

# THE TOTALITARIAN MODEL AND ME

## Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier

The 1960s and '70s were not a very propitious time to undertake independent research on the USSR. Despite the excellent training we had received at various Russian institutes set up after World War II, the Cold War atmosphere draped its pall over Soviet studies. Restricted access to the Soviet Union itself, its archives and other resources raised further practical and psychological barriers. All this combined to create the image of a closed, monolithic, totalitarian society.

Nevertheless, once in the USSR, one could discover chinks and patches of transparency in that forbidding façade—provided one had the luck to meet and interact with Soviet citizens and was sufficiently open-minded not to suspect a KGB agent behind every friendly face. In my case the opportunities to find an “unbuttoned” Russia came before I started my academic research: first during a tourist trip in 1958; then working as a guide for the first American Exhibit in Moscow in 1959. Brief tour and longer stay both disclosed unexpected facets of Soviet society: the existence, not of widespread dissent, but of individual opinion and independent thinking that patently did not echo the tone of the Soviet press and publications. This discovery, in turn, shaped my procedure during various later academic research trips. I would call it an “asystemic” approach, one that treated each Soviet specialist as a scholar defined by his/her own work and not by the system. Furthermore, this view facilitated access and communication, gained the confidence of Soviet interlocutors, and much generous help as well.

### Initial Contacts and Experiences

In 1958 I took a ten-day Intourist trip to Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. On the very first day, while our group was waiting to see Lenin and Stalin (then still together) in the mausoleum, a tall man from the Caucasus (to judge by his Astrakhan hat) approached

us and said jeeringly: “Imagine waiting in line just to see two devils in a box!” He expressed his sentiments in Russian and loud enough for all to hear. Then he simply walked off. He neither tried to nor could merge into the crowd: he was much too tall and there were not many people on Red Square. The fact that no one arrested him on the spot went counter to all the graduate-school lectures on the controls and terror that had reduced the population to abject silence and conformity.

The following days of the excursion reinforced the impression that Soviet citizens were not conforming to the totalitarian model. There were no more defiant pronouncements in public, yet in a subdued manner it became clear that there were areas of personal liberty or discretion that individuals exercised in ways that did not fit my bookish “expertise.” Take the way our Intourist guide treated me. Since the group was composed of elderly teachers from England who knew neither Russian nor much about the country, the guide suggested that I visit various sites of interest on my own. I already spoke Russian easily, was familiar with the history and culture, and carried a heavily annotated Baedeker. Neither I nor the guide, with whom I kept up for a while afterwards, got into any trouble for these independent side trips.

In Kiev she suggested that I attend an evening concert for young people. Although I can't recall the program in detail, one thing is certain: it was not the customary mix of folk and patriotic repertoire but a selection of contemporary Russian and French songs, more romantic than political. Soon after the concert started, an older man from the city Party organization got up, indignantly denouncing the program, and threateningly asked who had authorized the organizers to mount such a spectacle. The quick and unambiguous answer was: article such and such of the 1936 constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech.

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My next trip to Russia was in 1959, as a guide in the book section of the first American Exhibit. During those six weeks I had a sharper exposure both to Party controls and to the decency and personal courage of ordinary citizens. Before the Exhibit opened in the Sokolniki park, our shelves underwent official Soviet inspection. All books deemed offensive, subversive or suspect were removed, including a volume by John Kautsky on the Indian Communist Party (despite my pleas that the author was not the same Kautsky with whom Lenin had had his disagreements). Freud somehow escaped the censorship and visitors eagerly leafed through this taboo author and asked questions. When too large an inquisitive crowd gathered around a guide, some Party activist would invariably appear and interrupt with, "What about the oppression of Negroes in America?" or some similar hostile query. And just as invariably someone in the crowd would tell the activist not to bother the young guide and let people go on with their questioning.

We were also assisted by Soviet visitors when we were overwhelmed with questions about the unfamiliar forms that were displayed next door at the art exhibit. (That show was pretty tame in not straying too far from realism, but it did have one Jackson Pollock and an abstract sculpture by Rivera.) Frankly, we book guides could not always give answers that went beyond "You are free to like or dislike non-realist art." But again, invariably someone in the crowd would come up with lengthy, patient explanations that showed familiarity with modern art and its forms. They talked in terms of space, color, line—concepts that were not much used in Soviet publications. The repeated demonstration that the art appreciation of Soviet citizens was not limited to socialist realism, that some were familiar with the aesthetic vocabulary current in the West, gave me a sense of comfort—the idea of a common language existing between us.

