

May 2017 be less wild than 1917.
Interview with professor Norman M. Naimark,
Stanford University



Norman M. NAIMARK is the Robert and Florence McDonnell Professor of East European Studies, a Professor of History and (by courtesy) of German Studies, and Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution and (by courtesy) of the Freeman-Spogli Institute for International Studies. Norman formerly served as the Sakurako and William Fisher Family Director of the Stanford Global Studies Division, the Burke Family Director of the Bing Overseas Studies Program, the Convener of the European Forum (predecessor to The Europe Center), Chair of the History Department, and Director of Stanford's Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

Professor Naimark, you were one of the first American historians to research and publish about the roots of Russian revolutionary movement and the emergence of Marxism in the Russian Empire.¹ There were waves in history writing about 1917, from the traditional view that stressed out the inevitable course of Revolution and the crucial role of party elite to the first critical reactions of Russian émigrés. After the Cold War era, we witnessed a revision of approaches that allowed completing the 1917 puzzle with new pieces. Is there more room for research left? Is there still a necessity to write, or re-write, about the Revolutionaries, and the 1917 crucial events?!

There is always room for more research. This is not only due to the fact that every generation writes and rewrites history in its own way, asking questions that are relevant to the interests of new generations. Now there tends to be an emphasis on not looking at the 1917 revolution as a hiatus in Russian history, but rather looking at the period from the turn of the 20th Century to the mid-1920s, from Stolypin to Bukharin, if you will, as one of continuity, of the state trying to solve the problems of Russian backwardness through economic and political reform. There is also the general tendency to be more sympathetic

¹ Norman M. Naimark, *Terrorists and Social Democrats. The Russian Revolutionary Movement under Alexander III*, Harvard University Press, 1983.

to the tsarist regime, given the failure of the Soviet. So there is more work on the political, social, and cultural life of late imperial Russia. As for the Russian revolutionaries of the 19th Century, they are back in “vogue,” as they were in the 1960s and 1970s, when scholars were interested in radical movements in Europe and the U.S. With our own fascination with Islamicist terrorism, scholars are looking at the Russian terrorists for clues to how one can understand bomb-throwing as a political act. There were even Russian “suicide-bombers” at the turn of the century. The other important aspect of this question that I wrote about in an article on “Terrorism and the Fall of Imperial Russia,” is how a state reacts to terrorism. I argued – and still believe – that the Russian autocracy overreacted to the terrorist threat and therewith undermined its own legitimacy, helping in that way to bring down the government. The U.S. and European governments have to be very careful not to overact to terrorism; they should not break their own laws nor engage in illegal activities that would call their democracies into question.

The 1917 revolution is considered one of the main turning points of the 20th century. We, the historians, know that each event is unique, due to the circumstances that led to its evolvment, the actors, each playing its role, and immediate and long-lasting outcomes. Nevertheless, are the 1917 events comparable with other historical periods, and if so, to which extent? Is here a comparative historical exercise useful?

Comparative history is always useful for gaining insights about what is the same about certain events and what is different. From the days of Crane Brinton’s *Anatomy of a Revolution*, the exercise of trying to understand revolution in its comparative perspective (think also about Barrington Moore Jr. or Theda Skoczpól) can be very productive. The French Revolution is obviously “the granddaddy” of all revolutions, and the patterns established in that revolution repeat themselves, as Trotsky and others have pointed out. The Chinese and Cuban revolutions also go through similar phases. One learns a lot about revolution by counter-posing how they happen, how events accelerate to a crescendo, and how the revolution is “betrayed” in various ways.

The 1917 Revolution was considered as a seminal event in the history of the Soviet Union. Today it is no more a myth of a lone genius Lenin. It also lost the status of the cornerstone event that legitimized the Soviet regime. If not a myth, what is Revolution today, after 100 years? A spooky shadow that follows the Russians, and not only? A burden, that one wants to get rid of, but cannot?



I think of the 1917 revolution, more than anything, as a great watershed in the history of Russia. There are other ways to think about it (as we discussed in the answer to the previous question.) Above all, it belongs to Russia and ends a long period of autocratic rule, one could argue since the Ivan of Muscovy, but at least since Peter the Great in the beginning of the 18th Century. The Russian autocracy was a powerful combination of political, religious, national, and bureaucratic institutions that intersected at the pinnacle with the Russian tsar. That in 1917 the Russian tsar was overthrown, liberal attempts to reconstruct power in the Provisional Government failed, and the Bolsheviks took over, were events of world-wide importance. The Cold War, usually dated from the 1945-1947 period, could also be seen as beginning in 1917. The prominent role of communism in the 20th Century is really about the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution. Without Moscow's influence on the world after 1917, the shape of international politics – not to mention Russian politics – would have been much, much different. It is a huge event in shaping even our contemporary world. After all, the phenomenon of Vladimir Putin can be interpreted as an unusual mix of Russian autocratic traditions and the Bolshevik Chekist culture. Putin = Nicholas I + Dzerzhinsky. Even U.S. policy today is shaped by 1917; we still experience Russia through the lenses of the Cold War and cannot separate the Moscow of then with the new Moscow.

