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July 2020

Problems and Progress in the Historiography of the USSR: Robert W. Davies and his Pioneering Research

This essay highlights the advancement of studies on the Soviet Union since the 1980s, as reflected in the grand research project of the British economic historian Robert W. Davies. In 7 volumes and over 3.000 pages of dense information, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia* stands out as almost an encyclopedia of the dramatic and eventful period from the late 1920s to 1939.



After the Second World War, the British authorities recognized that before 1939 their knowledge of the USSR was insufficient and misleading as to the accomplishments of the Soviet leadership. This fact hampered British assessments in the initial period of the German-Soviet war. As the Swedish economic historian Martin Kahn explained, London had underestimated the military-industrial strength of the USSR, and in 1941 projected that a Nazi victory on the Eastern front was probably only a matter of months.

Consequently, given the unexpected Soviet army's victory, and its mobilized economy outperforming the German military industry, British authorities during the Cold War spurred their scholars in social and economic sciences for more solid research of the USSR. A pioneer was Alexander Baykov (1899–1963) who was active at the well-known institute in Prague, where S.N. Prokopovich (1871–1955) and other émigré Russians had published surveys of Soviet economic development. After the Nazi occupation of the Czech Republic in spring 1939, Baykov fled to Britain. After the war, Baykov published *The Development of the Soviet economic system*, a standard handbook at Anglo-Saxon universities that was republished in numerous editions from 1946 till 1988. He was appointed professor at Birmingham University and founded a one-man Department of Economics and Institutions of the USSR. One of his Ph.D. students was Robert W. Davies (b. 1925) who defended a thesis on the Soviet budgetary system. As the "Thaw" had changed Soviet-Western relations in the late 1950s, Baykov actively proposed a broadening of studies on the USSR. One result was the foundation of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies (CREES) at Birmingham University in 1963.

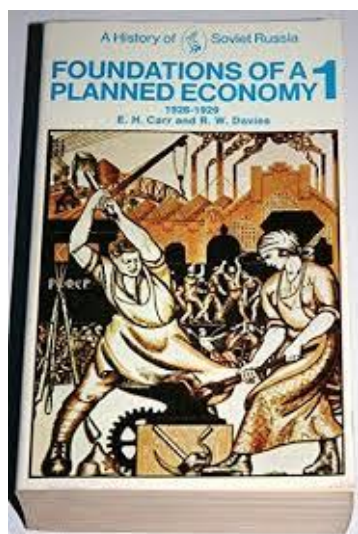
As director at CREES, Robert Davies established valuable exchanges of study visits, conferences and seminars with Soviet institutions. Among the first scholars from CREES to spend long research visits in Moscow and Leningrad were Robert Davies, Julian Cooper and other Ph.D. students. The research program at CREES on Soviet technology produced several fundamental studies by Julian Cooper, Ronald Annan and Robert Lewis. Soviet economists were invited for study visits at CREES. Among the more prominent can be noted Vasiliï Nemchinov (1894–1964) and Nikolai Fedorenko (1917–2006) who were both engaged in the reform debates in the 1960s and applied mathematical and cybernetic methods.

A common problem in those days was that for the 1920s only printed sources were available. However, for the New Economic Policy (NEP) years, these were considered as reliable. On the other hand, the hardening censorship of the 1930s hindered objective research by Western observers. Such was the conclusion of the British historian Edward H. Carr (1892–1982) who decided to stop his study of Soviet history by 1929. However, his 14 (!) volumes *A History of Soviet Russia* bear witness to how much research could be done with merely printed sources. As explained by his biographer Jonathan Haslam, Carr's legacy is disputed concerning his political theory, but not his impressive *History of Soviet Russia*. Even Soviet-time critics of "bourgeois falsifiers" recognized Carr's contribution as outstanding.