### **Academic Research: Soviet-Third World Relations**

From 1967 on, after an eight-year interval, I started going regularly to the USSR to do scholarly research. I was extremely fortunate to have Philip E. Mosely as my mentor and sponsor. Without his example and support, all the personal experiences and insight acquired during the previous two visits would not by themselves have enriched my academic work. Although Phil's field was foreign policy, he

was among those pre-World War II specialists whose knowledge of Russia extended far beyond diplomacy. He had lived and worked in the USSR in the early 1930s, spoke fluent Russian, and had a profound, sympathetic understanding of Russian culture. A major figure in organizing postwar Russian area studies, he was one of the early directors of the Russian Institute at Columbia. The program the Institute offered reflected the broad experience and familiarity of the older generation of American Sovietologists. All students, regardless of their chosen specialization, were required to take courses in literature, history, economics, in foreign and domestic policies, as well as to acquire a competence in the language to qualify for the certificate. That comprehensive two-year program gave me the background which made travel and work in Soviet Russia so meaningful and rewarding.

Mosely was also active in promoting various official and unofficial American-Soviet cultural exchanges ranging from the Quakers to IREX. At the same time he kept up cordial personal ties with Russian émigrés as well as with Soviet scholars. He was greatly esteemed by both communities. The fact that he was a hard-liner in foreign policy matters in no way diminished the respect he enjoyed among the Soviets who worked for the UN or passed through New York on official business. Quite the contrary, I'd say: his straightforward integrity raised their respect all the more.

In the early 1960s I started working for Phil Mosely, who planned at the time to write a book on Soviet policies in the Third World. After several years of analyzing official statements and other relevant materials, I became restless with the lack of hard information that would indicate the priorities, institutional interests, or range of options—information that would introduce a modicum of reality into the ritualized Soviet formulas and our Western abstract analysis. Careful reading in Soviet academic journals had given me a sense that one could get behind the official façades. From about 1963/64 on, publications like *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, *Aziya i Afrika segodnia*, *Narody Azii i Afriki* began to print articles that hinted at disagreements over old orthodoxies and suggested new interpretations.

So I asked Phil to arrange a grant from Columbia University to spend a month in Moscow interviewing those Soviet specialists whose arguments represented the "new thinking" of those days. He readily backed my project, arranged for the necessary funds, and

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provided me with valuable introductions to various highly placed Soviet experts. Among the persons Mosely knew was V. Solodovnikov, director of the African Institute, and an assistant to A. Rumiantsev, head of the social sciences division of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. With their generous help in turn, I was able to meet people like Viktor Sheinis, Nikolai Shmelev, Georgi Mirsky, Leon Zevin, Nodari Simonia, Sergo Mikoyan, Aleksei Kiva—to name just a few—a veritable pleiad who initiated the unorthodox thinking of the 1960s and '70s. Here lay the roots for later reforms in foreign policy formulations and actions.

The initial contacts were most gratifying and I would consult with them again and again over the course of the next 30 years, always assured of a ready reception and an interesting talk. Even when I came to Moscow to work on Russian art, I felt free to drop in on them for a chat and to keep up the cordial ties.

The 1967 interviews revealed a surprising range of non-conformist views, which certainly did not echo the prevailing official line. Many of the interviewees spoke not only of their own research interests but would also expound on Soviet-Third World relations and developments in the Third World itself. Many questioned the simplistic and confident clichés about the “inevitable” drift of the developing countries toward socialism, an assumption that justified Krushchev's drive into the post-colonial areas. Simonia, for example, was derisively skeptical that the Third World would choose a “non-capitalist path” of development, when the facts showed that only a very small fraction of the newly independent states chose to implement those proto-socialist policies.

My first articles were limited to describing the disagreements among Soviet academics about the course of events in the developing countries. In other words, what was the mindset among experts, many of whom advised the Central Committee's International Department or the Foreign Ministry. These articles covered the debates about the feasibility of industrialization and collectivized agriculture; about planning and a mixed economy; about trade and aid with East and West; demographic problems, class structure, and the role of acculturation in economic development.

In subsequent publications I began to comment on the actual Soviet policies. Having managed to penetrate below the official surface, I was able to describe with some assurance (as against speculative

reading between the lines) Soviet-Third World relations as ridden with problems, uncertainties, and a rising sense that these policies were an expensive failure from which the USSR should somehow extricate itself. My arguments did not conform to what was the prevalent line in our country—not only in Washington but also in academe.

It amuses me to think now that while I had the respect of Soviet scholars, the same could not always be said of my American colleagues. Take as an example the reception accorded my piece on “The USSR, the Third World and the Global Economy.” It was written for a Council on Foreign Relations study group on Soviet foreign economic policies (for which one other author also outlined the diminution in Soviet intransigence and the evident wish to emerge from economic isolation). But such arguments ran counter to the then accepted wisdom, and the Council did not turn the group's papers into a book, as planned. When my piece did appear in print (*Problems of Communism*, July-August 1979), one male Sovietologist advised me, “Elizabeth, you had better stick to writing about Russian art and not about Soviet policies.”

### **Academic Research: Russian Realist Art**

In the mid-1970s, my interests branched out into art history. The reason for this was my earlier decision to write a doctoral dissertation on the nineteenth-century group of Russian realist painters, the *Peredvizhniki* (or the Wanderers), rather than on, say, “Lenin and the East” or some such “fascinating” topic connected with my work on the post-colonial world. Once the dissertation was finished, I was urged to expand it into a book, to go beyond the group's formative period and peak years of influence (1860s-1880s) into the further story of their decline, their scant reputation after the October Revolution, and then in the 1930s their becoming the exemplar for Socialist Realism. So with the help of IREX grants I made several trips to Moscow and Leningrad in search of information and of supplementary material.

Of course, IREX was invaluable in arranging travel, accommodations, and archival access. Again, I had excellent introductions, this time from John Bowlt, a personal friend with vast knowledge of the Russian art scene, past and present. Art specialists, I quickly learned, were divided into two camps, roughly speaking—the liberals and the

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conservatives—each with a different evaluation of the *Peredvizhniki*. Having the benefit of the two opposing viewpoints opened my eyes not just to various disputed issues but also to the extent of politicization and outright falsification that characterized Soviet art history after 1934.

The conservatives (basically Stalinists) were connected mainly with the Soviet Academy of Arts, held high positions in the administration of the arts, and were busy producing thick, factual biographies of realist painters or editions of their correspondence with very full annotations (factually correct, but very slanted ideologically). The independent-minded liberals, also in government employ, tended to hold teaching posts in universities or to work in art research institutions associated with the Ministry of Culture, not the Academy. Their publications did not challenge the official schemas directly but certainly presented a less slanted image of Russian nineteenth-century culture (i.e., Chernyshevsky and Co. were not necessarily gospel) and tried to provide broader, fresher interpretations. Museum staffs tended to lean toward the liberal side, in part because many curators were scions of the old intelligentsia rather than products of the social upheavals of the 1930s.

I had good rapport with both groups; both tried, each in its own way, to facilitate my work. And I am indebted to them alike. The conservatives presented me with copies of their volumes. These were very useful once one got past the tendentious introductions and interpretations; the facts and references were there, so were the texts of correspondence or memoirs. (Due to this generosity I acquired a fine collection of basic books in the field at no cost other than the books on American art I would mail them in return.) Scholars of liberal persuasion did not have as many publications to offer. But their questions and suggestions prodded my mind out of its initially narrow framework, formed back home from reading the official historiography. Their comments made it plain, for example, that the *Peredvizhniks'* traveling exhibits from 1871 on were motivated as much by a shrewd gamble to tap the market among the new middle class as by the proclaimed desire of the intelligentsia to "serve the people."

I profited not only from the generosity and attention of both groups but also from their competition. Each, to one degree or another, was eager to influence how I would tell the story. Among the conservatives two scholars were most helpful: the late A.A. Lebedev, editor of Ilya Repin's extensive

correspondence, and the late Iosif Brodsky, professor at the Repin Institute at the Academy of Arts in Leningrad.

