

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Knowing the Cold War Enemy

“If military leaders have not the sense enough to counter Soviet propaganda without hiring a bunch of college professors then this defense establishment is in one darn bad shape,” quoted David Engerman of Brandeis University, author of *Know Your Enemy: the Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts*. This quotation comes from a 1953 U.S. Senate debate about the U.S. Air Force budget for a project called “The Working Model of the Soviet Social System.” It captures a popular attitude towards Soviet studies during the 1950s. “One of the problems was that the senators viewed the working model of the Soviet system like a model for a train, or an airplane. They were afraid of what would happen if it got out of the lab,” remarked Engerman.

The criticism of Soviet studies, a field that emerged in the United States with the founding of the Russian Institute (now the Harriman Institute) in 1946, was dual-sided. Government officials questioned the value of combining academia with security efforts, while academics worried that Soviet scholarship was trapped in a web of government agenda focused on fighting the Cold War.

“Early Sovietology was a creature of World War II as much as it was a creature of the Cold War,” Engerman said. Institutions established during World War II “provided the innovation and structure for Soviet studies.” In turn, Soviet studies served as the model for an area studies approach to graduate training that formed in the late 1940s and 50s. It was the groundwork for the Naval School of Military Affairs, which became the foundation for Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs.

Harvard founded its Russian Research Center in 1948, two years after the founding of Columbia’s Russian Institute. Although government experience was a prerequisite for the core faculty of both Soviet Studies centers, the founders of these programs emphasized that the goal of area studies institutions was not about “knowing thy enemy,” but to “produce the objective science of mankind.”

The two centers settled on a division of labor, with Harvard taking on the research portion and

Columbia conducting the Masters and PhD level training, yet there was always a level of competition between them. Engerman recalled a “backhanded compliment,” given to Columbia by Clyde Kluckhohn, the first director of the Russian Research Center. Kluckhohn commended Columbia for excelling at the “less glamorous work.”

While scholars of the early 1950s were eager to examine Soviet society, they had virtually no access to it. Most of their information on the Soviet Union came from stories of people who had gone there. The first behavioral study of the Soviet Union was the “Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, 1950-1951: Life History Interview Recodes.” A team of twenty-five young researchers administered questionnaires to Soviet persons displaced after WWII and residing in Germany, Austria and the United States.

“The project was sold to the Pentagon on the basis of how well it could train scholars as well as the product it would produce,” commented Engerman. Its goals were purely academic and the organizers refused to conduct classified research, because the idea was “to fit into the mainstream of academic sociology of that time.” The ultimate result was more successful academically than in terms of government intelligence. The project treated the Soviet Union as a modern industrial society and “was strikingly sociological, focusing much more on society than on politics.”

Scholarly trips to the Soviet Union finally became possible through the Inter University Committee for Travel Grants (IUCTG), which became the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) in the 1960s, with the first trip taking place in February of 1956, the same week that Khrushchev gave his secret speech denouncing Joseph Stalin. “These scholars received thirty day visas to spend time in a country to which they were devoting their intellectual lives,” remarked Engerman.

The Bakhmeteff Archive was the next project of “Columbia’s Russianist Empire.” This was a research program on the Soviet Union that tried to produce primary sources on the field. “Because of Columbia’s work we have a history of the imperial

period and can understand the structures of Soviet politics,” Engerman said, adding that the focus on infrastructure and sources “produced the body of scholarship we now have.” Because of these efforts, the U.S. has become an important beacon for researchers of Russia and other former Soviet Republics.

Engerman concluded that the training accomplished was the greatest success of Soviet Studies. Area studies have created “an indispensable training agenda.”

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner