

others, Carmen Popescu and Juliana Maxim on Romania, Kimberly Zarecor on Czechoslovakia, Brigitte LeNormand and Vladimir Kulic on Yugoslavia) that the interwar architectural avant-garde was not simply an ideologically homogeneous pan-European phenomenon, but rather it emerged at the intersection of dreams for a radically inclusive democracy, particular national and regional agendas, and technical and financial limitations.



## Natalia SHLIKHTA

Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stuck on Communism: Memoir of a Russian Historian* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019). 202 pp., ill. Index. ISBN: 978-1-5017-4737-3.

In 1999 Jeremy D. Popkin published an article titled “Historians on the Autobiographical Frontier.” In the piece, which would later be developed into a comprehensive monograph,<sup>1</sup> he presented his observations regarding the (re)emergence of interest among professional historians in writing memoirs in the late 1980s. He concludes, “Historians’ autobiographies do remind us that history is written by human beings, all of whom have their own unique personal histories and their own individual reasons for finding meaning in the history they write.”<sup>2</sup> The memoir of the leading American Sovietologist Lewis H. Siegelbaum was published by Cornell University Press in 2019. It appeared in the Northern Illinois University series in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, edited by Christine D. Worobec. In the introduction, the author explains the provocative, catchy title and also raises the same question that Popkin did: on intersections between history writing and autobiographies and the

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin. *History, Historian, and Autobiography*. Chicago, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin. *Historians on the Autobiographical Frontier* // *The American Historical Review*. 1999. Vol. 104. No. 3. P. 747.

meaning that historians' memoirs could have for themselves as well as for their readers:

Writing the memoir thus proved a not entirely unfamiliar exercise. As with most historical writing, I found the material engaging in a dialectical dance with the themes/arguments, each determining and delimiting the appropriateness of the other. Issues of sequentiality, causality, and consequentiality – so central to the history enterprise – cropped up early in preparing the text. The notion that no matter what historians take as their subject they are always writing about themselves suddenly took on a retrospective validity I could not have imagined earlier. (Pp. 4–5)

Following familiar patterns, the memoir is organized chronologically into eight chapters with an introduction and an epilogue (“Unfinished Thoughts”); unlike the majority of (nonhistorians’) memoirs, it also includes extensive notes (Pp. 171–193). Popkin addressed historians’ uneasiness with the autobiographical genre: “This freedom to write in a non-academic style comes at the price of abandoning scholarly conventions about documentation, a departure that causes some authors

evident anxiety.”<sup>3</sup> Siegelbaum is one such author, so he documents his memoirs painstakingly and cites his own studies, his personal and working diaries, the lecture notes he took as a student, syllabi of courses he was enrolled in as well as those that he taught, his personal and professional correspondence, conference programs, conversations, other historians’ mentions of him, reviews of his studies, and so forth.

The memoir “provides an account of an academic self, shaped by family background, the political tenor of changing times, and multiple mentors” (P. 4) from his birth in the Bronx in 1949 through to retirement from his professor emeritus position at Michigan State University in 2018. This is a self-reflective story of professional becoming with all the necessary components thereof. We learn of the author’s student years and of his fateful decision to become a historian and to study imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Everyone and everything that has influenced and shaped his professional growth and choices is contained in these pages: ideological engagement (“love for communism”), university professors and their courses, books that he read, fellow historians and his discussions with them, collaborations, conference conversations, research trips, and, importantly,

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* P. 735.

libraries and archives. The author remembers his unrealized projects, explains his versatile interests in history, and depicts in detail how his major studies and projects came to life and were received by academia.