For the volumes on the Soviet economy in the final years of the NEP period, Carr invited Robert Davies as his co-author. Their two volumes in *Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926–1929* (1969) treated the debates among the Soviet leadership on how

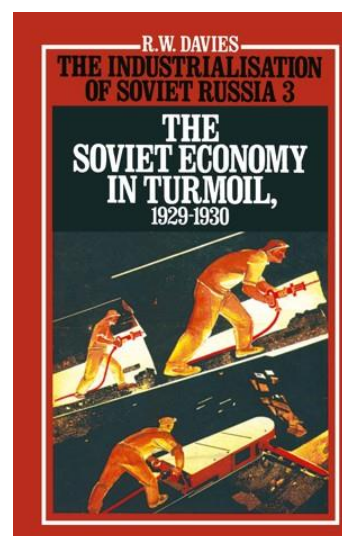
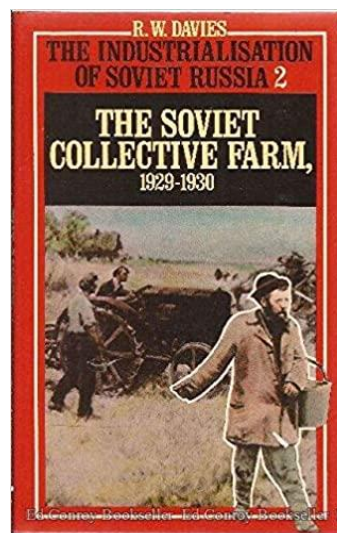


to replace the mixed-market economy with long-term economic planning.



Based on the experience from the above-mentioned joint project with Carr, Davies decided to continue research on the industrialization of Soviet Russia. His first volumes in the new project, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia*, published in 1980, are in-depth studies, based on printed sources from the USSR, concerning the collectivization of agriculture and the formal statutes and real conditions of the new collective farms. A few years earlier, at the Sorbonne, the Russian-born scholar Moshe Lewin (1921–2010) had presented his doctoral thesis *La Paysannerie et le Pouvoir Soviétique, 1928–1930*. This was one of the more important forerunners to Davies' own research of the topic. Jonathan Haslam has studied the correspondence between Lewin and Carr concerning the collectivization of the peasantry. Carr raised numerous objections and questions to Lewin's interpretations. Between 1968 and 1978 Lewin joined CREES as researcher and lecturer. Lewin gave many impulses for a broader social and economic history of the USSR. In particular, Lewin approached the debates among Bolshevik leaders in the 1920s and much later, in post-Stalin era, of

reformers in the 1960s, with a keen eye for the fine print or allusions in the heavily censored printed sources. The telling title of his research project is *Political undercurrents in Soviet economic debates* (1974).

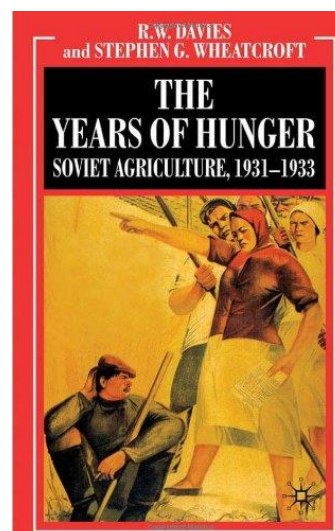
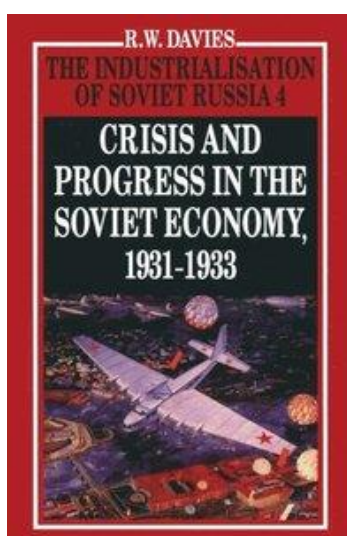


Davies' third volume on industrialization was published in 1989. He there analyzes the launching of the first five-year plan – for 1928–32, and successive upscaling towards more unrealistic final planning targets. Although the French economist Eugène Zaleski and others had earlier treated this most disputed Soviet planning effort, Davies managed to add a lot of detailed information based on a careful reading of newspapers, statistical reports and memoirs.



