

## Reviews

Aron Iakovlevich Gurevich, *Istoriia istorika* [The History of a Historian]. 288 pp. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004. ISBN 5824305390.

*Yuri Zaretsky*

The author of this book, Aron Iakovlevich Gurevich, passed away on 5 August 2006 at the age of 82. At the time of his death his name was known to all medievalists. In today's Russia, his works, which opened up new perspectives in the study of the Western Middle Ages, are well known to philologists, art historians, psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers. Without exaggeration, it can be said that these works reared at least two generations of Russian humanities scholars. Gurevich's eminence extends far beyond his homeland: his books have been translated into all European (and several non-European) languages, and his contributions to the study of history have been noted by way of numerous international honorary titles and awards. Unquestionably, the recollections of this outstanding scholar, a witness and a participant in the historiographical (and historical) process for more than 50 years, cannot but attract special interest.

The contents of the book are varied. The author in general proceeds chronologically but often strays from this principle and allows for lengthy digressions, speaking about medieval studies at Moscow State University in the mid-1940s and the atmosphere in which historical scholarship functioned in that period as well as in the following decades. He paints portraits of his teachers Evgenii Kosminskii, Aleksandr Neusykhin, and other well-known Soviet historians, primarily of the older generation—Sergei Skazkin, Boris Porshnev, Robert Vipper, Mikhail Barg, Aleksandr Chistozvonov, Aleksandr Danilov, Nina Sidorova, and Isaak Mints. He also talks about the philosopher Vladimir Bibler and the historian of literature Mikhail Steblin-Kamenskii. It is noteworthy that in this portrait gallery of his contemporaries, Gurevich leaves significantly more space for his opponents and critics than he gives to his friends and supporters. In his own words, because of the special circumstances of his professional life, his memoirs contain “some displacement of light and shadow in favor of the latter” (276). Gurevich's memoirs, however, are not limited to a narrow description of professional

---

This publication was supported by a grant from the Russian Foundation for Humanities Research, no. 06-01-00077a.

life in the “historian’s craft.” Gurevich constantly underscores that his intellectual life was intimately tied to the social reality of his time, and in lively fashion he recaptures various parts of this reality (see the chapters entitled “The Raging of State Antisemitism in the Last Years of Stalin,” “Humor and Anecdotes at the Height of Repression,” “War and Its Consequences,” “Historians and Marxism,” “The Beginning and Freezing of ‘the Thaw,’” “The General Atmosphere of the 1970s,” “Perestroika,” and others).

Gurevich notes on numerous occasions that *Istoriia istorika* is an account not so much about himself as about his time, his field, the people who created it, and—he emphasizes this in particular—the changes that occurred in the discipline in the course of the 20th century (10, 146, and *passim*). But if one were to attempt to somehow pinpoint the genre of the work, it would be best to identify it as an “autobiography” rather than a “memoir.” Ultimately, the central topics in this “historian’s history” are the works of the author, his books and their reception, new research topics, changes in his understanding of historical science, the overcoming of obstacles of various types, and an insistence on the correctness of his own professional positions. Aside from these themes, the author pauses in some detail on the twists and turns of his career—his 16-year “exile” to Tver’ (as he calls his teaching position at the Kalinin Pedagogical Institute); the difficulties of obtaining employment first at the Institute of Philosophy, then at the Institute of World History, of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR; the discussion of his book *Problemy genezisa feodalizma v Zapadnoi Evrope* [Problems of the Genesis of Feudalism in Western Europe]<sup>1</sup> at Moscow State University, which turned into a denunciation; his “discovery of the world” during *perestroika*; and his recognition as a full-fledged “citizen” of the global *res publica scholarum*.

The figure of the author himself, moreover, is unquestionably the most interesting part of these recollections. It is impossible not to ask: how could the “Gurevich phenomenon” have existed in the conditions of Soviet reality and the dominance of orthodox Marxism in historiography? One finds in the book interesting evidence of the historian’s personal transformation, his “internal *perestroika*” and the “reconstruction” of his professional activities—from agrarian historian to historian of *mentalité*, and from Marxist positivism to historical anthropology. One also finds reflections on the reasons for these changes. Gurevich attributes much of the explanation to two very different foundations: the effects of his research and work with source materials (at first Anglo-Saxon sources, then early medieval Scandinavian ones), which opened up for him new ways of understanding people’s lives in the early Middle Ages (64, 224); and the changes in the social and political life in the country after Stalin’s death, which created an atmosphere of relative freethinking (70). The need

<sup>1</sup> See [links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-8762\(197106\)76%3A3%3C756%3APGFVZE%3E2.CO%3B2-7](https://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-8762(197106)76%3A3%3C756%3APGFVZE%3E2.CO%3B2-7).

to find new approaches to historical inquiry free of the strictures of Marxist orthodoxy set the historian on a search for new methodologies and, above all, prompted his need to become familiar with Western philosophical and sociological schools. Gurevich in this context speaks about his first acquaintance with the works of Max Weber during the years of the “Thaw” and the difficulties of developing his own intellectual path (110); the important role played in his professional development by the works of Scandinavianists in the field of philology, which were notable for the broader perspectives and greater degree of freedom they displayed (67); and, above all, the influence of the French historians of the *Annales* school (224), which had a profound impact on the personal “reconstruction” of which he writes.

