

## Conference Paper

# Postmodern Alternative to 'Mainstream' in Historical Science of the Urals in the 1990s–2000s

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## Abstract

This article discusses general trends in the development of the historical science of the Urals in the post-Soviet period. Features of the main fields of historical researches are characterized and the existence of such phenomenon as 'retromania' in the official historical science is explored. The article also examines the influence of the postmodern model of historical research on historians of the Urals and adherents of this model in theory, methodology and scientific issues. The article concludes that the postmodern model of historical research possesses every feature of scientific research. Despite some negative traits (such as relativism as related to certain methodological issues and overly free use of terminology), it provides benefits by expanding the arsenal of theoretical concepts and especially the methods of historical research available to a contemporary historian. Thanks to this expansion, new research issues has been explored, new problems have been raised, and new approaches to traditional historical problems have been enabled. There has been a significant expansion of the scientific research issues, completely new problems have been raised, and approaches to the study of traditional problems have changed.

**Keywords:** the Urals, historical science, retromania, mainstream, postmodern model of historical research.

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## 1. Introduction

During the Soviet area, Ural scholars rarely expressed their opinion on the theoretical issues concerning the development of historical science, confining themselves to commenting on the basic tenets of Marxist-Leninist theory. Attempts made by some authors to express original ideas about the development of the historical process as a whole and the specific features of regional development provoked criticism and even use of preventive organizational measures by ideological structures (refer to a well-known case of the Ural historian V. Adamov).

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Situation in historical science of the Urals began to change at the turn of the 1980s–1990s. Perestroika encouraged regional historians to join the process of searching for new ways to explain the past. Ural scholars made significant contributions to the criticism of the classical model of historical study, criticizing its methodological one-sidedness, and they engaged in research for alternative theories that explain the historical process as a whole so as specific features of the development of the Ural history.

We can distinguish two directions in these researches. Some scientists tried to return the historical science to the new, ‘the only true’ monomethodology which was a reflection on the Marxist theory. This methodology was the civilization approach to history with its concept of totalitarianism for explaining Soviet history. A.V. Bakunin described the essence of Soviet totalitarianism, he drew parallels between the fascist (German and Italian) and Soviet models of totalitarianism and revealed the manifestation of totalitarian traits in the economy, political and social history of the Urals [1].

Most of the scholars were characterized by a kind of ‘retromania’, which in those environments was manifested as an appeal to the theories declared by the official ideology as anti-Marxist. Some of the theories proved to be in demand. Among them there was the theory of multiformity, applied to the study of Ural history by a professor of the Ural State University named after A.M. Gorky (USU) V.V. Adamov (1914–1984) and his adherents. The other one was a theory of echelons of capitalism development proposed by the American economist of Russian descent A. Gershekron (1904–1978), as well as some other theories of modernization.

A special influence on post-Soviet historiography was made by the theories of modernization. The first scholar who used them to study the realities of Russian history was O.L. Leibovich, a historian from Perm [2–3]. To study the features of the Russian modernization a scientific school headed by Academician V.V. Alekseev was established in Yekaterinburg [4].

We have already written about the peculiar perception of Western theories by some Ural historians and their attempt to adapt them to Russian realities [5]. Critics of the modernization interpretation of history rightly point to the closeness of its basic tenets to the positions of the traditional point of view. The origin of this phenomenon was highlighted by V.V. Alekseev in his memoirs. He admits that his understanding of the theory of modernization is different from the classical version, because in the Russian realities of the 1990s it was viewed as a compromise between formational and civilizational approaches to history. The author writes: “Scientists were aware of the extinction of the formational approach, but they did not dare to move to a civilizational one. A compromise was reached on the way to a theory of modernization. Gradually,

most of the staff (Institute of History and Archeology – V.Z., V.K.) agreed with my point of view, and this theory became the basis of their research” [6].

Ural economists and historians have made great contributions to the application of the theory of the mobilization society to the study of the Soviet period of history. The research of Chelyabinsk economist V. V. Sedov [7], as well as a group of scientists from the Center of Economic History from Chelyabinsk State University, who are responsible for drafting the problem of “The mobilization model of the economy: the historical experience of Russia in the 20th century” are particularly noteworthy.

