

My Debt to Leopold Haimson

I did not have the good fortune of being one of Leo Haimson's doctoral students. However, I suspect that my debt to him is as great as theirs. Let me explain.

In June 1956, I graduated from Knox College, a small liberal arts college in northwest Illinois, with a B. A. in Political Science; a two-year ROTC obligation; and only the very vaguest sense of what I wanted to do with my life. (Some time down the road, I hoped to *possibly* pursue a career in the Foreign Service.) With that in mind, having a "free" year before reporting for active military service, in September 1956 I began an M.A. program in the International Relations Committee at the University of Chicago.

I should immediately add that earlier, during my youth, my family was a part of a thriving community of distinguished Russian emigres on the east coast of the United States (my mother had been a former actress in Russian theater and my father was a prominent, Petersburg-born physical chemical biologist). Among the leading lights of this community were figures whose names are familiar to this audience, people like Michael Karpovich, George Vernadsky, Boris Nicolaevsky, Georgii Fedotov, Nicholas Timashev, Vladimir Nabokov, Aleksandr Kerensky, Vladimir Zenzinov, and many, many others. From these early family associations, especially from Karpovich and Nicolaevsky, I had developed a passing interest in Russian history. However, since no Russian history courses were then taught at Knox, it was not until I got to the University of Chicago that I had an opportunity to do any formal course work on the subject.

I took two memorable survey courses in Imperial Russian history from Leo during that first year at Chicago. Others have written about Leo's unique teaching style—about all I can add

is that already then, he lectured non-stop from crammed spiral notebooks. Oh—and if memory serves me, at that time he rode to class on a bicycle, often arriving slightly winded and a bit late. However, it is no exaggeration to say that for me his courses were *life-changing*. Thanks to the excitement of Russia's past instilled in me by his lectures, as well by close associations with such more advanced students of his as Rose Glickman and especially Allan Wildman, I soon developed a strong sense of purpose that I had lacked before. Bye, bye Foreign Service!

Before leaving Chicago for my two years of military service, I had asked Leo if he would direct my M. A. thesis on Maxim Gorky's visit to America in 1906 (at that time, relatively very little had been written about it). The topic had been suggested by Nicolaevsky, who also supplied me with a previously unpublished, politically revealing essay of Gorky's written in America. And Leo, who was already in close touch with Nicolaevsky in connection with the start-up of the Menshevik project, agreed to work with me on it. I did the research and writing for this thesis during the 1959-1960 academic year. It was my first attempt to conduct research in primary sources and to complete a significant writing project. Thanks to Leo's insights, sensitivity, and abiding patience, working with him during that year was a treasured experience, one that further deepened my longer-term commitment to the study of Russian history and, really for the first time, awakened the strong appetite for sustained archival research and original historical writing that still excites and energizes me today—a half century later.

Shortly before Leo left Chicago for Columbia, thanks largely to more generous support from Leo than I deserved, I received a financial aid package from Indiana University that enabled me to pursue my doctoral studies in Russian history there. But my debt to Leo didn't

stop at that point. In 1974, when I was working on the manuscript of my book *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, I gave a paper on my findings at Zbigniew Brzezinski's Research Institute for Communist Affairs at Columbia. Being aware of "differences" between Leo and "Zbig," I was astonished and endlessly gratified to find Leo in the first row of a packed lecture hall and, even more, to observe him smiling and nodding approvingly as I laid out my "revisionist" thoughts about the character and operation of the Bolshevik party in 1917 and about the complex dynamics of its coming to power. At an evening reception following the lecture, his insightful comments and enthusiasm for my work was music to my ears, as was his suggestion a few weeks later of a repeat performance at his Russian Institute colloquium. Taken together, thanks to Leo, these interactions were invaluable in shaping the re-write of my book and in energizing the continuation of my research.

This not enough, from then on Leo saw to it that I was included in regular student-faculty colloquia on aspects of the Russian revolutionary era at the Harriman Institute, which, due most of all to his organizational initiatives, became the international center for such discussions. Moreover, thanks to Leo's strong support, during three semesters in the early 1980s, when I was just beginning research for my most recent book, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, I received appointments as a Senior Research Fellow at the Harriman. Apart from assuring me access to the New York Public and Columbia libraries and the Bakhmetiev archive, these appointments facilitated regular, meaningful interactions with Leo, his students and colleagues, and the Institute's continuing stream of interesting visitors. Although, I was unable to finish research for that book until the opening up of the Russian historical archives a decade later, these interactions helped to crystallize my research needs, broaden my perspectives, and enrich my professional

life immeasurably. Still later, beginning in the 1990s, Leo's unique bonds with progressive Soviet historians, especially in St. Petersburg, helped me, and others like me, to build our own strong ties to them. I *could* go on. But surely this suffices to explain why I feel so deeply indebted to Leo Haimson—my teacher, mentor, colleague, and dear friend.

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