The ability to accept new concepts, Gurevich believes, played an enormous role in his professional trajectory. “I am lucky,” he writes, “because when we were seeking our own paths here, like blind kittens, I was able in time to pay attention to new directions being taken in the works of the leading historians in the West” (117). He adds with sorrow that for Soviet historians this “revolutionary turn in world historiography”—this is precisely how the author appreciates the contributions of the *Annales* school at its height—remained unnoticed (112). Incidentally, Gurevich notes that the new approaches opening up to him in history were not a blind imitation of his French colleagues: it was simply that somehow (to a significant degree, he believes, intuitively) he was able to come to similar positions independently. When new works by Jacques Le Goff came out he found in them confirmation of his own opinions (222).

One other thought that one can consistently find in this autobiography is the notion that Gurevich’s scholarly contributions to the study of the European Middle Ages were also made possible by certain personal qualities. These qualities are sometimes discussed directly, sometimes indirectly, but either way one finds them treated in the book. Gurevich’s unusual scholarly courage (staking out approaches that were revolutionary for Soviet historiography and asking questions of the sources that were striking in their originality) was combined with an extraordinary caution in his everyday life. He wrote books in secret, speaking only with his closest friends about his ongoing work, fearing that his telephone was tapped during his discussions with foreign colleagues and others. He was stubborn in achieving the goals he set for himself, and he developed an intuition that allowed him to feel what he calls a “strained nerve” in contemporary historiography. Even so, the most important qualities were an unshakable will and uncompromising intellectual stance. Without these, Gurevich believes, an historian can never create anything significant. “A good mind never hurt anyone”—he notes—“but the most important quality of a person is his character, and in fact, this is where many have stumbled.” Even more, he notes: “One was often forced to encounter cowardliness and a willingness to compromise [*prisposoblenchestvo*].

Those who endured the trials were more likely to create something useful and valuable, even with mediocre abilities” (147).

To what results, however, did Gurevich’s personal *perestroika* lead? What constitutes the new historical vision he developed and the new questions he posed for medievalists? The book answers this question by outlining Gurevich’s scholarly credo, a program for renewing historical knowledge that he developed in the early 1970s and followed without deviation until the end of his life.

Following the famous metaphor of Lucien Febvre, Gurevich himself calls his approach to scholarship a “battle for history” (*combats pour l’histoire*, 281). The reader of these recollections comes to understand more than once that the development of this new vision of history, and especially its exposition in books and articles, occurred in anything but an ivory tower of “pure science.” It was more like the opposite—a constant battle with the social environment, the Soviet bureaucracy, the power of well-off enemies, and the intellectual conservatism of his colleagues. In the realm of theory this was, above all else, a battle against positivist attempts to turn history into a science and ideologized history of the orthodox-Marxist type. About the kind of history for which Gurevich fought—“historical anthropology”—the book speaks frequently and substantively. Historical anthropology is defined through what the author sees as the most genuinely radical and promising direction in historiography: the approach initiated by the “founders” Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre and continued in the second half of the 20th century by the *Annales* school, which he believes retains its significance to the present day.

The story about “battles for history” in this book is closely interwoven with what might be called “battles for memory,” since the author sees one of his most important tasks as the preservation of memory about the Soviet past of Russian medieval studies. More than once, he underscores the importance of this mission, speaking about the great necessity of relating “how it really was” in the field and what the discipline had to live with in the course of a half-century. He wishes also to relate who were its most illustrative representatives not only in the professional but in the human scale of things. In the postscript to the book there is a call to convey this memory to a new generation of historians, to preserve “an honest picture of what we had to endure” (281).<sup>2</sup>

On numerous occasions the author notes that his visions of the past are unavoidably incomplete and to some degree subjective (e.g., 10). But at the same

<sup>2</sup> One should note that Gurevich’s “battles for memory” began much earlier. See A. Ia. Gurevich, “‘Put’ priamoi kak Nevskii prospekt,’ ili Ispoved’ istorika,” *Odissei* (1992) (Moscow: Nauka, 1994). These “battles” among medievalists became especially fierce after the publication of the posthumous memoirs of Evgeniia V. Gutnova, *Perezhitoe* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001). See, especially, Gurevich, “Popytka kriticheskogo prochteniiia memuarov E. V. Gutnovoi,” in *Srednie veka*, no. 63 (Moscow: Nauka, 2002), 362–93; and Lidiia T. Mil’skaia, “Zametki na poliakh,” in *Srednie veka*, no. 65 (Moscow: Nauka, 2004), 214–28.

time, he constantly assures the reader of the “correctness” of his vision of the past and his evaluations of events and people. Gurevich does not attempt to avoid such evaluations; on the contrary, he considers it his duty to pass judgment, sometimes severely. There is no need to dwell on these—discussion of the professional and personal qualities of the author’s colleagues does not enter into the parameters of the present review. Instead, I attempt to identify the more characteristic, general traits of postwar Soviet medieval studies that are laid out in the book.