This professional autobiography is part of other stories and also fits into much broader contexts. The author's family is included in it – parents and grandparents, two wives, and sons – but they are given primary focus only insofar as they are important for the *historian's* story. Therefore, he allows more space for his Marxist father than for his loving mother; he speaks much more about his second wife, with whom he also shared a professional life, than about his first, who gave birth to his two sons. The author's personal story is part of the history of American society from the McCarthyism years up to the Trump presidency and of Soviet and post-Soviet society from the early 1970s (when he visited the USSR for the first time) through the troubled 1990s to today. This broader history is comprehended and rethought by a Marxist historian who remains true to his ideological convictions even in 2018. Quite understandably, this a story of revisionism in Sovietology told by its representative who considered himself to be “an outsider” at the very beginning and maintained a certain “ambivalence about the academic profession” throughout

his life. Nonetheless, he has become part of “the establishment” in the profession, “sitting on editorial and institutional boards, chairing prize committees, and giving keynote speeches at conferences” (P. 157). Perhaps surprisingly, this is not the story of a Jewish intellectual or of the American Jewish community or of historians of Jewish origin (even though their Jewishness is always mentioned). This is because of Siegelbaum's self-identification as a “non-Jewish Jew”: “Jews who transcended their own ethnic or religious particularities to contest all social injustice inspired me” (P. 33).

Before coming to an overview of the book's chapters, it is important to outline the narrative structure and character. As already mentioned above, Siegelbaum sees many parallels between the historian's profession and memoir writing. Therefore, he “reassembles [his own] life in prose” (P. 4) just as he would write a historical piece: drawing from sources and establishing causality. When building his own narrative, the author constantly raises questions: “I have read a sufficient number of memoirs to know that ones that work best are not merely reflective or, in current lingo, self-reflective, but reflective about their self-reflexivity. They ask themselves not only ‘why did I do or think this,’ but ‘how did my doing or thinking this affect me?’” (P. ix). The narrative thus

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has three major levels: the first is a personal story retrieved from a person's own memory and available sources; the second is written by a professional historian who is trained to reconstruct and analyze the past; and the third consists of insights by an intellectual who is rethinking himself as well as past events and phenomena from the present-day position. In addition, it is essential for the author to convey his dual identity to his readers, to the point that he structures his narrative accordingly: "My ambivalence about both communism and history – but really about my own identity – is represented in the dualities that announce and structure most of the chapters in this memoir" (P. 2). The title of Chapter 2, "Revolutionary or Scholar?" is particularly revealing in this regard.

From Chapter 1, "Tennis and Communism," we learn about the childhood and teenage years of Lewis Siegelbaum, about his family, as well as about his Jewish ancestors who immigrated to the United States from the Russian Empire. These were the formative years for a future Marxist historian, as he sees himself. Why love for communism? And whence his interest in Russia? These are the key questions he raises in this chapter. In his view, it stems from his father who joined the Communist Party in 1939; for decades he worked as a social studies teacher

in the New York City public school system but was purged during the McCarthy years. "Dad made me quite unlike them," he writes, alluding to his white middle-class school friends (P. 13). This chapter also contains the first mention of some of the key figures in his future profession: Ronald Grigor Suny and Moshe Lewin. Chapter 2 covers four student years – 1966–1970 – at Columbia University. The 1968 student protests, in which Siegelbaum actively participated, are predictably given primary attention and accompanied by reflections about the revolution, revolutionaries, and then Lewis's attempts to "resolve the revolutionary/scholar bifurcation." The Marxist approach to political science, in which he majored, seemed to provide a solution: "Maybe I could be both" (P. 33). The courses by Stephen E. Cohen, Joseph Rothschild, and Michel Oksenberg had a major impact upon the future scholar.

In Chapter 3, the author tells of how he wrote his PhD dissertation in "Oxford and Moscow." Siegelbaum made a conscious choice "to escape from political science and the United States" (P. 40) when he decided to pursue a PhD degree at Oxford University in 1970. This choice entailed engaging with academic life and "English upper-class culture," which was not easy for a self-proclaimed "outsider" with Marxist beliefs. It

was at Oxford that he fell in love with labor history and social history, which allowed him to study working people. During his research visit to the University of Helsinki's Slavonic Library in 1972, he met and fell in love with Leena Törmä, his first wife. In the same year, he visited Moscow as an American exchange student, where he came to know (and love?) Soviet youth, Soviet people, and Soviet archives. His experiences in Moscow, he stresses, were significantly different from those that Sheila Fitzpatrick describes in her memoir: "I never felt myself nor was suspected of being a 'spy in the archive' or anywhere else in the Soviet Union" (P. 51). The culmination came in May 1975, when Siegelbaum defended his dissertation, which he saw as a contribution to the study of the causes of the 1917 Revolution.