Among the independent-minded scholars I must mention Dmitri Sarabianov, professor of art history at Moscow University, and the late A. Savinov, who taught art history both in Moscow and Leningrad. I should also single out Grigory Sternin, at the Institute of the History and Theory of Art, author of several unconventional histories of Russian art at the turn of the century; and Ilia Zilbershtein, the tireless editor of *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* and of documentary volumes on art. They all upheld the tradition of academic excellence and tried to broaden the area of the permissible. Zilbershtein, for example, was responsible in the 1960s for eliminating several "blank spots" in Stalinist historiography. He rehabilitated, first, Valentin Serov and then Sergei Diaghilev and other *Mir iskusstva* figures, who had been derogated by the conservatives as decadent and harmful to Russian culture.

Undoubtedly the greatest stroke of good luck I had was to gain access to the papers of the State Committee on Art, set up in 1936 as a political watchdog and command center for the Stalinization of the field. Under its strong-arm guidance the *Peredvizhniki*, as I found out, were transformed into painters of world stature (Repin became the equal of Raphael and Rembrandt not just through alliteration), into painters selflessly dedicated to serving society; and into cultural chauvinists disdainful of Impressionism and any other style that elevated form over content.

Reading the minutes of the Committee's meetings with various academic institutions and scholars, its plans for publication and for exhibits, exposed the mechanics of Stalinization that took place in the 1930s—how orders were decreed from above, how specialists were told to rewrite their works, how opportunists rose to positions of authority by toeing the Party line, how museums were commanded to cleanse their walls of decadent—i.e., of non-realist art—and to mount ideologically proper exhibits.

How did I gain access to this material in the Tretyakov Gallery archive? It was Zilbershtein who suggested I look at these documents; and the archivist at the time, Sofia Goldshtein, a fine scholar in her own right, readily granted the permission. Both have since died and I cannot now ascertain the reason for their permissive lapse, but I am inclined to attribute it to the fact that they were members of the old intelligentsia or old Bolsheviks, and that their

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own work was not marked by the pliant opportunism of those who followed the official line.

There is an interesting postscript to my initial success in gaining access to the State Committee's materials. A decade later, when working on Repin's biography, I requested the same papers in order to amplify a chapter on how Repin had been recast in the 1930s into the godfather of Socialist Realism. Permission was denied. By then there was a new, younger archivist (and head of the Tretiakov Gallery's Party cell to boot), who flatly said no. At the same time, I found out that *Russian Realist Art, The State and Society*, copies of which I had sent to all the libraries where I had worked, was not listed in their catalogues. The "subversive" information about the political pressures and shenanigans of the 1930s kept the book out of public circulation until the 1990s.

### Surveillance

What about surveillance and other political provocations? Nothing happened during my first two visits, although there were enough dubious Soviet characters working around the *vystavka* quite eager to befriend the guides. (The Exhibit managers warned us to stay clear of them and never to go out alone with a Soviet—an injunction I took with a grain of salt.) One friend—a musician—I acquired in 1959 (and we still keep in touch) took me to visit little-known historical places in and around Moscow. A decade later, he would take me beyond the legal 20-kilometer limit to smaller towns like Riazan. We would simply board the train and he did not even caution me to keep quiet. So we talked to other passengers and on one occasion sat with a group of students who recited Mandelstam's poetry.

Another acquaintance I made at the Exhibit—a journalist—did not prove to be such a reliable friend. In 1959 he took me to various historical spots beyond the 20-kilometer limit—to New Jerusalem monastery or the old town of Iur'ev Pol'sky. I do not remember any political conversations at that time. But when we met again in 1967, my "friend" took considerable interest in the work I was doing for Philip Mosely and at one point, on behalf of his journal (*Za rubezhom*, which covered the foreign press) asked me to write up something about my research interests. I was naive enough to oblige. His next step was to suggest that I write a piece on U.S. policies in the Third World—but this time for the Soviet intelligence. This request was conjoined with a bundle of crisp ruble notes and the offer of more

money upon my return to the States, with regular visits from someone in New York to pick up information on U.S. policies. Outraged, I showed the "journalist" the door and with a grand gesture of indignation threw the rubles after him into the corridor.

The incident did not frighten me. I didn't panic and run to the American Embassy for advice and protection. I suppose I was too ashamed of my own stupidity. So I continued doing research for Mosely, and there were no other attempts from the Soviet side to recruit my services. Here, it should be mentioned that American intelligence left me alone. The only incident concerned my taking A. Rumiantsev to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, sometime in the late 1960s. The next day the CIA called me up to find out whether there was any interesting information to share. Actually there were no tidbits to pass on, for example, about his editorship of *Pravda*. We had had a sociable visit talking about literature and art—from Paustovsky to Picasso. Again, as in the Soviet case, I was indignant and hung up on the caller from Washington. (I told Mosely of the call and he agreed with my response.)

