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M. N. Pokrovsky and Soviet Historiography: Some Reconsiderations

One of the most interesting and seminal figures in Soviet historiography is the historian M. N. Pokrovsky, whose influence has continued to be felt up to the present day. He was active in the 1917 Revolution in Russia, and in political and institutional developments during the first decade and a half of Soviet rule. He became what may be euphemistically called the "dean" of Marxist historians, yet after his death on April 10, 1932, he was ritually accused of being responsible for most of the "shortcomings" of Soviet historiography. Among the many accusations leveled against Pokrovsky the following have appeared with considerable regularity: (1) Because he was "dictator" of the historical front from 1928 to 1932, his interpretations of history were the "official" interpretations of that time and consequently had to be "reflected" by other Soviet historians. (2) Because he exercised complete control over the historical front, he was responsible for the purges that engulfed the anti-Bolshevik historians of that time. (3) Because he was not a Marxist but an economic determinist, or a vulgar (simple) economic materialist, he wrongly denied the effect of the individual or contingency on historical evolution. (4) He erred by supporting the thesis that the Norsemen played a major role in early Russian history. (5) He failed to adhere to a consistent periodization of Russian historical evolution. (6) Because he viewed history as politics turned to the past, and consequently interpreted the past according to the needs of the present, he showed himself to be unscholarly.

These indictments and others were ritually intoned, and not exclusively by Soviet historians, until about 1956, when Pokrovsky was gradually beatified and his name entered in the Marxist hagiology. While still considered an erring Marxist, he was given credit as a Marxist historian and acknowledged as the "father of Soviet historiography."

The rise, fall, and partial resurrection of Pokrovsky have not yet been fully explored, even though his numerous roles both before and after his death provide the bases for the study of some of the most salient features of Soviet Marxism and historiography. A knowledge of the institutional, political, and ideological roles of M. N. Pokrovsky is essential to an understanding of Soviet historiography, to insight into the political and ideological evolution of the Soviet Union, and to any attempt to determine the extent to which either Western or Soviet historiography may be regarded as independent and

scholarly. In this paper, however, I should like to speculate in some detail only about the last four of the indictments I have listed above, using Pokrovsky's ideology as background.

In the Soviet Union control over the historical profession has a high priority in the goals of the party, and historiography was and remains one of the major weapons in the party's arsenal. Until the late twenties, however, no such control had been established. The party was mainly occupied with the struggles for power immediately after the Revolution and again after the death of Lenin, and also with attempts to use "its control of resources and allocations to emphasize the material advancement of the proletariat, which reduced the importance of the humanistic sciences."¹ It was during this period that Pokrovsky obtained his reputation of "commander in chief" of the historical front. He actively participated in the establishment of new historical institutions, the founding of new historical journals, and the training of new historians; all of these measures were aimed, Pokrovsky believed, at implementing the new ideology of the "vanguard of the proletariat." Through his position and authority in these institutions and journals, Pokrovsky doubtless exercised considerable influence upon the writing of history and upon the historical profession. But how much real power was he able to exercise?

It seems to me that his power was more apparent than real. I state this view in the teeth of such strong contrary assertions as the following: To disagree with Pokrovsky meant personal disgrace, professional oblivion, and perhaps even death, or as Shteppa, one of the foremost historiographers in the West, has put it, "Pokrovsky had become dictatorial chief-of-staff on the historical front. His every word was law. His authority on questions of Marxist historical theory was incontrovertible"; and thus, has concluded Yaresh, "the works of Mikhail Nikolaevich Pokrovsky, the 'dean of Russian Marxist historians,' were the final word."²

A basic reason for my view is that the numerous organizations to which Pokrovsky belonged were for the most part state rather than party organizations, and it is doubtful that he was ever in the "inner party" circles. Jesse Clarkson, who translated Pokrovsky's *Ruskaia istoriia s drevneishikh vremen*, has written me, "The nearest he ever got to the inner party circles was in 1907, when he was elected a 'candidate' member of the Central Committee; in 1927 he did not have sufficient influence to get me admitted to the Kremlin (if he really did try on behalf of an unknown young American historian with a bump of mere curiosity)."³

1. Hans Jonas, "Die Entwicklung der Geschichtsforschung im der Soviet-Union seit dem Ausgang des Weltkrieges," *Zeitschrift für osteuropäische Geschichte*, 5 (1931): 67.

2. Konstantin F. Shteppa, *Russian Historians and the Soviet State* (New Brunswick, 1962), p. 91, and Leo A. Yaresh, *Two Essays in Soviet Historiography* (New York, 1955), p. 3.