Chapters 4 and 5, "Melbourne and Labor History" and "Labor History and Social History via the Cultural Turn," describe his life as a university professor, first at La Trobe University in 1976–1983 (he stresses that it was impossible for a recent PhD holder to find a teaching position at a U.S. university) and later at Michigan State University. Chapter 5 ends in 2000, when Siegelbaum was appointed chair of the history department. We learn about his teaching and research, his students and colleagues, and

his many professional collaborations. Major attention is given to his key monographs: *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (1988) and *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918–1929* (1992), as well as to the volumes that he coedited: *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, Identity* (with Ronald Grigor Suny; 1994) and *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents* (with Andrei Sokolov; 2004). Siegelbaum provides his own perspective on the transformations of Sovietology through these decades and on the impact that the end of the Cold War and the opening of the former Soviet archives had on Soviet studies. He was part of these processes, which exerted a major influence upon his professional choices and trajectories. "The larger process that I have traced in this chapter [is] moving from labor history toward a broader social and cultural perspective" (P. 103). In passing, Siegelbaum also admits problems with his marriage that intensified due to his wife's inability to fully adjust to life in the United States and, mainly, because of his constant research trips.

Chapter 6, "Centers and Peripheries," covers the same chronological period as Chapter 5 but mainly focuses on his research trips to the Soviet Union and post-Soviet republics through the 1990s. The chapter

starts with his visit to Donetsk in 1989 within the Pittsburgh–Donetsk Oral History Video Project on coal miners’ dynasties, which coincided with miners’ strikes there. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to his reflections regarding the effect that the collapse of the USSR had on the post-Soviet space and also on Soviet studies in the West, particularly on leftist historians and himself. Siegelbaum’s almost anthropological attempt to comprehend the formerly (?) Soviet people of the 1990s is one of the most profound and nuanced that I have found in Western literature on the period.

Chapter 7, “Online and On the Road,” covers the first decade of the 2000s and continues the theme of travel literally, virtually, and metaphorically. For Siegelbaum, the beginning of the new millennium was marked by the breakup of his first marriage and his subsequent remarriage to a fellow historian, Leslie Page Moch, with whom he would be traveling and collaborating thereafter. The digital revolution saw Siegelbaum work with new media, such as with the major online project “Seventeen Moments in Soviet History” (<http://soviethistory.msu.edu/>). His central project of the decade was also linked to traveling: *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (2011) was a

“source of pleasure” for many years and also brought him professional awards. The brief final chapter, “Migration Church,” is devoted to his latest collaborative project with Leslie Page Moch on migrations through imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet time and space. And, yes, it is also about travel. “‘You are always traveling,’ my friend Carroll ... says” (P. 167).

When analyzing the memoirs of ex-communist French historians, Jeremy Popkin considers them to be cases of “the classic autobiographical theme of sin and redemption” and concludes: “By themselves exposing the intense link between their Communist experience and their subsequent investment in history, they invite the question of whether history, too, is an ideological system that attracts individuals with a strong need for a set of beliefs that makes sense of the world.”<sup>4</sup> At first glance, Lewis Siegelbaum’s story is not at all about sin and redemption. It is about self-justification, though. The author strives to find a place for his Marxism in the post-1989 world: “I still see it, much as Rosa Luxemburg did in 1915, as the only real alternative to the barbarism of capitalism” (P. 168), and he stresses his affection for working people who attempted to realize a beautiful communist promise. That

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P. 745.

being said, Siegelbaum is far from idealizing the Soviet communist experiment: he defines it as “an impoverished version” and concludes that “Russia was a terrible place for building communism.” He admits: “It has taken me nearly a lifetime’s work as a historian to fully appreciate [this]” (Pp. 168–169). Does this mean that Lewis H. Siegelbaum has finally managed to resolve – thanks to the historical profession – his “revolutionary vs. scholar” conflict and find his own (not necessarily political) voice in history? I feel that the answer is “yes.” This memoir can be read as a true confession of love ... for history and historical craft.

