textbooks on party history, and here I have in mind principally my own, the role of Comrade Stalin in the development of Bolshevism, especially in the pre-war years, is not sufficiently examined.' There is where the roots of all the cries about 'Trotskyist contraband' are, the slander on the party, the rotten liberalism etc.³⁹

Stalin's letter to *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* was a watershed in Soviet historiography, ending the structures and relationships of the 1920s, and paving the way for the emergence of the *Short History of the VKP(b)* that would become the programmatic text par excellence. It also had far reaching consequences for how the 1917 revolution was

perceived both in the Soviet Union and in the West. By effectively ending Soviet scholarship on 1917, Stalin had ensured that Trotsky's *History* would be challenged by no Soviet competitor. The timing of Trotsky's book was also to its advantage. By the time he began to write it Trotsky not only had the Istpart and IKP publications at his disposal: he could also draw on the memoirs of the Menshevik N.N. Sukhanov, published in Berlin. He could also make use of the memoirs of Russian émigrés such as A.I. Denikin, A.F. Kerensky, V.M. Chernov, and P.N. Miliukov, and those of foreign observers like Sir George Buchanan and Maurice Paleologue. Even though Trotsky dispenses with footnotes, it is evident that his range of sources could not be significantly bettered even today. These advantages combined with Trotsky's literary flair, enabled his book to become the most influential single work on 1917 in Western historical literature. The basic contours of the spontaneous February, the well organized October Revolutions and the preponderance of Lenin, all have their origins in Soviet historiography. The credibility it achieved and the impression that it provided an alternative to the Soviet interpretation contributed to obscuring its early Soviet roots.

Stalin's *Short Course* adopted Vanag's findings that 'before 1914 the most important branches of Russian industry were in the hands of foreign capitalists, chiefly those of France, Great Britain and Belgium', so that Russia was converted into 'a tributary, a semi-colony of those countries'.⁴⁰ This brought Stalin very close to, if not identical with, Trotsky's position, which denied the existence of any substantial indigenous economic development. In the Soviet Union, research on the Russian bourgeoisie became heretical and was discontinued, only resuming in the 1960s. For over thirty years, therefore, Trotsky's interpretation coincided with official Soviet doctrine on the subject.

It is understandable that the subject of the historiography of the Russian Revolution was little studied in the Soviet Union, as it would involve a mention of Trotsky's contribution. It is more surprising that it has received so little attention from Western scholars. Its importance is that it provides a means of recognizing the ideological considerations behind the interpretation of events, considerations that can by no means be deduced a priori. These are a product of political imperatives, fractional struggles, theoretical debates and the institutional structures of the time. These factors are well worth investigating, because they are a means of evaluating the historical materials and conceptions which originate in Soviet times. If, for example, one maintains that the February Revolution was 'spontaneous', one should be aware of the part that this interpretation played in early Soviet ideology.

Notes

1. Trotsky, *The Essential Trotsky*, 23.
2. Waldenberg, *Wzlot i upadek Karola Kautsky'ego*, 342–3.
3. Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 31.
4. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniii*, vol. 41, 6, 8.
5. Holmes, *Revising the Revolution*, 36–39.
6. Nevskii, *Ocherki po istorii rossiiskoi kommunisticheskoi partii*.
7. Trotsky, *The Stalin School of Falsification*, 16.
8. Iakovlev, *Ob istoricheskom smysle Oktiabria*, 16.
9. *Ibid.*, 10.

10. Iakovlev, 'Fevral'skie dni 1917 g.'
11. Ostroukhova, 'O rabote v Istparte', 96.
12. Nikulenkova, 'Struktura i rukovodstvo Instituta krasnoi professury v 1920-e gody', 158–64. An outstanding example of a work of this type is A. M. Pankratova's monograph on factory committees on 1917: Pankratova, *Fabzavkomy Rossii v bor'be za sotsialisticheskuiu fabriku*.
13. Nikulenkova, 'Struktura i rukovodstvo Instituta krasnoi professury v 1920-e gody', 158–64; Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901–1941*, 207–8.
14. Solovei, 'Institut krasnoi professury: podgotovka kadrov istorikov partii v 20–30 gody', 91.
15. Fox, 'Political Culture, Purges, and Proletarianization at the Institute of Red Professors, 1921–1929', 30–1.
16. Nikulenkova, 'Akademik A. M. Pankratova - uchenitsa istorika M. N. Pokrovskogo', 87–93.
17. Vanag, *Finansovyi kapital v Rossii nakanune mirovoi voyny*, 54.
18. Ibid., 170.
19. Sidorov, 'Nekotorye razmyshleniia o trude i opyte istorika', 131–2.
20. Pokrovskii, *Imperialistskaia voina*, 267.
21. Genkina, 'Vospominaniia ob IKP', 263–4.
22. Ibid., 264.
23. Pokrovskii, *Ocherki po istorii Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii*, 507.
24. Ibid., 506–7.
25. Pokrovskii, *Istoricheskaia nauka i bor'ba klassov*, 234–58.
26. Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, 21–2.
27. Ibid., 32.
28. Trotsky, *My Life*, 329.
29. Ibid., 330.
30. Shliapnikov, *Semnadtsatyi god*, 185.
31. Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, 306.
32. Ibid., 171.
33. Pokrovskii, *Ocherki po istorii Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii*, 442.
34. Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, 316.
35. Stalin, *K izucheniiu istorii*, 3–17.
36. Zelenov and Brandenberger, 'Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b)', 75.
37. Khronika. Rezoliutsiia fraktsii obshchestva istorikov-marksistov po dokladu t. Knorina 'O politicheskikh urokakh t. Stalina i zadachakh istoricheskogo fronta', 214. At a session of the Orgburo on 19 February 1932 one of the criticisms levelled against Shliapnikov was that: 'Trotsky used his [Shliapnikov's] book in his work'. Pikhoia and Zelenov, *I.V. Stalin*, 176.
38. Knorin, 'Za bol'shevistskuiu partiinost' v istoricheskoi nauke', 30; Zelenov and Brandenberger, 'Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b)', 85.
39. Riutin, 'Platforma "soiuz marksistov-lenintsev" ("gruppa Riutina")', 202.
40. *Istoriia vsesoiuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii*, 156.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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