3. Jesse Clarkson to Bernard W. Eissenstat, Nov. 3, 1966. Hoetzsch argued the same

Power resided within the party and was exerted through party agents. Pokrovsky may have been an "agent" of the party and thereby have secured some influence over the historical profession, but his influence was limited and circumscribed by the party itself. Although a campaign of oppression of non-Marxist and even Marxist historians undeniably took place, the extent of Pokrovsky's responsibility in the campaign is not clear. In particular, it is doubtful that historical writing during the four years preceding Pokrovsky's death had to reflect Pokrovsky's interpretation. On the contrary, it seems that during this period Pokrovsky was forced to defend his views from constant attack, a matter outlined very well in 1962 by Shteppa, who, interestingly, failed to see the implications of his own evidence.⁴ The evidence more recently assembled by Frankel tends to place the thesis of Pokrovsky's ideological domination in a more objective perspective.⁵ Pokrovsky's continual attacks against those who questioned his interpretations as well as his constant defense of those positions clearly demonstrate his inability to impose his will on his colleagues, and this, combined with the fact that he was never an important party member, tends to indicate that his much vaunted power was more apparent than real.

The third indictment indicated above, which casts doubt on Pokrovsky's ideological fidelity to Marxism, is untenable despite indications that he was not an orthodox Marxist.

During the first decade and a half of the existence of the Soviet state, Pokrovsky was considered not only to hold to Marxist-Leninist dogma but also to be the founder and master of Marxism in Soviet historiography. "The first Soviet historian who gave [his] attention to the problems of Russian historiography was M. N. Pokrovsky."⁶ Miliukov asserted, "Everywhere and always [he engaged in an] uncompromising struggle for Marxist-Leninist theory, for the Bolshevik Party science against the 'right' and 'left' opportunist perversions of Marxism-Leninism, against counterrevolutionary Trotskyism and bourgeois theory."⁷ Hans Jonas argues that the entire successful endeavor to change the

point of view of historical research from an idealistic to a materialistic one—is almost single-handedly the work of one man: Professor Mikhail Nikolaevich Pokrovsky. In his position as acting Commissar for Public

line over a quarter of a century earlier, asserting that Pokrovsky, while holding a number of high government posts, "was never a member of the inner circle of the party." Otto Hoetzsch, "M. N. Pokrovsky," *Zeitschrift für osteuropäische Geschichte*, 6 (1932): 533.

4. Shteppa, *Russian Historians*, pp. 24-178 and passim.

5. Jonathan Frankel, "Party Genealogy and the Soviet Historians (1920-1938)," *Slavic Review*, 25, no. 4 (December 1966): 570-71 and passim.

6. V. E. Illeritsky and I. A. Kudriavtsev, eds., *Istoriografiia istorii SSSR* (Moscow, 1961), p. 18.

7. Paul Miliukov, "Velichie i radenie M. N. Pokrovskogo," *Sovremennie zapiski* (Paris), 65 (1937): 370.

Education and as presiding officer of the "State Council of Scholars" (GUS), created by Lenin, he led the reform of higher education. He founded . . . [many institutes]. He organized the Soviet Russian Archive system. He is the guiding force of most historical institutes. He was the first to present Russian history from the point of view of historical materialism. . . . He endeavors in numerous essays and lectures to formulate the origin and development of historical materialism and to keep its teaching pure and free of errors. M. N. Pokrovsky is the unquestioned leader of Marxist historical research in the Soviet Union.⁸

Interestingly enough, however, from Pokrovsky's fall from grace until his rehabilitation very few Western historians and not a single Soviet historian were willing to credit Pokrovsky with being either a Marxist or an historian. Paradoxically, however, both Soviet and Western historians have regarded Pokrovsky as an economic determinist, even though he constantly inveighed against economic determinism in his writings.

Pokrovsky believed that "Marxism is more complex than . . . simple . . . economic materialism."⁹ History, he explained, "happens under certain economic conditions, on a certain economic basis, and a realization of this basis is indispensable for an understanding of history, yet history is made by living persons, whose immediate motives may be of an economic nature. The analysis of these economic motives—as Marx emphasized—does not lead us away from the method of historical materialism."¹⁰ "Even a non-Marxist," he affirmed, "may take the point of view that economic conditions are the basis of the historical process" (*Aufsätze*, p. 6). The economic materialist is so "naïve" that his "simplification" of the historical process makes it "appear that if people would discontinue every struggle for life, freedom and happiness . . . then history would still, somehow, continue to go on a mechanical path [1906]." His understanding of the role of economic materialism makes of history "a blind spontaneous process which takes its normal course as if conscious people do not quite exist in the world" (*Ökonomicheskiĭ materializm*, p. 14). He argued that it was true that "simple" economic materialism was a "professional distortion which proved of use in a certain stage of the development of our craft [history]," and he asserted that the distortion still persists. Historians "will have to overcome the economic materialism of the nineties still rooted in many of us [1925]." Engels himself had "warned against the conveniences of the economic materialistic method of historical writing and cautioned one not to be caught by these conveniences." Pokrovsky expressed his "fear," however, that in extirpating the corrupting influence of economic materialism "the

8. Jonas, "Entwicklung der Geschichtsforschung," pp. 395–96.

9. M. N. Pokrovsky, *Ökonomicheskiĭ materializm* (Moscow, 1906), p. 3.

10. Pokrovsky, *Historische Aufsätze: Ein Sammelband* (Vienna and Berlin, 1928), p. 19.

biggest difficulty which will be encountered in the correction of this distortion will come from the law of inertia" (*Aufsätze*, pp. 19–20).

