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IN MEMORIAM

J. Arch Getty

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Like Sabatini's Scaramouche, Arch Getty "was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad." He possessed a quick wit and wry sense of humor; he did not suffer fools lightly. Although he encountered many, his strong social skills and graceful demeanor often masked his opinions. They rightfully found him polite and engaging. He appreciated the irony. He was also a very generous person who opened his home and heart to many. He was always eager to engage in discussions of the USSR in the 1930s with colleagues and graduate students to whom he was a generous mentor. As a man who enjoyed his indulgences, he preferred to have such discussions over dinner or drinks, including coffee, which he himself roasted. But that was his preferred daylight beverage. Whatever the setting or time, conversations with Arch were stimulating and despite the topic, always fun. Knowing him as we did, Arch asked the three of us—William Chase, Gábor Rittersporn, and Lewis Siegelbaum—to write this brief remembrance.

Arch was one of the key figures in revising the previously dominant narratives and tropes associated with the so-called totalitarian approach to what made the Soviet Union under Iosif Stalin tick. He never sought to discover what went wrong with the Soviet adventure and what were its prospects. Rather, he was interested in Soviet realities as they happened to be, and he explored them in the best tradition of "*sine ira et studio*."

As a political historian, Arch more than ably represented the arrival of that discipline in a field previously dominated by political science. In *Origins of the Great Purges* (1985), his careful primary research led him to reject the image of a tightly organized party controlled from the center by an omnipotent leader. He did so by bringing to bear the Smolensk Archive and other then little-used sources to demonstrate that the party over which Stalin presided was often badly organized, inefficient and faction-ridden, reacting to social processes as much as instigating them. He thereby expanded the scope of historical understanding beyond the center to address center-periphery relations and, to cite some of his favorite expressions, the "little screws" as well as the "big cheese." He did so in prose that was always precise and to the point but could be laced with tongue-in-cheek irony and witty allusions.

Subsequent books included *Stalinist Terror,* co-edited with his former advisor Roberta Manning (1993), *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939,* with Oleg Naumov (1999), and *Practicing Stalinism: Boyars, Bolsheviks, and the Persistence of Political Traditions* (2014). Among myriad articles he published, special mention should be made of "Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years," *American Historical Review* (Oct. 1993) which Arch wrote with Gábor T. Rittersporn and Viktor N. Zemskov and which remains the definitive work on the numbers of arrests, incarcerations and deaths resulting from Stalinist state repression. All these works took advantage of his extraordinary

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access to the formerly secret Communist Party and police archives. Access to such rich sources started with scholarly relations with Soviet historians that began with The Soviet Data Bank (constructed with Bill Chase), which sought to create a public political and biographical archive. When the USSR collapsed, those personal relations made possible the creation of the Russian Publications Series, created by Arch, Jeff Burds, Bill Chase, and Greg Freeze, which used federal and private funds to finance the production of guides to important central archives and their international distribution. Those guides remain the most complete listing of those archives' holdings. Arch himself helped to compile and edit the *Kratkii Putevoditel',* the invaluable guide to collections in the Central Party Archive (1993) and *Lubianka-Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1932–1934 g.g.)*, with A. N. Sakharov (2002). Supported by a bevy of federal institutions whose survival is now threatened, Arch in turn supported research by other scholars through his founding and directing of the non-profit Praxis International. He also organized and directed the Moscow Study Center of the University of California Education Abroad Program. These activities reflected his generosity of spirit, readiness to help fellow researchers with counsel, and sense of justice and solidarity.

Arch's last publication was *Reflections on Stalinism* (2024), co-edited with Lewis Siegelbaum. In his essay on "Fear, Belief, and Stalinism," he likened the archives where he loved to dwell to laboratories in which scientists "study the horrors of cancer, AIDS, or Alzheimer's." "Like my colleagues with their test tubes," he wrote in the final sentence, "I still feel the need to try and explain the unimaginable."

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