With glasnost and perestroika merely a few years later, conditions for studying the Soviet era changed radically. Robert Davies keenly observed the changes in the Russian information sphere in his surveys *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution* (1989) and *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era* (1997). These two surveys are a good introduction to the latest historiographical changes in Russia, the struggle against a conservative heritage and for an objective and complex historiography of the Soviet period.

The opening of formerly closed archives favored a radical broadening of Davies' project. In the fourth volume *Crisis and progress in the Soviet Economy, 1931–1933* (1996) the primary sources from archives give a better understanding of how the first 5-year plan actually proceeded and what the real accomplishments were. Davies gives concise and pertinent commentaries on numerous Soviet leaders, managers, planners, and economists, even far below the well-known top brass in the Communist Party, adding understanding of the decision-makers' backgrounds and the otherwise often anonymous bureaucracy.



The fifth volume *The Years of Hunger, Soviet agriculture, 1931–1933* (2004) contains analyses of the multiple causes of the famines in various parts of the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. Davies wrote this volume together with Stephen G. Wheatcroft, an eminent specialist on Russian agriculture and Soviet-era statistics. In 1930, the grain harvest from the forcibly established collective farms had surpassed the expectations of the authorities. Between 1932 and 1933, on the contrary, the countryside was struck by widespread famine.

This volume concerns a topic that is hotly debated by Russian and Ukrainian historians. Consequently, there was a demand for a Russian translation: *Gody goloda. Selskoe khoziaistva SSSR, 1931–1933*. Davies and Wheatcroft discern a multitude of causes and separate several forms of the famines in the early 1930s – in Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and certain regions of Russia. The detailed statistics provided by Davies and Wheatcroft as well as a methodological appendix to the volume may serve as basis for any discussion of the various interpretations of the causes of the 1932 – 33 famine, and how this issue has been politicized in certain countries. They emphasize the fundamental mistakes made by the regime. They also argue that



there can hardly have been a genocidal intent from Stalin, Kaganovich and other leaders. The British historian Robert Conquest had argued, in his *Harvest of Sorrow* in the mid-1980s, that the Soviet leaders intentionally committed a genocidal action against the Ukrainian peasantry. After reading *Years of Hunger*, Conquest changed his mind and frankly declared that the famine was unintentional albeit possibly avoidable with other policies.

An important aspect of Soviet-era historiography has been the publication of source and documentary volumes. At CREES, the historian Arfon Rees had published several monographs on the legendary Bolshevik manager Lazar Kaganovich, the people's commissar of transport and politburo member since the 1930s. As the very informative correspondence between Stalin during his summer vacation at the Black Sea, and his colleagues in Moscow revealed much on the deliberations among the leaders, viewpoints that were not seen in the final resolutions, Davies and Rees edited two volumes. One in Russian that gives the complete collection of all letters sent by courier to and from Stalin; the other in English but abridged with explanatory introduction and comments by the editors.

The sixth volume *The Years of Progress: The Soviet Economy, 1934–1936* (2014) covers in detail the advance of industry, capital investment, domestic and foreign trade. Davies places special emphasis on the dual threat of war, in the east from Japan, especially after their occupation of Manchuria in 1931, and in the west from Germany after Hitler's takeover of power. The Soviet defense industry got higher priorities given these threat assessments. Davies frames the latter part of the 1930s as consisting of two distinct periods. Hard lessons

were learned from misjudged efforts during the first five-year period. It was a period when the dominant drive to set up heavy industry was revised in favor of a more balanced attempt to promote the growth of consumer-oriented branches. Investment calculations and development targets were thereafter set with a better grasp of what managers, engineers, and workers in various enterprises could eventually handle.

