



This academic year marks a major milestone: the 75th anniversary of the Harriman Institute. Founded in 1946 as the Russian Institute within Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs, it quickly became a national hub of interdisciplinary research, outreach, and debate about the region. The Institute was the first of its kind in North America—a foundational den of what was known as Sovietology. Much has happened since, including the renaming of the Institute in 1982 in honor of a major gift made by Averell Harriman, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the plunge into the unprecedented post-Communist transitions in Russia and the Soviet successor states.

Rather than mark our 75th anniversary with a celebratory institutional history, we wanted to reflect on how the mission of the Institute—to promote world-class research, understanding, and debate about the region—has evolved throughout these different eras. Indeed, as the world has changed, so too has regional studies as an academic field and professional practice. I want to briefly highlight three trends:

First, the space of the region can no longer be bound by the political geography or administrative boundaries of the post-Soviet or post-Communist countries. During the Cold War, our research networks and communities, located “over here,” were conditioned to ascertain what was happening in the political and social life of a far-flung region that remained fixed “over there.” In this global era, however, we see more transnational actors and processes that actively shape our understanding. Multiple generations of the Eurasian diaspora, such as Ukrainians and Uzbeks right here in New York City, selectively engage with the political and social life back home; we celebrate artists and writers moving between countries, interfacing with cultural communities across Eurasia, Europe, and North America; and governments and exiled political opposition leaders play cat-and-mouse games overseas, battling in media and litigating their disputes in foreign courts, such as in the UK. What constitutes the “region” and its spaces is so much more fluid and globalized than it once was.

Second, far from what we once viewed as the Soviet monolith, this evolving “region” involves increasingly complex dynamics, encompassing a mix of local, national, and transnational actors and processes that align and associate themselves with a variety of cultural influences and historical backgrounds. The governments and, by extension, national academies of the individual post-Communist countries are forging their own histories, cultural guidelines, and research agendas, while these same flourishing scholarly communities now interface with their counterparts in North America and Europe. Moreover, the major regional conflicts we have witnessed in Georgia, Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh have forged new national identities as political leaders and publics redefine their identities and political orientation. The influence of the European Union and the West is welcomed in some countries and openly rejected in others, while other external players like China and Turkey are also rapidly reshaping the region.

Finally, we see area studies engaging with exciting new fields and academic partners. The classic tension between interdisciplinary “area studies” and the disciplines that privilege comparative theory and methods itself seems increasingly anachronistic. One such area is the exploding new field of social media analysis and communications scholarship, where researchers now

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use the big data found in the mass use of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to study matters such as cultural trends and the dynamics of social protest movements, while the digitization of humanities is changing our perceptions of contemporary cultural associations. Moreover, beyond the traditional academic “disciplines” of the arts and sciences, area studies centers like the Harriman are increasingly engaging with professional schools and researchers from fields like journalism, law, social work, and higher education. Many of these researchers and professionals are eager to learn from the contextual and interdisciplinary approach of regional studies as they engage in their own discussions about global best practices and standards. In turn, there are now new fields and professional careers for our graduates. Though many continue to pursue traditional careers in government and academia, new private and not-for-profit actors that interface with the region, such as in the blossoming political risk analysis sector, greatly appreciate the interdisciplinary skill sets of our contemporary regional studies graduates.

In recognition of some of these trends, for our two 75th anniversary issues of the magazine we have reached out to our multigenerational community of alumni, faculty, and practitioners and asked them to give us a unique insight into how some of the professional fields and activities associated with studying the Soviet and post-Soviet region have evolved over the decades, as well as into the challenges that they face today. This is the first of our two anniversary issues, and we take up the important, but underappreciated, role of academic and expert community exchanges as important forms of intercultural transmission and understanding. We include a piece by Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier on her experience with the U.S.-Soviet exchanges of the Cold War era, including her stint as tour guide in 1959 at the National American Exhibition in Moscow, where participants were given glimpses into the daily life and conditions of the other sphere. Later she made frequent research trips to the USSR, where the name of her mentor Philip Mosely opened many doors. We are very fortunate to have a contribution from Mark Pomar, former president and CEO of IREX (as well as a Harriman alumnus and member of our National Advisory Council [NAC]), who was based in Leningrad as an IREX senior scholar in 1981. For the better part of his career Mark has energetically designed and overseen ambitious programs in areas including media, policy, law, and education that strove to export best practices and civil society engagement to assist in the project of post-Soviet political and economic transition. And, Julie Newton (also a distinguished alumna and NAC member), the principal investigator of the University Consortium—an academic exchange network founded in 2015 to encourage mutual understanding among students in the U.S., EU, and Russia—reflects on the challenges of fostering empathy and understanding of each side’s contending narratives in the wake of the Ukraine conflict in 2014.

The other topic we are spotlighting is journalism and what it means in practice to cover developments in the Soviet Union, Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe. The section opens with Colette Shulman’s recollections on the challenges she faced as a United Press reporter in Moscow and Warsaw in the 1950s, whether interviewing Pasternak after he won the Nobel Prize or reporting on everyday life in Moscow. Colette continued her reporting career in the 1960s in Cambridge,

Massachusetts, with her public television program, *Soviet Press This Week*. We also include a piece by Ann Cooper, who was NPR's Moscow correspondent in the final years of the Soviet Union and later executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists and a faculty member at Columbia Journalism School. She recalls the perceived freedoms journalists felt at the end of the USSR and contrasts that optimistic period with the challenges facing journalists in Putin's Russia. Justin Burke—publisher, executive director, and founder of Eurasianet (hosted in the Harriman Institute's office space since 2016)—writes about the ups and downs of running a website devoted to covering Central Asia and the Caucasus, which launched out of the Open Society Institute (now the Open Society Foundations) during the early years of internet publishing in 1999 and became an independent nonprofit during the rise of the misinformation age in 2016. Finally, we have a piece by our alumnus Joshua Yaffa ('08), who has been covering Russia since the Bolotnaya protests and is currently a Moscow correspondent at the *New Yorker*. Josh writes about the evolution of his experience covering Putin's Russia and reflects on the challenges faced by journalists there today.

We also have two stories in addition to our anniversary themes—an interview with alumnus and former Harriman director Timothy Frye ('92) about his new book, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, and an excerpt from Volodymyr Rafeyenko's novel, *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*, translated from the Ukrainian by Mark Andryczyk.

This particular issue of *Harriman Magazine* is bittersweet for me as it is the final one where I have the privilege of penning the director's letter. Though the pandemic has brought great personal and professional challenges for all of us, it has also affirmed to me the extraordinary nature of the Harriman's supportive and dynamic global community. More than ever, our remarkable students, alumni, and faculty continue to actively shape our understanding of the region, whether as members of academia, government, the private sector, or influential civil society organizations. It has been a privilege to learn from them and their groundbreaking achievements. I am also grateful that the future of the Institute is brighter than ever, with a dedicated and talented staff and the incoming leadership of Valentina Izmirlieva, a distinguished intellectual historian and member of the Department of Slavic Languages who specializes in both studying and promoting intraregional connections and understanding. These last six years have been among the most rewarding of my professional life, but I am now excited to return to conducting more intensive research and teaching and mentoring students under the auspices of the Institute. As always, I look forward to seeing you all on the 12th floor.

All the best,



Alexander Cooley  
Director, Harriman Institute