

In Memoriam

Leopold Haimson (1927–2010)

JOCHEN HELLBECK AND PETER HOLQUIST

“If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which seeds will grow
and which will not.”

—Macbeth, used as the introduction to Haimson’s
Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism

Leopold Haimson, Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, died at his home in New York City on 18 December 2010, at the age of 83, after suffering a stroke in October of that year.

Haimson was a leading historian of 19th- and early 20th-century Russian history. He was the author of numerous important books and articles; a tireless and singularly successful promoter of international scholarly cooperation among American, European, and Russian scholars; and the mentor of several generations of graduate students.¹ As students of Haimson we would like to use the bulk of this commemoration to share with readers what it was like to study under his guidance and how we were shaped by his approach to history and the historical study of Russia more particularly.

Haimson was born in Brussels in 1927 to a family of Russian émigrés. His father had been born in Borisov in the Jewish Pale of Settlement, graduating from Warsaw University and moving to St. Petersburg. In his *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* as well as in his introduction to *The Making of Three Russian Revolutionaries*, Haimson examined the social and psychological trajectory of revolutionaries from precisely this milieu.² His mother was a daughter of a merchant family whose grant of large forested

¹ For a list of Haimson’s publications and descriptions of his career, see “An Interview with Leopold Haimson,” *Kritika* 8, 1 (2007): 1–12. See also the following memorials: Boris Kolonitskii and Uil’iam Rozenberg [William Rosenberg], “Pamiatī Leopol’da Khaimsona”; David McDonald, “Leopold Haimson: His Historical Vision and Historiographical Legacy,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 4 (2010): 507–14, 515–30; and A. P. Nenarokov, “Men’ shevistskii proekt’ Leopol’da Kheimsona,” *Voprosy istorii*, no. 5 (2011): 166–71.

² Leopold H. Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955); Haimson, with Ziva Galili and Richard Wortman, *The*

territories contributed to the building of the Trans-Siberian railroad. After the revolution, the family went to first Harbin and then Berlin, settling in Brussels. Leopold was 13 when the Nazis invaded and overran Belgium. The family escaped on a fishing boat from Normandy to unoccupied France, and then to the United States. Soon after his arrival in the United States, Leopold Haimson enrolled at Harvard College in 1942 at age 15 (having lied about his age in order to be admitted), completing his degree in 1945.

This life trajectory, which Haimson shared with a certain cohort of his generation (Marc Raeff, Michael Confino, Moshe Lewin, Nicholas Riasanovsky), made him a cosmopolitan by life, rather than simply by choice. He was equally at home in the French, English, and Russian languages. He wore his cosmopolitanism lightly. Rather than preaching, by his life and scholarship he communicated to his many students that a serious scholar simply *should* be cosmopolitan.

As an undergraduate at Harvard, Haimson had focused on French history, with a B.A. thesis devoted to the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on Maximilien Robespierre and the question of whether to hold “ideology” or “circumstances” responsible for the Terror in the French Revolution. With the defeat of Nazism, Haimson became fascinated with the Red Army and the Soviet Union and entered graduate study in Russian history. He formed part of a truly remarkable cohort of students studying under Michael Karpovich, notable equally for their breadth of views as for their later prominence: Richard Pipes, Marc Raeff (later his colleague at Columbia University), Martin Malia, Donald Treadgold, Nicholas Riasanovsky. He completed his degree in 1952 and moved in 1956 to his first position at the University of Chicago.

Yet even at this very early stage of his career, he engaged in independent study in the social sciences. For over five years he worked together with Margaret Mead on a project to identify contours and regularities of Soviet political culture. The essay resulting from this project, “The Ideal of ‘Conscious Activity’” (1951, a manuscript that only a few U.S. research libraries carry), seeks to lay bare Bolshevik assumptions on decision making by comparing Soviet approaches to chess, operational thinking in Soviet battle situations, and the organization of Soviet mass industry.³ Decision making in all these settings, Haimson argued, was shaped, albeit to different degrees, by how

Making of Three Russian Revolutionaries: Voices from the Menshevik Past (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

³ Leopold H. Haimson, “The Ideal of ‘Conscious Activity’: Some Aspects of Decision Making and Communications in Soviet Theory and Practice,” report prepared for the Office of Naval Research by the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures Project (1951).

Soviet Communists understood the laws of history and their own place in them. The Bolsheviks emphasized “the existence, in a world governed by objective laws, of forces outside their control, moving according to consistent patterns.” They believed that these consistent patterns “could be apprehended only through their own pressure on the external world,” and hence they “began to depend on the recognition and diagnosis of the real or alleged forces that resisted this pressure for their own plans and incentives to action” (ii–iii). Over time, the Bolsheviks came to identify their own activities “as counterplans to the diagnosed intentions, as active parries against the movements of these opposing forces, which they endowed with the rational, consistent, and relentless will that the Bolsheviks themselves wished to possess.” The “ideal of conscious activity” hence amounted to a counterpointed series of rules that were to guide the conscious activity of the new Soviet man.

Haimson chose chess as the prime arena of his investigation because this sport prized rational calculation and persistent attention, thus attracting the type of “conscious” players coveted by the Soviet regime. Soviet chess masters, he showed, were trained to direct their pieces against “actual or expected moves of the opponent, so as to thwart his plans and wrest the initiative from him.” But they were to act only toward the middle phase of the game, by when the opponent was assumed to have “already committed himself to a plan which the Soviet master could diagnose and counter with a plan of his own” (vii). Haimson then turned to the field of Soviet military tactics, using the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk to demonstrate the workings of the same counteroffensive style—a style that dictated the design of tactics and the deployment of troops in opposition to the opponent’s plans, which had to be rendered legible in the first instance. In view of the fact, however, that the Soviet military was staffed overwhelmingly with peasant soldiers, rather than seasoned chess players, Soviet military planners conceived of external forms of organization that reflected the assumption “that individuals who are internally unprepared to perform adequately can be made to do so by the pressure of an organizational set-up” (x). What resulted in practice, Haimson noted, was a highly unwieldy and coercive military apparatus.

Much more could be said about this highly original and insightful piece, which vividly evokes Haimson’s fascination with the Red Army in wartime. This early essay demonstrates a recurring concern in Haimson’s teaching and scholarship: the attempt to locate, in circumscribed settings, the shaping presence of larger historical forces.

This interest in anthropology and political culture continued throughout his career and is especially evident in Haimson’s first book, *The Russian Marxists*

and the Origins of Bolshevism (1955). This work was widely recognized as a penetrating analysis of the thought, psychologies, and social milieus underlying the emergence of revolutionary Marxism in late imperial Russia. The book discusses the politics as well as the personal lives of Lenin, Martov, and others of their cohort in terms of a tension between spontaneity and consciousness. While they sought to rework workers' and peasants' "spontaneous" social unrest into "conscious" political activity, these revolutionaries observed their own thought and behavior in the same terms, seeking to subject their spontaneous instincts to the forces of the conscious will. Although it has been criticized, the spontaneity–consciousness binary remains a dominant paradigm for most scholars' understanding of the psychology and political culture of Russian and Soviet Marxism. As the coordinator of the Inter-University Project on the History of the Menshevik Movement, Haimson oversaw the collection of innumerable interviews and the textual record of Menshevik activists. (Students of Leo will recall the files, microfilms, books, and journals from this project occupying much of his large office in Columbia University's International Affairs Building.)