Davies again collaborated with Wheatcroft, a specialist on Soviet agriculture, but also with Oleg Khlevniuk, one of Russia's best experts on the history of Stalinism. Khlevniuk contributed to the sections concerning the Gulag camp system and its role in the economy. For a short period, there was also a certain relaxation of repressive measures, particularly those that targeted specialists who had been persecuted previously.

Davies' panorama of all Soviet industrial branches underscores the undeniable high growth rates in industry and the accompanying indicators of a more evenly distributed advancement of the economy as a whole. The book has a well-organized structure and a straightforward chronological layout that makes reading this exhaustive study fascinating: first comes a lucid introduction of Soviet forecasts and plans; second the problems of quarterly or even monthly implementation of those plans; and finally an analysis of each year's achievements "in retrospect".

This highlights how the decision-making processes actually were egalitarian, even at a time when Joseph Stalin, as general secretary of the Communist Party, was considered the undisputed leader. An appendix clearly illustrates this thesis by



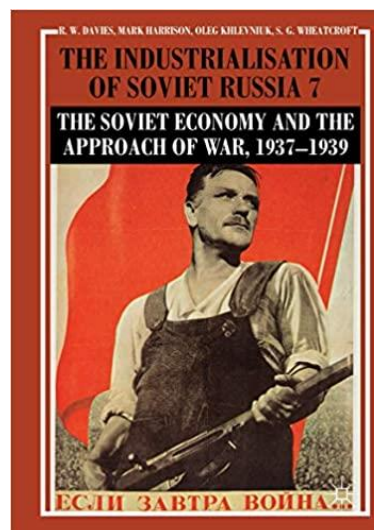
a detailed scheme of how the collection of grain was decreed for peasants throughout 1936.

While a theoretical approach to the Soviet economic system may start with the concepts of a totalitarian system, the rich empirical evidence of conflicting Soviet realities and a mix of economic viewpoints suggests that until recently we held oversimplified views of the system. The fact that Soviet leaders in the mid-1930s meticulously scrutinized their own failures—more often casting such failures in concrete, technical terms than attributing them to “sabotage” by “enemies of the people”—indicates the need for multiple frameworks of interpretation. The contrast could hardly be greater than between the proclaimed triumph of socialism in 1936, and the staged show-trials of Party members as well as mass-scale deportations or execution of millions of ordinary citizens.

In each volume of *Industrialization of Soviet Russia* the reader will find plenty of hints for further research, reflections on debates among specialists on the USSR as well as discussion on the source base. Davies also edited and contributed to shorter articles in two textbooks with articles by Western specialists on the Tsarist, NEP and Stalinist period economics. In less than one hundred pages he also skillfully explained the main problems in Soviet economic development from Lenin to Khrushchev (1998).

The first volumes of Carr's *History of Soviet Russia* were published when the Cold War was intensive and ideological confrontations were reflected even in academic historiography. They had been received critically by a number of Western specialists, who were opposed to Carr's detached, non-moralizing but strictly analytical approach, as

he explained in his famous lectures *What is History?* As his *History of Soviet Russia* expanded to over a dozen solid and well-researched volumes, admiration predominated for Carr's outstanding grasp of an enormous basis of sources. In comparison, Davies' *Industrialization* has been received positively in the academic communities and in particular in those countries where an empiricist approach is appreciated. Japanese scholars have even coined the term “the Birmingham school of Soviet studies”, with respect to the standards set by Baykov, Carr and Davies and their followers at CREES.



The final volume *The Soviet economy and the Approach of war, 1937-1939* (2018) covers one of the darkest times in Soviet history. The economic changes must be contextualized in different ways here. As before but more urgently, the assessments of a future war became more acute with the advances of Japan in occupied China, the civil war in Spain and the outspoken revanchist policy of Nazi Germany. In 1937-38, repressions widened from the Communist party and industry captains to hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens. On dubious ethnic or social criteria, they were convicted to forced labour in camps or



executed. The authors analyze in detail how the high-level and also mass repressions paralyzed the functioning of the state administration. The growing role of the Gulag system for the economy in various regions is set out clearly.