There is no question that Pokrovsky believed, as did Marx, that at the basis of the development of human society is economic change, that is, "the struggle of man with nature, for life, for a bit of bread, a warm corner, and so on."¹¹ But the options available to man to fulfill his needs are extremely limited by factors other than natural and national development. "It is superfluous to add that men are not free in their choice of productive forces which are the basis of all their history, because every productive force is an acquired force, a product of previous activity. In this manner, the productive forces are the result of the practical energies of men, but this very energy is determined by the conditions in which men find themselves: the productive forces acquired earlier and the social system existing earlier and created not by themselves but by previous generations." Does this position exclude the individual or chance from influencing the course of history?

Pokrovsky put forth his position on this topic with eloquence, lucidity, and some spoofing. He asserted that " 'the nose of Cleopatra' . . . may have a certain relative influence [in history], rather minor to be sure" but it could not "influence the course of events as a whole." The individuality of certain events or persons "is expressed precisely in that they show the stamp of a given individual," and, therefore, in the explanation of different events "one must not fail to invest such individuality with all its characteristics, that is, with the characteristics of the men who create these events."¹² He quoted Engels as saying, "Based on a given level in the development of productive forces men make their history," and concluded that it is therefore apparent that " 'idealistic spheres' can exert a tremendous influence on economics," but "this influence is secondary" (*Aufsätze*, pp. 7, 39).

To buttress his argument Pokrovsky turned to the highest authority, Marx himself. He cited Marx as saying, "History would have a very mystical character if 'chance' played no part. Contingencies form, of course, a component part of the general course of development, being balanced by other contingencies. However, acceleration and retardation depend to a great extent on such 'contingencies' among which is such 'chance' as the character of individuals who lead the movement at first" ("Marks kak istorik," pp. 379–80).

On a number of occasions Pokrovsky pointed out the influence of leadership and contingency on the inevitable laws of historical development. One could cite a number of examples, such as Ivan IV, who told the Englishman

11. Pokrovsky, *Russkaia istoriia v samom szhatom ocherke*, 3rd ed. (Moscow, 1923), p. 11.

12. Pokrovsky, "Marks kak istorik," *Vestnik Sotsialisticheskoi akademii*, 1923, no. 4, p. 380.

Jenkinson that Russia was not only interested in trade agreements but in political accommodations as well (*Aufsätze*, p. 24), or Boris Godunov and the False Dimitrii, both of whom, Pokrovsky argued, "attempted to improve the condition of the peasants."¹³ That Pokrovsky maintained that the actions of these men were limited by the social conditions in which they operated is of course not open to question, nor is the fact that he emphasized the influence of the base of the socioeconomic formation over that of superstructure. One may even point out that perhaps in an attempt to compensate for the idealistic interpretations which he attempted to destroy he overemphasized the influence of the substructure. But then one must not commit the same error in the critical analysis of his works.

The importance of the roles of the individual and of chance are most clearly expressed by Pokrovsky in his analysis of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. One must, however, view his position here with some skepticism for reasons which will be given below.

Pokrovsky believed that generally history evolved in accord with the schema advanced by Marx, and he argued that it was the Revolution of 1905 which most clearly demonstrated the validity of the process of dialectical materialism. "The most important fact which we gained from this memorable year is the fact of the transformation of the dialectical historical process from an abstract, literary form into a concrete living fact" (*Aufsätze*, p. 21). For Pokrovsky the Revolution of 1905 produced two important results. In the first place, it accelerated the circulation of the tenets of historical materialism. The dissemination of this concept "can be compared to the colossal spread of historical ideas in the nineties," and from this time on, these ideas "more or less represented real Marxism" (p. 16). In the second place, the 1905 upheaval also inaugurated "the Russian Revolution [which] passed through two stages. . . . The first [was] . . . the Revolution of 1905, that is to say . . . the first attempt at a *bourgeois* Revolution, [which was victorious in 1917 and led to the second stage] the Socialist revolution" (*Brief History*, 2:22).

