H-Diplo Essay 397- Sheila Fitzpatrick on Learning the Scholar's Craft

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Learning the Scholar’s Craft

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Essay by Sheila Fitzpatrick, Australian Catholic University (Melbourne), University of Sydney, and Professor Emerita, University of Chicago

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. 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. 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 curious preoccupation with primary sources and archives. 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). 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. 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 it, 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. This was the basis for my dissertation and subsequent first book, The Commissariat of Enlightenment.

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. 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.

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 à 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 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]

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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 Damousi\[17\] became another close collaborator.


**Sheila Fitzpatrick** is an Australian who also holds US and UK passports. She plays the violin as well as writing history and non-fiction, and currently lives in Sydney.

**Notes**


See chapter 5, “In the Archives,” in Fitzpatrick, Spy in the Archives, 169-212.


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.


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

Fitzpatrick, White Russians, Red Peril: A Cold War History of Migration to Australia (Melbourne: