

# **The Future of Slavic Area Studies**

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## **Introduction**

Slavic area study programs are undergoing a major transformation and will be structured in a radically different way over the next ten years. The transformation results from the confluence of several new developments in world history: 1) the breakup of the Soviet empire into a multiplicity of independent nationalities; 2) the end of secrecy and deliberate misreporting of social and economic data by the former republics and satellite countries of the Soviet Union; 3) the enormous expansion of data collection and analysis by national and international institutions; and 4) the spread of scholarly and scientific learning unadulterated by formal ideological constraints. These developments have had and will continue to have a differential impact on the practice of area specialists in the social sciences and in the humanities, but the overall outcome will be a field of Slavic studies that is very different for both categories of scholars.

## **The Anthropological Basis of Cold War Social Science Research**

The development of Slavic studies in the United States was based upon the methodology of anthropology. It was no accident that the first director of the Harvard Russian Research Center was the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn. The first major research project conducted at the Russian Research Center was the Harvard Refugee Project, which was led by an anthropologist, Raymond Bauer, and a sociologist, Alex Iokeles. The methodology of anthropology was not directly relevant to historians of Russia, or to students of Russian and Soviet literature. History and literature were always based on geography and language areas, and history, language and literature departments in universities and colleges in the United States expected scholars to have the necessary linguistic skills and familiarity with national cultures. This was not generally the case, however, for the social sciences. Studying the economics and politics of the Soviet Union and of Eastern Europe during the Cold War could not be carried out in the way one might study an open system, such as France or Great Britain. The scholar had to approach the subject very much the way an anthropologist would approach the study of a primitive society. The scholar would need to familiarize him or herself with the language and culture in order to understand the structure and functioning of the society. One way to do that would be to identify certain 'informants', individual members of the society who were knowledgeable and could communicate to the scholar the general and unique features it exhibited.

It followed that economists, political scientists, international affairs specialists, sociologists and other social scientists would need to immerse themselves in the language, history and culture of the Soviet Union and/or its satellites in addition to learning the fundamental elements of their own disciplines in order to research and study the societies behind the Iron Curtain of the Cold War. Thus, history, language and literature for these countries benefited from the development and expansion of social science studies because these fields formed the core-training program of Slavic areas studies. The growth of Soviet/Russian area studies was, of course, driven by the Cold War and funded by the US and other governments primarily for security reasons. Anthropology as a field, ironically, did not benefit in the long-run from the growth of Soviet area studies despite having contributed to it methodologically. This was mainly because there was little or no access to real 'informants'. Western social scientists became surrogate informants instead. Sociology and anthropology flourished only briefly during the Harvard Refugee Project of the early 1950s, which interviewed thousands of displaced persons both as informants in specialized interview projects and as respondents in the Inkeles and Bauer survey.

The closed nature of the countries behind the Iron Curtain and the physical and ideological isolation of their scholars meant that Western social scientists had to collect the data through laborious searches of sometimes only barely relevant sources, analyze the data using standard disciplinary methods, and publish in specialized journals and presses, many of which were not standard mainstream disciplinary products. So long as the Cold War continued and the Iron Curtain effectively screened out native scholars, informants and respondents, Soviet specialists were honored, promoted and their research was generously funded. With the end of the Cold War the situation changed fundamentally and irreversibly. Moreover, with the opening up of those previously closed societies, the anthropological methodology came under serious criticism within the social science disciplines. Anthropology has always had a very strong bias toward cultural relativism. Economics as a discipline, for example, on the contrary has sought to be a true science with absolute findings. Something similar holds for other social science fields. This foreshadowed conflict between social scientists proper and area specialists once the latter became less necessary for nonacademic reasons.

## **Too Much of a Good Thing: The Explosion of Independent Nations**

The break away of East-Central Europe from the Soviet empire and the subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union into fifteen independent countries overwhelmed Slavic Studies. So long as the Soviet empire existed behind the Iron Curtain our scanty coverage of the different nations and nationalities was not so obvious, but once the curtain rose and independence reigned it became obvious that we did not have sufficient scholars with adequate training to cover

the new reality with any degree of proficiency. Previously we studied the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as two entities with little regard to nationalities or ethnic groups. It was as though we agreed with Leonid Brezhnev's dictum that the Soviet Union had 'solved the nationality problem'. There was a certain logic to the practice because Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe and Russification in the USSR did create a significant degree of homogeneity of politics, economics and social structure. After the dissolution of the Soviet and Russian empires the nakedness of our field became obvious. No center or institute could hope to cover more than a country here and another there. Meanwhile, each new or freed country began a process of differentiating itself from the others. Generalization about economic reform, democratization, and so forth became increasingly hollow. And events in the now many small, non-threatening remnants of the former Soviet empire were of much less concern to both governmental and private funding agencies.