These two revolutions, Pokrovsky maintained, evolved not only as a part of the historical process but also in response to a "conscious element." He argued, "the colossal influence of our party was very apparent in our first revolution (1917). It would be absurd to minimize it and to present that revolution as a purely spontaneous process." It is true, he said, in referring to the Revolution of 1917, "that the masses were moving in the direction of the insurrection," but it was the Bolsheviks who foresaw the moment "and alone of all parties [was able] to give a correct forecast of the revolution . . . [and

13. Pokrovsky, *History of Russia: From Earliest Times to the Rise of Commercial Capitalism*, trans. and ed. J. D. Clarkson and M. R. M. Griffiths (London, 1931), pp. 177-79, and *A Brief History of Russia*, trans. D. S. Mirsky, 2 vols. (New York, 1933), 1: 176.

also was] the first organized revolutionary force that has consciously directed the colossal process of a revolution."¹⁴

Sometime earlier Pokrovsky had asked a rhetorical question: "Can the individual change the course of history? . . . Of course not," he answered, "But if we take an individual event—October 25, 1917, old style—here personalities . . . played a major role. Take, furthermore, the whole history of Bolshevism. This, of course, is a world phenomenon called forth by exceptionally general causes, transcending our country and our generation; but try to understand the individual moments of the history of Russian Bolshevism from its inception to its latest phase without drawing in the mighty individuality of its leader, and you will fail" ("Marks kak istorik," p. 380).

It is apparent that at all times Pokrovsky viewed "contingency" as an important influence on historical evolution. After the year 1928, however, many of his statements seem to attribute a greater *degree* of influence to "chance" than had been his wont before that year. Moreover, after 1928 he became unusually adept at sanctifying his arguments with the name of Lenin. Although it had not been unusual to cite Lenin's name in support of an interpretation before 1928, Stalin's victory in the struggle for succession and the change in the nature of the party heightened the need to demonstrate *partiinosť*, that is, fidelity to the party's position, and accentuated the tendency to cite Lenin's authority.

In 1930, for example, Pokrovsky argued that the question of the interpretation of Russian history is "a dispute about how to *interpret Leninism*. . . . For any correct interpretation of Russian history must be based on Lenin's interpretation of it."¹⁵ An important task, he wrote on another occasion, was to unite historical work with the proletarian struggle; "where this union is not achieved there is no genuine Leninist history."¹⁶ He confessed, "I often argued with [Lenin] . . . and I always got myself in a mess . . . [so] I stopped arguing and yielded to Ilich [Lenin]."¹⁷

To Pokrovsky the "revolution of 1905 served as a vast object lesson." This "vast object lesson" he then applied to the contemporary Soviet situation, and by doing so demonstrated a fundamental change in his conception of *partiinosť*. He wrote, "that is why in our own days, in the days of the socialist reconstruction of our economy when the problem of a clear-cut consistent party

14. Pokrovsky, "Rol' rabocheho klassa v revoliutsii 1905 g.," in M. N. Tikhomirov et al., eds., *M. N. Pokrovskii: Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1966-67), 3: 606-7.

15. Pokrovsky, "O russkom feodalizme, proiskhozhdenii i kharaktere absoliutizma v Rossii," *ibid.*, 3: 560.

16. Pokrovsky, "O zadachakh marksistskoi istoricheskoi nauki v rekonstruktivnyi period," *Istorik marksist*, 31 (1931): 7.

17. Pokrovsky, *Oktiabrskaiia revoliutsiia: Sbornik statei, 1917-1927* (Moscow, 1929), p. 18.

line unswervingly carried out and the problems of fighting opportunism have become so vital it is so useful for us to examine the revolution of 1905 from the point of view of an analysis of political leadership" ("Rol' rabocheho klassa . . .," p. 606).

Pokrovsky knew that the Bolshevik influence on the Revolution of 1905 had been relatively negligible, but his implication that it was great and his appeal to the dogmatic authority of Lenin must be explained by the wish to survive under a totalitarian regime. It must be admitted, however, that Pokrovsky struggled mightily against this subversion of his ethical integrity. He pointed out that in the Revolution of 1905, while "the influence of our party was already great, . . . it was not alone at the head of the revolution." He also argued that the party was able to "foresee the moment," and that in its ability lay the "secret of its victory over its opponents" (*ibid.*, pp. 606-7).

Thus while he made an effort to maintain a position of objectivity, there seems to be little doubt that, at least superficially, he clothed his position in the glittering generalities demanded of him by the party's ever-increasing control of the historical front. This leads to the questions of how Pokrovsky the historian used the Marxist method, how he viewed the writings of historians of non-Marxist persuasions, and what kind of an historian he was.

One of the most important aspects of Marxism for Pokrovsky was its role as a method of interpretation, a key to the understanding of the historical process. "We who are Marxists are . . . more advantageously placed than our bourgeois predecessors. We possess what they do not possess, *a method*, a key to the interpretation of all developments, whether they took place yesterday or thousands of years ago" (*Brief History*, 1:14). But the key to understanding is useful only if the problem is formulated correctly. He argued that "Marx stressed clearly that an economic scheme may yield a key for the understanding of actual social relations only if we place such a scheme on an historical basis and begin its application with the question, how did the conditions originate which are to be liquidated at the time" ("Marks kak istorik," p. 380).