There can be no doubt that I was watched and followed on each of my trips to the USSR. But I did not feel much constrained since I never knew or met any open dissidents. Accordingly, I always saw people I wanted to see or consult without taking too many precautions. And so far as I know, none of them suffered any consequences for having talked with me or inviting me to their home. However, I was very careful not to leave my address book in the hotel room. So much so that once I interrupted an important interview to dash back to the hotel when I realized that I had left it behind. Amusingly, the director of the institute I was talking with understood my concern and even offered me his chauffeured car to get downtown quickly while he obligingly waited for my return to resume the interview.

I would leave my research (but not interview) notes in the hotel, in part to demonstrate that I was doing bona-fide academic work. But obviously such "candor" was not enough. Once in the mid-1980s, my bag with research notes on Repin disappeared mysteriously from my side at the Sheremetevo airport only to reappear equally mysteriously some eight hours later, long after the missed flight. The reason for this particular search became obvious only during Gorbachev's glasnost days. As it happened, two days before departure I had visited a woman historian whose efforts to discuss "blank spots" on

the pages of *Voprosy istorii* were of interest to me. Unbeknown to me at the time, she was also a close friend of Andrei Sakharov and served as his liaison while he was exiled in Gorky. Clearly, I had been suspected of smuggling some manuscript.

### Interviewing Techniques

The inferences I drew from personal encounters on the 1958 and '59 visits set the course for the way I later conducted interviews and sought access to research materials. Instead of being mesmerized by the Cold War image of the "other," I tried to act as I would in any Western country. Because American colleagues marveled at my success in breaking barriers to get access to Soviet specialists and sources, let me set down a few points.

First of all, prior to going over I became as well acquainted as possible with the publications of various specialists to get a real sense of the quality of their work. It was not difficult to distinguish between genuine scholars and those I would call "political featherweights," people whose analysis reflected more the political slogans of the day than solid research or original insights. Needless to say, I either tried to avoid the latter or talked to them mainly to gain a better understanding of the orthodox line; comparison would bring into sharper relief the novel and less conventional thinking of the honest scholars.

Thus prepared, I could express my interest in the work of interviewees as academic specialists. I would never start out with questions on some sensitive aspect of Soviet policy. It was easy enough to draw inferences about the conceptual framework in which official policy was carried out from their responses about their research—say, the composition and vanguard role of the working class in Africa.

My manner during interviews was relaxed, neither tense nor confrontational. Often a rewarding interview would start with mere chitchat on some totally unrelated matter. For example, my first meeting with V. Solodovnikov, director of the African Institute, began with his long description of his difficulties in getting proper tutors to coach his daughter for the entrance exam to Moscow University. Not exactly an insight into Soviet policies in South Africa but rather a peek into the lives of the Soviet elite, a tidbit that was equally fascinating to me as an outsider. In looking back on that conversation, my sympathetic listening no doubt put us both at ease.

I always reciprocated the Soviet specialists' generosity with their time and advice by writing

thank-you letters, by sending them the books in which they had expressed interest, and, once it became possible for them to travel West, by entertaining them in our home in New York and showing them the city's attractions.

I also gained the confidence and respect of Soviet specialists by producing what they regarded as solid publications. I was careful to avoid including information that might have been embarrassing to my hosts. For example, IMEMO (Institute of World Economy and International Relations) had two sections for the study of the working class abroad: one section continued in the orthodox groove, researching to prove its absolute impoverishment; the other initiated novel work on its differentiation. Much the same information could be conveyed by citing articles that disagreed about the strength and role of the working class in developing countries. My very first article, resulting from the trip in 1967 (which appeared in *World Politics* in July 1968), was immediately translated into Russian. Friends at IMEMO later told me that it was distributed to young staff members as an example of careful research and objective writing that should be emulated.

Being a woman also worked to my advantage. The specialists I interviewed were predominantly men. They all treated me with deference and courtesy, even with a hint of male condescension. But I did not mind so long as they talked candidly and informatively; I never considered it demeaning or offensive. When one American colleague asked me outright what was the secret of my success in getting so much information from Soviet specialists, my answer—partly in jest—was "I flirt."