An important contribution is the chapter on how two population censuses were carried out; the results of the first census of 1937 were unacceptable to Stalin as they clearly showed the devastating effects of collectivization and famine. The next census in 1939 tried to fix the data and embellish the statistics. The real demographic outcome of the 1930s was only discerned in the post-Soviet period, when the primary data of the first census was declassified and published in documentary volumes.

The main aspect of the volume is reflected in the title; how the growing threat of a major war influenced a particular industry. The investments in defense enterprises set the basis for a much more militarized economy. The special aspect of Soviet planning were the so-called mobilization plans that were based on carefully assessed maximum production capabilities in case of war. The modernization of Soviet artillery, tanks and aircraft and the preparedness for mass production in wartime had become the main goal by 1939.

The final chapter of volume 7 sets the whole project of Soviet industrialization in historical perspective, given the Tsarist background, on the one hand, and the outcome, the collapse of the system in 1991, on the other hand. The authors reflect on the forced industrialization and the lack of incentives in the system. The statistical system was basically professional, however, the political goals tended to distort the result presentation. In the end, even the leadership would lack a reliable

data basis for their planning. The militarization of the economy that received its definite form in the late 1930s proved capable of outperforming even the German war economy. The foundation of this war preparedness had been outlined already in the late 1920s, as various development strategies were discussed. Its basic structure would remain more or less reformed till the end of the Soviet period. As mentioned above, the special discipline of Soviet studies was institutionalized in Great Britain right after the Second World War. The Soviet economic performance formed a part of so-called development economics from the 1950s onwards. The Soviet model of development was used as textbook reference for comparative studies of industrialized and less-developed countries in the Third World. This final chapter carefully discerns the undisputable success performance of the Soviet economy up to 1939, but likewise underlines all the negative or even disastrous aspects in the break-neck social and economic transformation. In an afterword, alas far too brief, Davies himself reflects on how his own view of Soviet history has changed, from the 1950s and 1960s when he wrote *Foundations of a planned economy*.

The seven volumes of *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia* by Robert Davies, and for the four last volumes in cooperation with eminent specialists on various aspects of the Soviet economy, Stephen G. Wheatcroft, Oleg Khlevniuk and Mark Harrison, will stand out as foundations for any further research on this period. Given their empirical richness, strict chronological pattern and thematic clarity, as well as the massive amount of tables with pertinent source evaluations, they may even serve as an encyclopedia on a crucial period, 1929–1939, in Russia's modern history.



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Lennart Samuelson is an affiliated researcher at the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE) since 2008. He earned his Ph.D. at the Institute for Research in Economic History at the Stockholm School of Economics, in 1996. He was a guest researcher at the National Defence College in 1996-2001 and Waern visiting professor at the Institute for Studies in History at the University of Gothenburg, in 2011-2012.

Samuelson's research in Russian economic history re-started when the archives opened in 1992. His major research topic is the development of the Soviet military-industrial complex from the 1930s onwards. He has participated in several research projects on Soviet agrarian history of the 1930s, on the Great Terror 1937-38 and the Gulag camp system, and also on Sweden's relations with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period. His research results have been rewarded by several institutions.

The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities rewarded its prestigious Rettig Prize in 2014 to Samuelson for his fundamental research and innovative grasp of the Russian archival materials.

On 4 November 2014, for organizing Swedish-Russian economic-historical workshops and conferences at Stockholm School of Economics and Gothenburg university, for arranging study visits for Russian archivists in Stockholm and for Swedish scholars in Moscow, as well as for his spreading knowledge on Russian history to the Swedish public, he was awarded Orden Druzhby (the Friendship Order) by President Vladimir Putin at the National Day ceremony in the Kremlin.

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