Consequently, for Pokrovsky every Marxist was an historian by definition. It was entirely natural, he argued, "that the founder of dialectical materialism should have been . . . an historian in his entire understanding of the world"; and even though the world holds a number of non-Marxists, "it is my profound conviction that Marxists cannot be nonhistorians" (*ibid.*, pp. 375-76, 383-84). "History," he said, "is the concrete investigation of concrete social problems" ("O zadachakh . . .," p. 7). But change is endemic in history. "Man changes and will change, like everything else. Social ways come into existence, other social ways fall apart, in their place rise new ways, and so on." It is impossible to foresee the termination of these changes, but by observing them over hundreds of years "we shall understand their regularity and learn the

laws of such changes" (*Russkaia istoriia*, p. 6). Hence "we study the past precisely in order to understand what is happening now" (*Brief History*, 1:5).

Pokrovsky believed, and rightly so, that the role of the masses in the scheme of history had been neglected before the rise of Marxist historical science. "The creative role of the masses was, as in olden times, misunderstood." In Russia the prerevolutionary historians had "considered the masses as an object for action from above, never as a *subject*—a cause"; and consequently, concluded Pokrovsky, "a truth which should be an axiom for every Marxist . . . is that historical as much as economic and legal theory is a part of the ideology of a certain class" (*Aufsätze*, pp. 18, 67). With the rise of Bolshevism it became necessary for Marxist historians to subject all previous historiography to a severe and critical analysis to demonstrate the class biases under which it was written as well as to make evident the invalidity and fallaciousness of its assumptions and conclusions. "As concrete as it may appear, history is less exact than political economy or jurisprudence. A scientific presentation of history . . . can be based only on the class principle." Only by attempting to write class-conscious history, Pokrovsky continued, "can we decipher the numerous historical controversies, can we find the key to endless discussion—can we recognize the differences for what they are—the confrontation of different class interests" (pp. 23–24).

Pokrovsky did not disdain that good which he saw in non-Marxist writings. Even though the laws of historical materialism were constant and unalterable, it was the duty of the historian to determine the facts by investigation of the actual events. He must provide "documentary material which is [both] unimpeachable and valid."¹⁸ The Marxist historian did not have to create history from the fertility of his imagination; he did not even have to rewrite history (*Aufsätze*, p. 25). His job was interpretation, guided by historical materialism and based on actual facts. In terms of "historical conception," wrote Pokrovsky, "there is nothing for us to borrow from our predecessors" (*History of Russia*, p. xiii). The material which the bourgeoisie historians have culled "can be used by us as *material*, in the strict sense of the word, provided that it is decoded by us, that it is freed from that ideological covering given it by our predecessors . . ." (*Aufsätze*, p. 25).

Pokrovsky's ethical integrity as an historian is also well worth noting. "He held to professional standards, had regard for documents and evidence, though at times he wrestled mightily with them to compel them to yield what he sought."¹⁹ In a speech at the First Congress of archive workers of the RSFSR held in 1926, Pokrovsky struck out against efforts "to reshape historical documents." "I must state," he said, "as a Communist and as an historian that we must dissociate ourselves from this approach. We have no

18. Pokrovsky, M. Ia. Berzin, et al., eds., *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v epoku imperializma: 1878–1917*, 10 vols. (Moscow, 1931–39), 1: xiii.

19. Bertram D. Wolfe, *Six Keys to the Soviet System* (Boston, 1956), p. 46.

right to put falsified documents, not containing what was actually written, into the hands of the peasant and worker. Our first duty to the proletariat and the peasant is to be truthful."²⁰ On occasion he would display a surprising tolerance, remarking, "But what is one to do? . . . Every historian depicts the side of the past which is visible to him: let others depict the other side—on the whole you will have something more."²¹ On the coming of his sixtieth birthday, he said, "And just one more little remark: while contending with bourgeois history, we ought not to forget that there is a technique in it which we must master. Do not disdain the good which you see in your enemies."²²

Pokrovsky's tolerance for bourgeois historiography, however, was limited, and in general he had little use for the premises and the conclusions of non-Marxist historians. "In physics, chemistry, and even biology, a non-Marxist or even a nonmaterialist scholar may be a valuable research specialist or a capable science teacher. . . . But a nonmaterialistic historian is good only for the collection of material, and even then one has to watch to make sure that he does not commit any stupid errors."²³

Undoubtedly by both training and attitude Pokrovsky was a professional historian. He had studied under such notable scholars as P. Vinogradov and V. Kliuchevsky, and in the traditional sense was a skilled, educated, and practiced scholar. Obviously, for Pokrovsky as an historian, historical materialism had a threefold purpose. First, it was simultaneously an explanation as well as a guide to the understanding of history; second, it was a method that permitted a true interpretation of reality as well as a guide to the analysis of the future; third, it was a weapon to be used against non-Marxist concepts as well as those who used these concepts.

While it is generally held among Marxists that historical materialism is a weapon to be used against the class bias of non-Marxists, it was Pokrovsky who was most vigorously indicted for this. During the two and a half decades in which he was regarded as a fallen angel, both Soviet and Western historiographers subjected his reputation as an historian to the most severe opprobrium, which generally centered on the accusation that Pokrovsky subordinated history to politics.