The positive effect caused by the use of “dissident” and foreign theories to the explanation of the peculiarities of the development of the history of the Urals, led to the emergence of the opinion that the post-Soviet historical science would continue to “be enhanced by theories”.

Evaluating the official historical narrative of the Ural science in the 1990s – the first half of the 2000s, it is necessary to highlight the following features of it. Firstly, the main efforts of scientists were focused on rethinking those periods of the history of the Urals, which were too ideological in Soviet period of times. These periods were primarily referred to the Late Imperial period (the period of imperialism) and Soviet periods. Secondly, since the Marxist theory gave priority to the study of mainly economic factors, in the post-Soviet period the study of the regional political and socio-cultural history came to the fore.

## 2. Methods

To answer the proposed questions, the following research procedures have been used:

1. analysis of the main trends in the development of historical science of the Urals in the post-Soviet period
2. comparison analysis in the field of theory, methodology, methods and scientific problems.
3. analysis multi-conceptualism

## 3. Discussion

**Case 1. Theory and methodology.** Currently, the official historical narrative generally established in the *perestroika* period has been rewriting. The existence of ‘retromania’ phenomenon in the historical science of the Urals is also proved by a great interest

towards the Soviet history. Only in 2018–2019 in Ural State University there were published both general scientific studies [8] and specific problems researches [9–10] dedicated to various periods of Soviet history. These researches have a grant support. Although a critical attitude towards the history of the Soviet society is increasing and a historical research base has been significantly updated, it is important to note that the methodological basis of these studies has remained traditional once it was developed mainly in the years of *perestroika* and the first ‘post-perestroika’ years.

The postmodern model of research has become a real alternative to the ‘mainstream’ discourse in Russian historical science in general and in regional historical practices at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Postmodern trends, which made a great impact on the world historical science in the second third of the 20th century, began to appear in Russian historiography only in 1980s–1990s. It should be noted that the postmodern model of research is actively applied to a research process by a relatively small group of Ural researchers.

The influence of the postmodern model of research on studies of Ural historians can be seen on three levels: theory, methodology and scientific issues.

The classical model of research has been criticized by postmodernists for its strong interest in metanarratives of all kinds. Nevertheless, to explain the history, adherents of the postmodern model of research suggest to use the socio-cultural paradigm and to rely on achievements of the ‘new historical science’ (The Annales School) and also such theoretical approaches as ‘new cultural or intellectual history’, ‘new social history’ etc.

By the middle of 2000s Ural historiographers A. T. Tertyshny and A. V. Trofimov have already noted that as a result of the search for new theories “a modern historiographic field is represented by at least twenty diverse conceptual approaches which explain the meaning, course and the features of Russian history”. [11]

The abundance of various theories gave rise to such a phenomenon as multi-conceptualism. The main adherent of this phenomenon in the Urals is B.V. Lichman [12], who understands multi-conceptualism as a tolerant attitude to various ideological views expressed in assessing historical facts [13]. We can agree with the statement of A.V. Lubsy, who writes that postmodernism is characterized by: “radical and positively evaluated cultural pluralism and tolerance, ‘equal rights’ of cognitive paradigms and ways of thinking, recognition of their intrinsic value” [14]. The set of possible history interpretations considered as a disadvantage in modernism becomes the basis and defining feature of postmodern historical knowledge. Thus, the consciously forced

pluralism put into practice of cognitive activity as a positive task is the essence of 'postmodernist thought', which could be determined as relativism.

**Case 2. Methods.** From our perspective, the main influence of postmodernism on modern historical science is a significant expansion of research methods. Postmodernism supporters believe that since the single, the unique, the individual are the only phenomena worthy of attention in historical knowledge, the main thing in understanding the meaning of historical phenomena are not theoretical constructions, but the tools with which historians try to decipher the past.

According to L. P. Repina, changing of the perception of the nature of the relationship between history and the social sciences (prevailing in the 1960s) had a huge impact on the expansion of methodological arsenal of historical science. The 'golden age' of interdisciplinary interaction began in which "attitudes to equal cooperation in the formation of a new socio-historical science based on an integral interdisciplinary approach to the study of society prevailed" [15].