## **Open Societies: Data Availability and Reliability**

As the former satellites and republics of the USSR became independent thanks to the end of the Cold War, economic, political and sociological data became increasingly available and more reliable too. The economic statistical agencies switched to Western (or international) social accounting measures. Now it was Gross Domestic Product, not Net Material Product. Marxist categories melted away to be replaced with standard economic terminology. Political scientists and sociologists were now able to conduct surveys and polls, or to gain access to those conducted by native scholars, which allowed them to carry out mainstream political and social analyses of politics and social developments previously off limits even for native scholars. The difficult methodological problems that had faced the Harvard Refugee Project of the 1950s and the Soviet Interview Project of the 1970-80s no longer dogged analysis and interpretation of household preferences, political commitments and social conflicts. From now on, with some exceptions, external and domestic scholars would be able to study these countries in the same way we had studied France, Germany or Spain previously. The 'official opinion' has been discarded for the study of 'public opinion'.

## **Data Collection and Analysis by International and National Agencies**

During the Cold War the CIA spend a great deal of manpower and money attempting to measure economic, social and political developments behind the Iron Curtain. Today data are collected, collated and evaluated by national bodies in each country and by the major international institutions: the IMF, World Bank, EBRD, Democracy House, and so forth. Almost all of these studies are presented in the English language. These agencies and institutions

employ native researchers to collect and describe the data. There is no need for American scholars, for example, to get their hands dirty hunting for data and testing it for reliability. Similarly, US government agencies need not construct their own tables and expend valuable intelligence resources to do so. What is more, non-specialist scholars are now able to use these data to analyze and compare countries that were previously the sole domain of the Soviet specialist. The monopoly of Soviet studies was broken by the Cold War and the creation of the new open societies. The rationale for Soviet or post-Soviet specialists has been undermined.

## **The End of Ideological Constraints on Native Scholars and Analytical Training**

In Soviet times native scholars in the various countries of the Soviet and Russian empires were severely constrained in the kind of analyses they were allowed to conduct. It was not sufficient to find a citation somewhere in Marx, Engels, Lenin or Stalin to support a view or interpretation. Certain 'leading scholars' provided the correct interpretations and the only suitable quotations from the published doctrine. In many areas, such as economics for example, economic analyses standard for mainstream economists were forbidden and punished as bourgeois. For years discussions of 'plan and market' could only be conducted cautiously and tentatively. Consequently non-native scholars found little useful in Soviet type analyses. One tried to ferret out the data and conduct a proper analysis.

Today things have changed radically. Young scholars in the social sciences (and in the humanities also) have been trained in European or American educational institutions, or they are being trained by those who were educated earlier in the West. There is no longer an official line to constrain interpretations or analyses. The American economic specialist on things Soviet, East European or Post-Soviet is no longer a unique scholarly resource. There is no longer a need to create the anthropological equivalent of a native informant out of an American social scientist. A Russian, Ukrainian, or Georgian scholar has all the language and cultural background required, and he or she is likely to have an edge after acquiring modern scholarly training. Increasingly, studying the countries of the former Soviet empire is just like studying any open social system anywhere in the world. Most of the work of data collection, analysis and publication will be done by native scholars. Consequently, there is no need for Western governments to provide hefty pecuniary incentives to persuade a young social scientist to take the additional time to become immersed in the culture as well as learning the discipline. Only those who truly love the country sufficiently to put in the additional time will be non-native scholars.

## Conclusions

The implications of the changes I have described for area studies are pretty much self-evident. Increasingly, area centers will consist primarily of historians, linguists and language and literature specialists. Economists have already disappeared for the most part. Political scientists and international affairs specialists will be next. In fact, there is a likelihood that area centers will wither away entirely. Without continued substantial federal and private foundation funding, centers are likely to disappear or to be greatly diminished in size and reach. The benefit of being a member will diminish too, which may make it unattractive to face disciplinary opprobrium for being an area specialist in the social sciences.

There is one bright exception. The International Council for East European and Eurasian Studies (ICEEES) offers the possibility of creating a true international center for area studies. In this case, areas would be represented by scholars from the countries in question, plus a few die-hard nonnative specialists. Our meetings would become international meetings of scholars interested in cross-country comparison and in in-depth studies of individual countries.