Furthermore, the fact that I was born in Poland was probably an asset as well, although I have no particular feelings of Slavic solidarity. More important, I did not fit the typical Cold-War image that Russians had of Americans. As an example, on an early visit to IMEMO in the late 1960s I waited a long time in the reception room for someone to escort me upstairs. Finally, I asked a young man who was also sitting there whether Dr. So-and-so was in his office. It turned out that the young man had been waiting for me. But he was expecting a nattily dressed, heavily made-up, self-assured American who would be impatiently pacing up and down. As I was not acting like the "ugly American," he had simply assumed I was another Soviet citizen.

The final advantage and facilitator in gaining the confidence and opening up my interlocutors was a genuine interest and knowledge of Russian history

and culture. Time and again I noticed how a conversation—especially with political scientists—became a mutually satisfying exchange when I mentioned, say that Gogol was among my favorite writers or that I was also writing on Russian art. An appreciation for Russian culture easily broke the ice. For example, when Egor Ligachev came to lunch at the Kennan Institute in 1991, the frigid unease with which the affair started disappeared when he heard that I had just published a biography of Ilya Repin. That was familiar territory, a topic that made him relax. He told us with delight that Repin was his favorite painter and from then on the luncheon took on an entirely different tone. (Parenthetically, information about a Soviet scholar's or politician's cultural tastes was a good indicator of his political outlook—whether he/she upheld the old orthodoxies or whether they appreciated trends not stamped with the official imprimatur.)

### In Conclusion

Thinking back on my experiences in the USSR in the late 1950s and on doing research there during the following decades, I must confess to a tinge of nostalgia for those “old” not-altogether-bad days. There is no denying the various hardships and scares generated by the system and by the Cold War—something probably hard to image for people doing academic work decades later under entirely different circumstances.

Naturally one was well aware in those days of working and living in a system that was unfree, unjust, and arbitrary. Yet, there were challenges and rewards in going behind and beyond the system's façade. It was truly inspiring to find out how many an individual managed to maintain personal integrity, to avoid performing unsavory political roles, to act like a free agent—for example, to invite foreigners home, which was my good fortune from 1968 on—or to open up a politically sensitive archive.

That experience and its rewards, I would imagine, were similar to those of an explorer or cartographer who comes upon some unknown river, area, or mountain. They have the thrill of penetrating a mysterious territory and the satisfaction of producing a better, more accurate map.

As I look back, it was really an extraordinary experience and privilege to have become acquainted with people who, back then in the 1960s, were unafraid to raise questions that did not comport with the accepted Marxist-Leninist categories. Getting to know the mind-set of “people of the sixties”

(*shestidesiatniki* in Russian) led me to take Gorbachev's “new thinking” seriously. It had begun to sprout some 20 years earlier. Hence I could not dismiss Gorbachev's reforms as mere political posturing to befuddle the West. To me they were signs of deeper processes maturing in Soviet society.

Perestroika was a sequential development from vigorous roots; it represented much more than the geopolitical dictates and economic needs of the moment. There was far more to Gorbachev's changed course than the advice of Yakovlev (who was reputed to have “seen the light” during his Canadian exile). Gorbachev's pool of informants and advisers, his support group, was much larger. It also comprised many *shestidesiatniki* in my own field. Because of familiarity with their increasingly explicit arguments about the poor prospects for revolutionary change and Soviet success in the post-colonial states, it came as no surprise to me that Gorbachev drastically reduced Soviet commitments in the Third World, pulling out of Afghanistan, Angola and Cuba.

These and other momentous changes of the late 1980s had their origins in the first wave of new thinking in the 1960s—a development that the totalitarian model, with its own rigidities, did not accommodate.

*Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier Resident Scholar at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, is the author of “Valentin Serov: Portraits of Russia's Silver Age” (Northwestern University Press, 2002). Her other books include “Russian Realist Art: The State and Society” (1977), “Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art” (1990) and “The Soviet Union and the Third World: An Economic Bind” (1983), all published in Studies of the Harriman Institute. She earned her Ph.D. in the History Department, Columbia University (1973), and holds a Certificate of the Russian Institute. She teaches courses in political science and art and society at Columbia.*