The 20th century was the time when millions of people lived with the belief that revolution is a simple and effective tool to change the political order, and that Revolution belonged to everyone. This is mainly due to the successful Soviet propaganda that lasted for many decades. Was this, all in all, a negative belief, or something positive also came out of it?

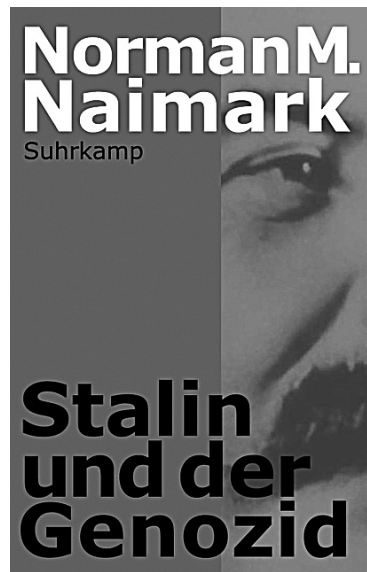
Negative and positive are evaluations that historians try to avoid. Our job is to understand what happened and why, describe those events clearly and accurately, without “judging.” With that said, my own view is that the Russian Revolution and the Soviet “experiment” – and the Chinese, Cuban, Southeast Asian, and East European variants that derived from it – created enormous harm, without the commensurate “good” that would have perhaps justified it. Revolutionary experiments usually entail Utopian visions, which, when faced with the harsh realities of human behaviour and societal vicissitudes, cannot be fulfilled. The frustration of revolutionaries in this context frequently leads to attempts to violently implement their policies, causing immense social and individual harm. Think about the Great Leap Forward (1958-59), which cost anywhere from 30 million to 45 million Chinese lives, all to fulfil Mao's Utopian ideas about the transformation of the countryside. The costs

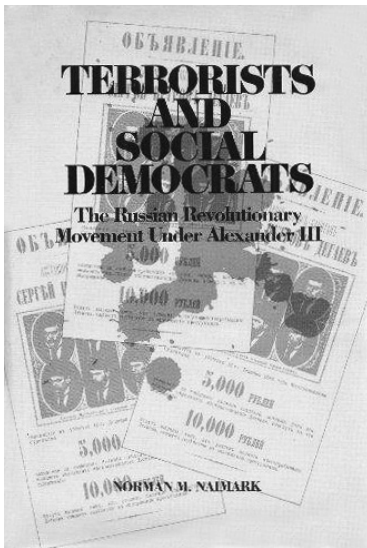
of Soviet “modernization” were similarly extremely high, taking tens of millions of lives in the end and creating by force an economic structure that hurt more than it aided the welfare of its citizens. The horrors of the rule of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia derives from similar “forced Utopias” that, in the end, rather brought hell to earth, versus heaven. My view is also that these revolutionary acts of transformation landed Russia and Russians in an economic dead-end, and they are still trying to find their way out.

The bureaucratic and authoritarian nature of the Soviet regime is considered one of the main causes of the collapse of Soviet colossus in 1991. Was this an outlived Bolshevik legacy? Should one interpret the collapse of the Soviet empire as the end of the Bolshevik era?

Certainly, one should think of the Soviet period as lasting from 1917 to 1991. Some would suggest Bolshevism was over with Gorbachev and perestroika. I don't think so. Mikhail Sergeevich tried to revive, as we know, the original spirit of Bolshevism through his reforms, but this just did not work. My view is that one of the major problems for the Soviet Union was economic. This supposed great power simply could not perform well enough to keep up with the pretensions of empire and the needs of the Russian people and others in the Soviet Union. Another problem was that the ideology no longer motivated anyone, either in government (where this created enormous corruption) or in society, where cynicism and duplicity prevailed. The experiment failed and came to an end, almost miraculously to an almost completely peaceful end, especially when thinks of all the blood that was shed to keep it going.

