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From the Editors

11 September 2001: The Return of History

There was a time not long ago when it seemed that geopolitical history was dead. The grand narratives of nations in conflict, much beloved by everyone from Herodotus to Ranke, had been found wanting for one or another reason. The first blow was struck by left-leaning historians in the 1960s and 1970s. E. P. Thompson and his followers labeled grand history elitist and called on the politically conscious to write social history “from below.” In the years that followed, it seemed that everyone did so: the 1970s witnessed a flood of histories in which tsars, ministers, and generals were supplanted by peasants, pipe fitters, and pie-makers. The common man was, as promised, saved from obscurity. But populist sympathies were not the only force behind the flight from grand narratives. A second blow was struck in the 1980s by the proponents of the new history of power. What might be called the “Foucauldian moment” shifted historical interests away from power writ-large and toward power writ-small. Historians who in an earlier time might have written about this or that Franco-Russian alliance instead applied French social theory to Russian “discourse” and “techniques of power.” New territory was opened by this fruitful exchange, and new ways of seeing old stories were written. But the assault on the grand narrative did not end there. A third blow was struck by the end of the Cold War and the putative “End of History.” For a very brief moment (doubtless to be seen as a golden age of innocence by future historians) it seemed that the very need for high political and especially diplomatic history had evaporated along with the Soviet Union. Books about the battle of nations seemed more and more like relics of a bloody and thankfully closed era in world history. American global hegemony meant, or so many said, peace in our time.

Geopolitical history – the stuff of history itself to an earlier age – slowly lost ground in this 30-year battle of attrition. As new generations of social and theoretical historians populated history departments, military and diplomatic historians often left them. As a result of shifting interests and limited expertise, graduate programs reduced their course offerings in geopolitical history. Doctorates in military and diplomatic history became more rare, as did undergraduate concentrations in these areas. Professional historians, believing that geopolitics was somehow elitist, uninteresting or irrelevant, abandoned the field to amateurs working in popular media. The rise of the History Channel offers a telling example. Shunning the standard military fare of what many derisively call the “Hitler Channel,” academic historians missed a golden opportunity to inform the public about matters historical.

On 11 September 2001, the bill for our neglect of geopolitical affairs came due, and we could not pay it. The terrorist attacks on the centers of American global power demonstrated forcefully the importance of geopolitics to historical understanding in our age. In the wake of the attacks, Americans quite naturally began to ask questions of a geopolitical nature: who are the Taliban and who backs them? Why are some of the Muslim nations of the Middle East so enraged by American actions? What role does the Israeli-Arab conflict play in producing their anger? What interests did the other major powers in the world have in the American campaign against terror, particularly in Afghanistan? In a word, Americans wanted a quick, concise tutorial in great-power politics over the last half-millennium. Yet what did they get? Historically ill-informed pundits on CNN; hastily produced, shallow “documentaries” on Arab terrorism; just-add-water books on the history of Middle East by journalists; and rivers of blood, as always, on the History Channel. In the main, professional historians were silent. They contributed little to the collective process by which the American citizenry was “brought up to speed” on the tangle that is modern geopolitical history.

The chasm between the interests of the public and academic historians has been wide for some time, but only recently has this rift become dangerous to the free world. America is a democracy. The people will elect the officials who will chart our course in these difficult times. It is, therefore, a necessity that the public be informed by trustworthy experts, including historians knowledgeable in geopolitical history. The community of professional historians must recommit itself to the study and dissemination of intelligent, balanced, and comprehensible diplomatic and military history. The “big picture” must return, for all our sakes.

In this effort, Russian and Eurasian historians should play a crucial role, as they have precisely the regional expertise that is need to inform public debate on current and future policy. Eurasia, for so long a neglected backwater of history, has quickly moved to the fore of world consciousness. Two months ago most Americans could not identify Afghanistan on a map; now many are at least acquainted with the geography around Kabul. Immediately to the north of Afghanistan lies another “blank spot” in American consciousness – Central Asia. In November 2001, as this issue goes to press, the new states of this region, and Uzbekistan in particular, are coming to play a vital role in the United States’ campaign against the Taliban. The fates of Central Asia and Russia have been bound up for nearly seven centuries; the well-worn Moscow-Tashkent axis of interests, almost unknown to the world before September 11, has become a centerpiece of American foreign policy in the region. Russian and Eurasian historians have a duty to ensure that the public, in America and abroad, understands the history of this complex region.