Certainly Pokrovsky argued that history had political implications and that it could be used as a political weapon. "It is the essence of history," he stated, "that it is the most political of all sciences" ("O zadachakh . . .," p. 5). It is an interesting commentary on contemporary historiography that many of the same people who have criticized Pokrovsky for being an economic deter-

20. Quoted in V. P. Danilov and S. I. Iakubovskaia, "Istochnikovovedenie i izuchenie istorii sovetskogo obshchestva," *Voprosy istorii*, 1961, no. 5, p. 18.

21. Quoted in Anatole G. Mazour, "Modern Russian Historiography," *Journal of Modern History*, 9 (1937): 201. No source given.

22. Pokrovsky, "Rech'," *Istoriik-marksist*, 10 (1928): 272.

23. Pokrovsky, "Institut krasnoi professury," *Trudy Instituta krasnoi professury* (Moscow, 1923), 1: 5.

minist have also argued that political instrumentation played *the* influential role in his use of historical evidence and his ideas. This is obviously a self-contradiction. The same Western historian who argued that Pokrovsky used a "mechanical interpretation of history" two pages later wrote: "Scarcely any other writer has ever equaled Pokrovsky's skill in subordinating history to politics. 'History,' he once said, 'is politics fitted to the past.'"²⁴

This statement is always attributed to Pokrovsky without a reference to any of his works. It has been used so often in criticizing Pokrovsky that the very repetition of it has given it the status of truth. In fact he attributed the position mentioned to historians he criticized. He wrote, "History, in the *scribblings of these gentlemen* [referring to some historians of the nineteenth century] is nothing different than politics turned to the past, not the present."²⁵

Consequently, we may assert by way of a summary that the charges of vulgar economic materialism and of the subordination of "history to politics" are mutually contradictory, and that neither one is borne out by the evidence. It is possible that these two unwarranted charges arose in Western historiography from an uncritical examination of Soviet historiography by historians who gave too little attention to the political content in the interpretations of the Soviet historians.

For well over two decades Pokrovsky's ideas and interpretations of history were considered by Soviet historians to be anti-Marxist. The question of the degree of Pokrovsky's alleged deviation from Marx may perhaps best be answered by examining two representative categories from the very extensive syllabus of errors promulgated against him: the Norman thesis and the problem of periodization.

The Norman thesis is an excellent example of the use of history in carrying out party dictates in the Soviet Union. The problem simply stated is whether the Slavs of antiquity had to call the Varangians to institute a political organization which they themselves were incapable of developing. It was as old as the eighteenth-century argument between Gerhard Friedrich Müller and Mikhail Vasilevich Lomonosov. During the 1930s with the rise of racism the question became one of particular importance in the Soviet Union. If the Slavs had been themselves incapable of political organization and had had to call on the Normans to create statehood for them, then support would be given to Hitler's claim of the superiority of the Germans and the inferiority of the Slavs. Consequently the party insisted that historians demonstrate the invalidity of this thesis. This development in Soviet historiography was obviously called forth by political expediency and not by any of the teachings of Marx; thus

24. Anatole G. Mazour, *Modern Russian Historiography*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1958), pp. 187-90.

25. Pokrovsky, in *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoi akademii*, 26 (1928): 5-6. Quoted in O. D. Sokolov, "Razvitie istoricheskikh vzgliadov M. N. Pokrovskogo," in *M. N. Pokrovskii: Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, 1: 28.

when Germany was defeated one might assume that for a Marxist the question would lose its importance.

A cursory examination of Soviet historiography after 1945, however, shows that this is not the case. Among others Mavrodin, who had once supported the Normanist theory, and Grekov staunchly denied its validity.²⁶ Some years later, in 1961, a statement appearing in *Kommunist* insisted that "Soviet scholars . . . have dealt a decisive blow to the so-called Norman theory which held that the Kiev state was 'created' by the Varangian Viking newcomers."²⁷ Two years later, in an article in *Istoriia SSSR*, Sakharov and Shapiro argued that "without denying the fact, obvious from the chronicles, of the participation of Vikings in the government of ancient Russia, [B. A.] Rybakov contends, with full justice, that 'the rule of the Varangian Oleg in Kiev was an insignificant and brief episode, excessively enlarged upon by certain pro-Varangian chronicles and subsequent historians of the Norse school,' and that 'the historical role of the Vikings in Russia was negligible.'" The authors then went on to give praise to M. N. Tikhomirov, who "refutes the concept of the old historiography on the notorious 'founding of Rus' allegedly dating from the 'invitation to Rurik in 862.'" ²⁸

A year earlier (1962) Dubrovsky, in conformity with the revised party attitude toward Pokrovsky, undertook to present Pokrovsky's treatment of the Norman question with some objectivity. Dubrovsky wrote:

In dealing with the origin of the state among the Slavs who populated our country, Pokrovsky emphasized that the beginning of the development of the ancient Russian state was related to the internal processes which took place among the Slavs. He noted the appearance among them of hereditary princes, and at the same time he criticized the chronicle version that "the princes were invited from overseas" and the Norman theory of the "invitation to the Varangians," Pokrovsky confined himself merely to pointing to the erroneous nature of this theory. He held that this was not an invitation but a conquest of the milder form in which the conquered tribe was not exterminated but became subject.²⁹

In his attempt to rehabilitate Pokrovsky's position on the Norman question, Dubrovsky does Pokrovsky a disservice by intimating that he was closer to the contemporary party position on this question than he in fact was. Pokrovsky began his inquiries in history from the position that "history is the *concrete* investigation of concrete questions." As to the validity of the Norman

26. See, for example, B. D. Grekov, *Bor'ba Rusi za sozdanie svoego gosudarstva* (Moscow, 1945), pp. 22 ff., and V. V. Mavrodin, "Osnovnye momenty razvitiia russkogo gosudarstva do XVIII v.," *Vestnik Leningradskogo universiteta*, 1947, no. 3, p. 84.

27. M. Nechkina, Iu. Poliakov, and L. Cherepnin, "Nekotorye voprosy istorii sovetskoi istoricheskoi nauki," *Kommunist*, 1961, no. 9, p. 65.

28. A. M. Sakharov and A. L. Shapiro, "Sovetskaia literatura po problemam istorii russkogo feodalizma v 1962 g.," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1963, no. 4, pp. 139-40.

29. S. M. Dubrovsky, "Akademik M. N. Pokrovskogo ego rol' v razvitiu sovetskoi istoricheskoi nauki," *Voprosy istorii*, 1962, no. 3, p. 17.

thesis he argued: "When one has to reconstruct the facts on the basis of a few lines (often written hundreds of years after the event) in a chronicle or on the basis of one vague document, then there is more than enough room for 'creative fantasy.' Who the Russian princes were and where they came from was the subject of endless arguments without conclusive results. The question lost all *practical* significance when the last princes disappeared from the arena of history" (*Aufsätze*, p. 23).

For Pokrovsky, the historian, the question was still one of interest; for Pokrovsky, the follower of Marx, the question had no practical significance and was consequently unimportant. To the party and later Soviet historians, however, the "proper" solution to this question had, and still has, enormous importance, both as an aid to Soviet nationalism and as evidence of the "progressiveness" of the Slavic peoples, particularly of the Great Russian people.

The final charge against Pokrovsky to be treated here is the accusation that in his work periodization—a matter of major importance to the party—was not clear and distinct.

In the fifty years of Soviet historiographical development the problem of the correct chronological limits of various periods seems to have obsessed Soviet historians, and the problem still awaits a solution. There are at least five general reasons why this problem has attracted so much attention, reasons that are closely interrelated. First, as Marxists, Soviet historians are taxed with the responsibility for fitting the history of their country into the socio-economic formations developed by Marx. Second, since Soviet Marxists generally regard these formations as both universal and progressive, Soviet historians are also charged with the responsibility of fitting the history of their country into the universal pattern of the development of mankind. Third, because the socioeconomic formations advanced by Marx are progressive (primitive communism, slaveholding, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, communism), there is the need to demonstrate that Russia was not a "backward" country before October 1917, and that it was an integral part of the Marxist historical process. Without this there is no explanation for the Great October Revolution. Fourth, because the Soviet Union is viewed as continuous to the Russian state, Soviet historians must use the device of periodization to show that in the light of universal history, Russia, and hence the Soviet Union, is as historically advanced, or further advanced, than any other state. Fifth, the general, and sometimes ambiguous, tenets of the Marxist ideology may lead to disparate and conflicting interpretations. As Yaresh put it,³⁰ "the adjustment of the history of an individual country to a predetermined universal pattern tends under any circumstances to be awkward, but . . . it is made particularly difficult by . . . the fact that the political leaders of the Soviet Union have reserved . . .

30. Leo Yaresh, "The Problem of Periodization," in Cyril E. Black, ed., *Rewriting Russian History*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1962), p. 34.

the right to determine which of these interpretations must be accepted by historical scholarship.”