Today nostalgia for Soviet times is not an uncommon thing for older generation. One of the arguments one can hear in interviews is the experience of “equality”, lack of the drive for wealth, which gave people the feeling that all have the same chance for success and a bright future. Nevertheless, one would notice that gaining the elitist social status required persuading in education, but most important, years of dedication to the Communist party. This led to bureaucracy expansion and corruption that outlasted the





system itself. It was the “elite world”, on the one side, and the world of the others, the simple citizens, on the other side. The latter must have sensed it, nevertheless, many of them express nostalgia for these times. How can one explain this nostalgia to the younger generation?

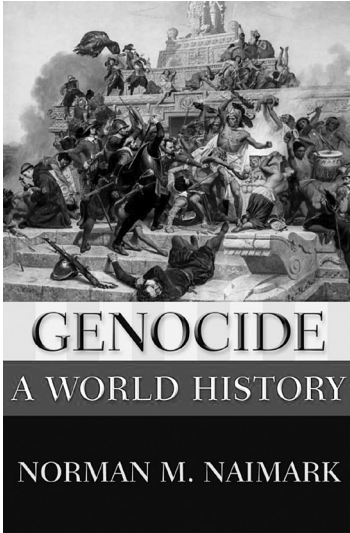
There is almost always nostalgia for earlier and simpler times. Change is hard on everyone, whether established and well off or not doing as well as one would wish. I'm nostalgic for the old Stanford and the old Bay Area, when things were inexpensive, there was no traffic, and one didn't have to bother with constantly mastering new technologies. I dislike the world of I-phones and Twitter. And my 96 year-old mother doesn't like computers at all. My students would think this was all silly. I can understand the nostalgia of those older folks in your region who lived under communism and remember the social benefits, the lack of worry about pensions, and the good times they had even when there were shortages and nothing in the stores to buy. There was a kind of security and comfort in not having any power at all, not having any serious consumer choices, not knowing very much about the outside world, and simply living day to day, doing one's job – whether it was a real one or not – and enjoying family and friends. It is hard to be shoved into a new hurly-burly world of competition and inequality, though, as you noted, of course there was inequality in the communist system, as well, in some ways even worse. But it wasn't so noticeable. It's important to point out that nostalgia, like most forms of memory, is also frequently subject to distortion. People tend to forget the bad parts of the communist past and remember the good ones, and even misrepresent to themselves the relationship between the two. Nostalgia produces an unreal sense of the past. But some people need that as a way to face the uncertain present and future. The problem is, of course, that this produces some nasty political results, and not just in your part of the world: in the United States as well, where Mr. Trump appeals to an idea of America that first of all never really existed, and secondly, is unattainable in a rapidly changing global environment. There is no going back – but, again, the “back” that he and others imagine, was not really what they think was there. I think the same for the most part of those who are nostalgic for communism.

On January 21, April 22 and November 7, the former communists and their sympathizers bring flowers to Lenin's monument in Chişinău. Some argue that tearing down the monument will break down the memory of a "glorious Revolution". What would be left? Here comes the "Great Patriotic War" as a replacement for a "glory", we suppose.

I think it is a good thing to have a monument of Lenin around, as a way to remember a part of your history that should not be forgotten and needs to be integrated in a longer view of the Moldovan past and future. Of course, I wouldn't necessarily bring flowers to the monument in honor of the revolution. As I stated above, I think the revolution brought enormous harm to the people of the Soviet Union, including the Moldovan Republic, and destroyed the economy and society in ways that still effect people's lives. The revolution of 1917 happened for good reasons – but it was also a tragedy from which societies in that region are still recovering. I guess I think pretty much the same about the "Great Patriotic War." Here, the balance may be different. After all, the Soviet defeated the Nazis, a huge accomplishment. But it's also true that the war brought tragedies along with it. Did all of those people who died -- 27 million according to the most recent studies – really have to die? Did Stalin throw lives away in his sometimes irrational military decisions? What about the effects of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on countries like the Baltic States, Ukraine and Moldova? If one lost one's relatives in the war and want to honor those soldiers who fell in it, it would make sense to remember "Victory Day." But I don't think one should place too much emphasis on "Pobeda" simply for the purposes of national identity. A lot went wrong in that war; one could and should write a well-documented "critical history" of that war.

In the post-Soviet space we are concerned with finding out about the "ultimate truth": about the Revolution, about the Soviet past and its lasting legacy. You were member of the Commissions for Historical Truth in both Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. How the work of the commissions impacted politics and society in these two countries?