Haimson studied the interplay of social groups and political actors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, challenging firmly held views that the 1917 revolution was best understood in terms of political ideology and a Bolshevik conspiracy. Haimson pointed to longer-term processes of social radicalization and political fragmentation that were fraying the fabric of the tsarist regime long before the revolution. Haimson's most-notable—and most-debated—contribution was his two-part article in 1964–65 on "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia," inaugurating a long-running and continuing debate between "optimists" and "pessimists" over the prospects of the imperial old regime.⁴ Haimson was long seen to have favored a more "Soviet" interpretation of these events in his insistence on the *zakonomernosti* of the revolutionary conjuncture. In fact, Haimson's article grew out of his engagement with Soviet colleagues. The germ of the article was a 1962 presentation at the Institute of History of the USSR Academy of Sciences, at which he presented his Soviet colleagues with a far more heterodox interpretation of the revolutionary crisis than the one they knew. In short, rather than being viewed simply as an intervention in a debate within the North American academy over the prospects for tsarist Russia, Haimson's

⁴ Leopold H. Haimson, "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905–1917," *Slavic Review* 23, 4 (1964): 619–42 and 24, 1 (1965): 1–22; see also Haimson, "The Problem of Political and Social Stability in Urban Russia on the Eve of War and Revolution Revisited," *Slavic Review* 59, 4 (2000): 848–75.

argument also grew out of his commitment to entering into dialogue with—and to engaging and challenging—his Soviet colleagues.

This commitment to international collaboration was a leitmotif of his career. Early on, he had collaborated with Margaret Mead and chaired the Inter-University Menshevik Project. From the 1960s through the early years of the 21st century, he maintained unusually strong ties with Soviet colleagues. He had a long-standing relationship with the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*. In earlier years he was engaged in Paris with Fernand Braudel and other leading members of the *Annales* movement on problems of social development and conflict. He published extensively in English, French, and Russian—including volumes with Charles Tilly and Giulio Sapelli on strikes, wars, and revolutions in an international perspective. The goal of this major international project was, in Haimson's words, "to strive toward a purview of Europe's historical development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in which ... Russia's historical experience ... may be reintegrated ... and find [its] proper place in a comparative perspective."⁵ This comparative project on strike movements throughout Europe on the eve of and during World War I anticipated the renewed interest in studying that war, especially Russia's role in it.

One of the earliest scholars to travel to the Soviet Union and work in Russian archives after World War II, Haimson worked tirelessly over four decades to bring leading Soviet and American historians into contact with one another. The academic ties he forged in Soviet Russia led to the founding of international workshops that shape the intellectual exchanges between Russian and Western historians to this day. Haimson helped structure the European University in St. Petersburg, founded in 1994, to engage leading trends in Western as well as Russian historical and social thought. The university has since established itself as a flagship institution of postgraduate studies in history and the social sciences.

Haimson's largest contribution to the field of Russian history, however, was his role as mentor to several generations of graduate students, from his time at the University of Chicago and then at Columbia. His historical breadth was unusual. Several of his early students at Chicago wrote dissertations on Muscovite history. Identified by many as a "social historian," Leo oversaw a large number of students who in fact studied the imperial state and its

⁵ Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly, eds., *Strikes, Wars, and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Haimson and Guido Sapelli, *Strikes, Social Conflict, and the First World War: An International Perspective* (Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 1992), quotation on 4.

bureaucracy. As David McDonald has noted, Haimson's influential 1964–65 article on “social stability” in fact had a companion piece on political attitudes and state power that is less frequently mentioned: his seminal article on “The Parties and the State: The Evolution of Political Attitudes in Post-Reform Russia.”⁶ Leopold Haimson taught both of us at Columbia in the 1980s and 1990s; in his teaching and mentoring style he was demanding as well as generous, nurturing in his students a deep and lasting passion for Russian history and an insistence that we attend to what our historical protagonists were saying in regard to who they were and what they were doing.

We both vividly recall our first meetings with Haimson when we came to Columbia University as beginning graduate students. *PH*: My incoming cohort in 1986 numbered seven students. Remarkably, six of that group would finish, and all of us would find work at prestigious institutions: myself, Frederick Corney, Nadezhda Kizienko, Nathaniel Knight, Yanni Kotsonis, and Laurie Manchester. In my first meeting, Leo sat behind his desk, eyes twinkling. He then provided a list of readings for our first class meeting of his seminar on postreform Russia, numbering four books in Russian. Leo concluded cryptically, “and be sure to read Bobby.” I had no idea what Leo meant. On leaving his office, I consulted with some graduate students who were more advanced in the program, avuncular guides to the path of graduate study: David McDonald and Frank Wcislo. Leo had meant for me to read the work of one of his earlier students, Roberta—“Bobby”—Manning's *The Crisis of the Old Order*.⁷ This early encounter introduced me to the larger universe of his students.

JH: I was admitted along with three other Russianists when I arrived at Columbia several years after Peter. Less than seven, four is still a formidable number and a testimony to the resources made available to the study of Russia during the Cold War, and to the particular enthusiasm Soviet studies generated among students during the heady *perestroika* period. (Yet I was the only one to survive the first year of studies. I ended up being Leopold Haimson's last student.) I remember coming to New York the previous fall to introduce myself as a Ph.D. applicant and visiting Mark Von Hagen, the historian of 20th-century Russia, during office hours. Mark at some

⁶ Leopold H. Haimson, “The Parties and the State,” in *The Transformation of Russian Society: Aspects of Change since 1861*, ed. Cyril E. Black (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); on this work as a companion piece to the 1964–65 article, see McDonald, “Haimson,” 516 n. 3.

⁷ Roberta Manning, *The Crisis of the Old Order in Russia: Gentry and Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

point said it would be a good idea for me to meet Leopold Haimson, and so we walked over to his office just down the hall. Leo stood there, in his trademark combination of turtleneck and corduroy pants, puffing his pipe while dictating letters to a research assistant. “He is German and speaks four languages,” Mark said by way of introducing me. “We can use that,” Leo said, and he looked at me, his eyes squinting, and grinned in his inimitable way, before resuming his dictations. In later years I would see many more of these slightly amused, quizzical grins—often in situations where he was sizing up a new acquaintance. But sometimes the look was just meant to conceal the fact that he was somewhere else altogether with his thoughts.

Getting into the Columbia program back in those days may appear to have been easy, but making it through the Columbia program, and especially the two core colloquia on imperial Russia taught by Leopold Haimson, was anything but. Each of the syllabi for the two courses, the first one covering the half-century from the emancipation of the serfs to the revolution of 1905, and the second dealing with Russia’s revolutionary experience in 1905–17, comprised 20 single-spaced pages of required and highly recommended readings, starting with memoirs and historical analyses penned by contemporaries to the events under discussion, and covering a broad range of Russian-, French-, German-, and English-language scholarship.

Haimson was always interested in big questions and issues that defined the social and political formation of late imperial Russia, but he addressed them with a granular attention to detail, seeking to find the essence in the particularity of the empirical. This is why he directed us to pay close attention to sets of historical actors whose thoughts and actions disclosed the presence of larger, transpersonal processes and forces at specific historical junctures. These questions included the members of the Editing Commissions and how their social and political backgrounds influenced their views on the agrarian question on the eve of the emancipation of the serfs; the fates of the 1881–85 Kakhanov Commission and, two decades later, Witte’s 1902–5 Special Conference on the Needs of Agriculture; the discussions in the agrarian committees of the first two Dumas; the manifold fault lines running through the merchant estate; and urban workers’ voting patterns during the Duma elections. Virtually every student who passed through Haimson’s colloquium recalls the famous “iron cross” that he would draw up on the blackboard, distinguishing not only horizontally between the social and political conceptions on the part of tsarist bureaucrats, on the one hand, and members of the political opposition, on the other, but imparting a vertical dimension in addition that differentiated between universalist and

particularist conceptions of the social and political order. This iron cross gave the Kakhanov Commission, with its plan to end the legal and political segregation of the peasantry and create a common trans-estate system of public self-government from the village level up, its particular salience; and it made memorable to colloquium participants the obscure figure of Aleksandr Pazukhin who, as a district marshal of the nobility from Simbirsk province, vocally opposed the work of the commission.