Gurevich discusses several aspects of the question in special detail. He gives evidence on the domination of Marxist schemas in the Soviet agrarian history of medieval Europe, straying away from which was “fraught with all sorts of adversity” (39). Accordingly, he has much to say about the narrowness and limited views among the historians of this time. He speaks of the domination of scientific approaches and statistical methods, the view that “history is a science to the degree that it can possess quantities and measures, derived with the assistance of exact science and above all mathematics” (17). The author gives much attention to the social and political context shaping Soviet medieval studies. An especially trying period was the postwar years, when generational change and the destruction of scientific schools resulted in a “catastrophic decline of the scholarly level of historical research, a great narrowness in terms of the questions studied, [and] the cultivation of cynicism and immorality in the scholarly community” (42). Gurevich identifies two positions taken by scholars that, in his opinion, “determined the condition of Soviet historical science to a significant degree.” The first was a “departure” into narrow specialization (“internal emigration”), which allowed its practitioners to avoid interaction and, hence, accusations of an ideological character. The second was self-censorship, the search for compromise, and the deployment in scholarly works of hints and hidden meanings (*inoskazaniia*, 96).

*Istoriia istorika* is not just a book about the “battles for history” and “battles for memory” of Aron Gurevich but a study of his life experience. How, then, does the author sum up the results? How did they look to him? There is clearly no uniformity on this question. On the one hand, he garnered worldwide recognition for his scholarly achievements and fame for his works and interpretation of history. On the other hand, one reads—and much here is said between the lines—of a scholar under-appreciated in “his own country.” Gurevich never taught at the History Faculty of his alma mater, Moscow State University; he had no opportunity to create his own “school”; and he was never elected academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This theme of unfulfilled achievement of his potential as a result of unfavorable circumstances is clearly detectable throughout the book. Still, in *Istoriia istorika*, its author, despite the numerous difficulties and losses, comes out the victor. The reader sees that he was able to fulfill a large part of his personal agenda—to make a significant contribution to the international study of medieval history, to introduce the

*Annales* school and historical anthropology to a Soviet audience, and to create works that became known throughout the world.

By the time one closes a book of memories, one has unintentionally formed an image of the author, and after that it is sometimes difficult to avoid certain analogies, parallels, and associations. The present reviewer is no exception. To me there quite unexpectedly appeared the figure of Peter Abelard, the author of *Historia Calamitatum* (The Story of My Misfortunes). One can easily contest such a strange analogy, of course, as dubious or even completely artificial. But is it not really Abelard, that “unbroken unicorn,” who threatens his enemies and suddenly appears at the very end of *Istorik istorika*? I did not yet relate all the truth about the past, the author throws out in the book’s last pages, but I will certainly do so if the opportunity arises: “I do not exclude the possibility that if fate gives me more strength and time, I will capture all of my *historia arcana* and some people [*koe-komu*] will not fare well in it” (281).

Perhaps this analogy with Abelard is not really as accidental or outrageous as it may seem at first glance. In a recently published Russian-language book that he dedicated to the medieval individual (and which he based in large measure on autobiographical materials, including Abelard’s *Historia Calamitatum*), Gurevich comes to a noteworthy recognition: his work with medieval texts was closely connected to his thinking about his personal life history.

At one stage of my work, while pondering the question of personality in the medieval West, I felt a need to write a kind of autobiographical etude. I attempted to give myself an account of my own experience as a historian, which spans the course of no less than half a century. [...] I began to think not about the personality of the medieval person, so subject to change and so problematic, but about something seemingly immutable—my own ego. These are two very different topics, but hardly devoid of an internal connection. For I attempted on myself the same experiment to which I had previously subjected others who lived many centuries ago. Though it might seem that there can be no point of contact between a subject matter and the means to penetrate and make sense of it, still, a dialogue of this sort is not totally deprived of meaning.<sup>3</sup>

*Translated by Roman Kovalev*

Dept. of Philosophy  
State University—Higher School of Economics  
Miasnitskaia ul. 20  
101978 Moscow  
Russian Federation  
yurizar@yahoo.com

<sup>3</sup> Aron Gurevich, *Individ i sotsium na srednevekovom Zapade* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), 372.