The main thing about those commissions is that the peoples of the region need to understand that there is not a "zero sum game" involved in the question of victimhood. In other words, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians (and Moldovans) were surely victims of the Nazis and victims of the Soviet occupation. They now have the opportunity to use archives, published papers and books, argue with one another about what happened to their peoples



at the hands of these two occupiers during the Nazi-Soviet Pact period, the period of Nazi occupation, and the period of Soviet “liberation” and “occupation.” But it is also true that the Baltic peoples, Ukrainians, Moldovans, and others were also perpetrators, meaning they sometimes murdered Jews, collaborated with the Nazis (as well as resisted), and collaborated with the Soviets (as well as resisted.) Those local nationals who worked in the communist parties and spent their time going back and forth from Moscow had as much to do with the “crimes of communism” as did the Russians, sometimes even more so. All of this requires of scholars (and of society) that they try to look at the past with empathy for both perpetrators

and victims, trying to understand why people did things in their own terms, but also allow the past its own integrity. By that I mean, one needs to try to separate one’s identify, passions, likes and dislikes, from the past, and allow that time, I’m speaking now of the war, 1939-45, to speak for itself as honestly as one can let it speak. That’s not easy, but one sees that historians have done a decent job trying to allow that to happen, and subsequently making some progress in helping their respective societies “come to terms with the past.” Sometimes, the publications of our colleagues are abstruse and excessively detailed, but they do “trickle down” to society, through informed debates, publicistic activities, appearances on television and radio, and teaching in universities and secondary schools.

Last, but not least, please share with the reader your thoughts about your new book, as well as about your future publication plans.

As you know, I just published a book entitled, *Genocide: A World History*.² This is really my attempt to wrap up a trajectory of my work on ethnic cleansing and genocide that began with the war in Bosnia in the mid-1990s. In this new book, I simply wanted to demonstrate how ubiquitous genocide has been throughout human history and in all kinds of societies throughout the world, and how episodes of genocide are linked with one another, while being embedded in the human experience. At present, I am at work on a book that

² Norman M. Naimark, *Genocide: A World History*, Oxford University Press, 2017.



I have tentatively entitled, *The Fight for Sovereignty: Europe and Stalin, 1944-1949*. The idea is to demonstrate through a number of case studies from various countries in Europe (not just Eastern Europe) that political struggle went on during the immediate post-war period between forces that advocated a Soviet-style solution to political problems and those who opposed them. I use seven case studies, sometimes idiosyncratic ones, to point out that the “Iron Curtain” did not descend on Europe until the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s, and that until it did, there was a lot of room for politics and alternative solutions.

We thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with the Moldovan academic reader.

Questions from Svetlana Suveică and Sergiu Musteață

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Professor Naimark earned his Ph.D. in History from Stanford University in 1972 and before returning to join the faculty in 1988, he was a professor of history at Boston University and a fellow of the Russian Research Center at Harvard. He also held the visiting Catherine Wasserman Davis Chair of Slavic Studies at Wellesley College. He has been awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (1996), the Richard W. Lyman Award for outstanding faculty volunteer service (1995), and the Dean's Teaching Award from Stanford University for 1991-92 and 2002-3.

Professor Naimark is interested in modern Eastern European and Russian history and his research focuses on Soviet policies and actions in Europe after World War II and on genocide and ethnic cleansing in the twentieth century. His published monographs on these topics include *The History of the "Proletariat": The Emergence of Marxism in the Kingdom of Poland, 1870–1887* (1979, Columbia University Press), *Terrorists and Social Democrats: The Russian Revolutionary Movement under Alexander III* (1983, Harvard University Press), *The Russians in Germany: The History of The Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (1995, Harvard University Press), *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe* (1998, Westview Press), *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing In 20th Century Europe* (2001, Harvard University Press), and *Stalin's Genocides* (2010, Princeton University Press). Moreover, he is the author and editor of numerous additional articles, books, and chapters.

In his latest book, *Genocide: A World History* (2016, Oxford University Press), professor Naimark builds upon his earlier work by presenting the entire history of genocide in a single comprehensive but concise volume. The book examines numerous genocides that occurred between those in ancient civilizations and the post-Cold War genocides in the Balkans and Darfur including the warrior genocides such as during the expansion of the Mongolian empire, communist genocides such as those under Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, and anti-communist genocides as occurred during the Guatemalan civil war. This book contributes to the literature not only by providing a single, complete presentation of the history of genocide but also by its inclusion of social and political groups as subjects of mass extermination. In so doing, professor Naimark is able to identify additional episodes of genocide throughout history, thereby facilitating a better understanding of how mass murder has been used as a political tool and how it has developed over time.

Having completed *Genocide: A World History*, professor Naimark is turning his attention to his other major research stream: the post-war history of Europe and, in particular, the period from the end of WWII to 1948/49. He is currently working on a book manuscript that builds upon earlier work in which he examines what happens after war and genocide.