Haimson required active engagement in his classroom, and he was delighted when colloquium participants showed an ability to enter the minds, as it were, of historical actors, to retrieve their assumptions and follow through on the logic that guided them as they interacted with other individuals or institutions, thus shaping the political process. There were other moments, too, when he reverted to lecturing and deplored that the seminar was devolving into dentistry with him alone acting in the room, pulling students' teeth. Either way, the mode of deep scrutiny that he asked us to perform in the colloquium generated deep understanding from within, such that one felt like a contemporary to vital debates about Russian society and politics which took place more than a century ago.

The colloquium and seminar meetings occurred on a weekly basis late in the afternoon in room 1219 of the International Affairs Building, a room that we remember not only for the glorious sunsets over Morningside Heights that could be observed from the row of seats facing the large window front. Each week Haimson would enter the room, equipped with a number of vital accessories. These included a Clairefontaine notebook (French-produced, with thick shiny paper—his favorite writing aid) filled with scrawling notes, along with a number of felt markers in his pockets. Once he showed up looking like a film actor who had been dressed to appear like he was shot in the chest. The red felt marker in his shirt pocket had begun to leak, a fact to which Haimson was entirely oblivious. In one hand he would always carry a brown bag containing two big styrofoam cups of cappuccino and iced water from the deli next door. The next few minutes would go by with him beginning to engage and interrogate his students, all the while seeking to light a cigarette. Over the course of the next two hours we would listen to the repeated clicking sounds of the lighter, and once that maneuver had met with success, we watched with growing concern as he held the burning cigarette over his coffee or moved to drink from the cup in which he had been dashing out previous cigarettes. All of this took place below a big DO NOT SMOKE sign, painted in glaring red letters, that building administrators had put up just for him.

With its focus on historical actors' intellectual commitments and worldviews, Haimson's teaching, like that of the other Russianists at Columbia—Marc Raeff, Richard Wortman, and Mark Von Hagen—clearly engaged with the lives and the writings of the Russian intelligentsia. What was less apparent to us as his students, however, was the fact that we were not just taught about the intelligentsia. By enrolling in the Columbia program we were in some fashion introduced into a veritable Russian intelligentsia culture, recreated by Haimson on American soil. There was, to begin with, the intelligentsia circle, the "Russian history workshop," which met once a month and brought outside speakers, many from Russia, to the Harriman Institute. Leo was the undisputed *vozhd'* of the gathering—his authority accentuated by his thick beard, his habit of letting everyone else speak first before taking the floor with fundamental, wide-ranging, and succinct remarks, and, of course, the privilege he maintained of smoking practically nonstop throughout the session. Bothered by the smoke, one senior seminar workshop participant got up and went out into the hall, from where she followed the meeting through the nearly closed door slit. The air out there was not much better, and so she implored Leo whether he would consider smoking just every other cigarillo. The workshop discussions continued on over dinner in a nearby Chinese restaurant, with students clamoring for Tsingtao beer while Leo would always order his salted margarita. The circle culture was replicated in the *kruzhok* run by the Ph.D. students in Russian history. Both of these types of gathering fostered fellowship and cohesion, along with a clear sense of inclusion and exclusion.