Even before the 1930s it was charged that Pokrovsky's historical scheme was disordered, obscure, and at times contradictory. After the thirties the accusation was continued, but with far greater vituperation. Lenin himself, in an otherwise complimentary letter, had pointed out the lack of clarity and precision in Pokrovsky's *Brief History*.³¹ Rozhkov also complained of the lack of “distinguishable periods” in *Russian History from the Earliest Times*.³² Certainly these criticisms are justified. At times Pokrovsky's periodization is not only ambiguous but contradictory. Although Pokrovsky himself set no clear chronological limits to periods, Roslova points out that “in his *Russian History from the Earliest Times* Pokrovsky advanced the following periodization: from the eighth to the eleventh centuries—court-landownership; from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries—feudalism; from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries—commercial capitalism; the nineteenth century—industrial capitalism.”³³ Pankratova, using the same work, outlined Pokrovsky's periodization somewhat differently: eighth to tenth centuries—communal landownership; eleventh to sixteenth centuries—feudalism; seventeenth to eighteenth centuries—capitalism; nineteenth and twentieth centuries—industrial capitalism.³⁴

In the third edition of his *Russkaia istoriia*, Pokrovsky specifically referred to the periodization of Russian history and asserted that the Northern War marked the “concrete maturity of Russian commercial capitalism, concurrent with the origin of industrial capitalism which one hundred years later became just as strong and violent as its father.” He then went on to say that “the time of the complete maturity of industrial capitalism in Russia falls in the second half of the nineteenth century,” and in “the twentieth-century Russian imperialism is already on the stage” (*Russkaia istoriia*, p. 3).

Quite obviously, Pokrovsky made very little attempt at setting clear and precise chronological limits to the successive “socioeconomic formations” in Russian history, and consequently there is no distinct chronological periodization in his works. The reason for this is simple. Pokrovsky was no more interested in the precision of the chronological limits of historical periods than was Marx. In 1924 he explicitly stated that he was “not much of a follower of schematization and periodization.” Periodization he considered perhaps as useful as a chronological peg to hang concepts on, or as a teaching tool to help

31. “Pis'mo V. I. Lenina M. N. Pokrovskomu,” in *M. N. Pokrovskii: Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, 3: 3–4.

32. N. A. Rozhkov, *Russkaia istoriia v sravnitel'no-istoricheskom osveshchenii*, 12 vols. (Leningrad, 1922–30), 1: 21.

33. A. S. Roslova, “Formirovanie vzgliadov M. N. Pokrovskogo i ego istoricheskaiia kontseptsiiia,” in *Istoriografiia istorii SSSR*, p. 474.

34. A. M. Pankratova in B. D. Grekov et al., eds., *Protiv istoricheskoi kontseptsii M. N. Pokrovskogo*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1939–40), 1: 62–63.

the novice student understand certain peculiarities of the historical past but in general a “device” and “a very weak one” at that.³⁵

Pokrovsky's attitude toward periodization becomes much clearer if his ideas on the socioeconomic formations are used as background. He maintained that “pure” formations were nonexistent. “We ascribe this or that social phenomenon to this or that formation on the basis of the majority of its characteristics, of its fundamental characteristics.”³⁶ He believed that the idea of historical “stencils” applicable to all periods of time and to all people was based on imagination and not the historical process, and thus concluded that each historical epoch had an individuality of its own. This position was not alien to either Marx or Lenin. Marx himself had warned that “epochs of social history can as little be marked by hard and fast lines as can geological epochs.”³⁷ Lenin also had warned that there never was and could not be a socioeconomic formation which existed in pristine purity,³⁸ and sometime later Pokrovsky argued that “all of this had its roots in the purely *metaphysical*, antidialectical notion that every given country at every given period of time must be exclusively dominated by *one* sure economic system. . . . Hence the quest for ‘pure’ feudalism, and so on. One little detail had been forgotten—what Lenin regarded as the ‘life and soul’ of Marxism—which is ‘the theory of historical development is many-sided and full of contradictions’ ” (“O ruskom feodalizme . . . ,” p. 564).

Such a statement does not constitute a rejection of the Marxist view that socioeconomic formations evolve from lower to higher stages. Moreover, in Pokrovsky, as in Marx, the major attention is directed to the rise of the capitalistic socioeconomic formation and the analysis and criticism of it.

Unquestionably there are many aspects of Pokrovsky's work that can and should be criticized. In his world view Pokrovsky was obstinate and obdurate, and he, in common with other Marxists, demonstrated a tendency toward exaggeration and hyperbole. On the other hand, he was a well-trained professional historian and relatively honest in his historical methodology. It was only natural that the dogmatics of Marxism, on the one side, and the honest accumulation of evidence, on the other, would occasionally lead Pokrovsky into an inconsistent position. I have reference here to errors of fact, rather than to errors brought about by a changing theology. Many of the supposed “errors” that the later Marxist historians and some Western historians have attributed to Pokrovsky were clearly brought about by changes in the party line and its need for other interpretations to endorse a new position. It seems to me that the indictments dealt with above are representative of such changes.

35. Pokrovsky, “Sovetskaia glava nashei istorii,” *Bolshevik*, 1924, no. 14, p. 11.

36. Pokrovsky, *Istoricheskaia nauka i bor'ba klassov*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1933), 2: 314.

37. Karl Marx, *Capital*, ed. Ernest Rhys, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul, 2 vols. (New York, 1930), 1: 391.

38. V. I. Lenin, “Krakh II internatsionala,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, 20 vols. (Moscow, 1920–26), 13: 160.