Ural scholars have made great contributions to the popularization of interdisciplinary methods of historical research. O.S. Porshneva examined the formation process of the phenomenon of interdisciplinary cooperation between history and other social and human sciences, analyzed the theoretical approaches and methods of related social and human sciences, the principles of their application in historical research [16]. T. I. Slavko substantiated the role of scientific knowledge mathematization in increasing the objectivity of historical research [17]. L. N. Mazur developed and adapted mathematical statistics, sociological and other interdisciplinary methods, so as specific methods and procedures generated by them, designed to ensure the reliability of the results [18].

The postmodern model of historical knowledge is closely related to the anthropological turn, a steady trend towards the atomization of historical knowledge. Microhistory as a research approach to the study of daily life and mentality of a 'little man' is used in many works of modern authors. We have already written that use of this research approach makes radical change in research methodology engaging new types of sources [19]. Especially this refers to the use of personal sources.

It is not a coincidence that one of the most popular areas of knowledge among historians is cultural anthropology; historical anthropology and the history of mentality are largely based on its theories and methods [20].

Since the idea of postmodernism past reconstruction is replaced by the idea of history construction, it is based on the principle that historical reality is produced by a variety of social practices, including cognitive ones which are conditioned by culture. Therefore, postmodernists do not propose to analyze historical processes, events and

phenomena, but to analyze the idea of them. In the recent Ural historiography, a large group of researchers is engaged in the study of political and economic representations. Professors of the Ural State University of Economics in Yekaterinburg put into scientific use a significant number of sources allowing to show the influence of public perceptions on their behaviors [21].

**Case 3. Scientific problems.** Some phenomena that arose in the modern era within the postmodern model of historical knowledge got a new meaning. This is the case with the history of daily life, the problem of historical memory, etc.

If in the Soviet times, daily life was understood as 'life description', now it is regarded as a form of social history. According to the Chelyabinsk historian I.V. Narsky, the history of daily life "suggests both complex historical argumentation and compatibility of the description with a high level of theoreticality" [22]. N.L. Pushkareva assumes that daily history is focused on a comprehensive study of recurring, "normal" and habitual element, constructing style and mode of life among representatives of different social strata, including emotional reactions to life events and behavioral motives [23].

At the very beginning, active researchers of daily life were the experts in women's history. Chelyabinsk researcher M.I. Miroshnichenko revealed that in Soviet times researchers had been actively developing the history of the women's movement in the Urals [24]. Currently, gender history is developing in the bowels of the 'new social history'.

Noting that the peculiarity of the Russian (Ural) understanding of the history of daily life is its assignment to the section of cultural studies or even almost ethnology, and therefore, in the study of daily life, they still equate it with the mode of life history [22, 25–26].

The issue of historical memory became popular in Ural historiography [27–29]. Concerning the change of attitude towards the issue of historical memory E.I. Koznova notes: "Anyway, memory discourse occurs when each community or each society at a certain moment or in its own time experiences a state of 'break' with the past. At the same time, if modernity not only demonstrated a break with tradition, but also did break with it, then postmodernity tries to bridge the gap. Therefore, the reason for the heightened interest in memory is seen, particularly, in the fact that memory is being lost, goes away, whereas humanity is trying to preserve it" [30].

## 4. Conclusions

We have already noted that another cost of postmodern model is the vagueness of the used terminology, investing different meanings in the same concepts. Of course, taking into consideration the differentiation of historians, we should not hope for a single point of view on the system-forming definitions of this scientific discipline. Nevertheless, it is necessary to agree on a common understanding of the used historical terms [31].

Summarizing the research on the postmodern model's influence of historical knowledge on modern Ural historians, the authors cannot agree with A. V. Lubskey that "in general, the postmodern model of historical knowledge has no relation to the science, since it denies the attributive features of scientific historical research" [14]. This impact should be assessed differentially. It is positive to expand the arsenal of theoretical concepts and especially the methods of historical research, which can be used by a modern researcher. There has been a significant expansion of the scientific research issues, completely new problems have been raised, and approaches to the study of traditional problems have changed.

The negative features of the postmodernism's manifestation include the spread of mass consciousness relativism with regard to the criteria for assessing historical knowledge, the spread of some scientists' opinion about the uselessness of following the exact sciences canons, passion for pluralism, neglecting scientific terminology, etc.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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