This intelligentsia culture extended beyond its institutionalized circle. It was evident in Haimson's deep concern with the regularities of historical progression—regularities, to be sure, that he did not personally adhere to, but that he sought to distill from the minds of the Russian intelligentsia, firm believers in discernable iron laws of history. The historical intelligentsia applied historical thinking in order to chart political paths toward a better future. Performed in a critical spirit, Haimson's analysis did not replicate this perspective but instead sought to lay bare, as it were, the future horizons which these historical actors inhabited. While drawn to the intelligentsia's romance with history and analyzing its effects, Haimson's own approach to history evidenced skepticism toward any deterministic schemes, emphasizing instead variable situations and contingent factors. Not only did he feel closer to the Petersburg school of Russian historiography, which valued empirical source criticism (*istochnikovedenie*), than to the Moscow school, with its more rigid conceptual thrust; he also preferred St. Petersburg and its critically minded historians over *stolichnaia* Moscow.

Haimson taught us to bring to light the cosmology of historical actors through sustained attention to historical documents and the language in which they spoke, to retrieve the subjective meaning that historical actors gave their experience in specific social and political contexts. Whenever he felt that we were rushing, generalizing about processes or events, he would bring us back to the memoir or historical analysis in question and ask us: What is the language they are using? By teaching us to understand language as historically situated and evolving, Haimson shaped both of us in important ways, notwithstanding some methodological differences. For instance, Haimson's principled distinction between subjective perceptions and objective reality allowed for a degree of instrumentality in historical actors' use of language that our own understanding of subjectivity, in which subjects are fully constituted by the language and practices surrounding them, does not foresee.

Haimson's sense of history informed his engagement with the present. He was an active participant in the 1968 events at Columbia University, and his students from that era remember his commitment to their cause and to that of university autonomy. Not only did he employ the past as a lens on the present, he also incorporated these experiences into his understanding of the past. In the 1980s, in seminar discussions covering the 1905 revolution, Leo would insist to his students that revolutionary moments exploded received expectations and radically extended the horizons of the possible. He would then become reflective: "you would not believe what administrators at Columbia began to think and do, in 1968—things they would never have done before." He was passionately committed to following the process of *perestroika*, seeing it as a revolutionary era in its own right and insisting that his students see this process unfolding right around them, as well as studying the past.

It is also quite true that there were noticeable blind spots in Haimson's conception of history, in terms of what he considered to be more or less relevant subjects of historical inquiry. He showed little interest in military or diplomatic facets of Russia's history. (Nevertheless, several students managed to persuade him of the merits of their particular topics in these spheres, such as David McDonald's work on foreign policy as an arena for united government.) He was not taken with approaches that emphasized gender. Leo also tended not to devote attention in seminars to question of religion, be it understood as religious structures or personal faith. His interest in Russian history was an interest in "European Russia" broadly conceived. His seminar did not feature modules devoted to questions of empire and imperial rule. Interestingly, some (although not all) of these blind spots were also blind spots of many members of the intelligentsia.

The times when room 1219 of the International Affairs Building was filled with graduate students in Russian history (along with wafts of cigarette smoke) are not likely to return. Likewise, the singular way in which Haimson taught the history of late imperial Russia has itself become a historical formation, receding back into time, with his syllabi becoming historical documents in their own right. Nowadays, job openings favor historians of the 20th and 21st centuries, rather than imperial Russia, and they cater to Europeanists or global historians, rather than to Russianists per se. As practicing historians of Russia, both of us have trouble fitting the Kakhanov Commission into surveys of Russian history that span entire centuries.

But much of what Leo has imparted to his students lives on and is likely to be passed on to their students in some fashion. He taught us to be attentive to the workings of *preemstvennost'*, the sense of continuity and connection, along with fissures and breaks, that informed the thinking as well as the political activities of different generations of the Russian intelligentsia over the past century and a half, imparting a distinct political and cultural tradition. This sense of history as a living and breathing tissue of meaning linking past, present, and future was arguably what underlay Haimson's own fascination with the intelligentsia. Mindful of the spirit of *preemstvennost'* and its enduring spell, we mourn the passing of Leopold Haimson—a commanding teacher and researcher, a complicated and sometimes difficult man, a generous and warm friend.

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