



# THE DISAPPEARANCE OF FEAR

## A PROFILE OF ANN COOPER

BY RONALD MEYER

**A**nn Cooper (CBS Professor of Professional Practice in International Journalism) joined fellow former Moscow correspondents for the roundtable discussion “Russia Hands,” sponsored by the Overseas Press Club of America and the Harriman Institute, on February 24, 2016. (Video is available on the Harriman website.) Cooper, who referred to her posting in Moscow in 1986–91 as “the good years,” arrived in the capital city as NPR’s first Moscow correspondent. The move to Moscow in late 1986 entailed not only nine months of intensive language lessons and moving halfway across the world, but also learning a new platform—radio. She had received three offers for Moscow postings, but chose NPR because of its national audience. NPR assured Cooper that she would be trained, but she admits, “There wasn’t much training.” She did, however, possess a clear and distinctive voice that was perfect for radio—and fifteen years’ experience as a working journalist in newspapers and magazines. For many of us she remains the “voice” of perestroika.

Neither Cooper nor NPR, however, had foreseen the months the Foreign Ministry would take to process her press credentials, and during this time she worked for The Associated Press. Alone in the AP office one weekend in early 1987, she starts reading reports coming through on the telex that political prisoners were being released from the camps in Perm. Cooper decides to telephone Andrei Sakharov’s apartment to get confirmation of the story, and, as always, Elena Bonner, his wife and protector, answers. Cooper summons all her Russian—and most people will recognize how much more difficult it is to speak in a foreign language over the phone (particularly a bad Soviet phone line) than it is with

your interlocutor in the same room—to tell Bonner that she is receiving reports of political prisoners being released from the camps. Bonner replies that they are hearing the same thing and is about to hang up, saying she needs to keep the line open. Cooper pushes the point and asks whether Bonner can confirm the names that she has collated from the telex, which gets Bonner interested and the conversation continues as Bonner confirms most of the names from reports by the prisoners’ families. Cooper receives confirmation for her story, which goes out on AP—but without a byline because she lacks credentials. Months pass without any word from the Foreign Ministry on her NPR credentials, and, finally, AP applies to have Cooper credentialed with them, believing that NPR’s case will never be resolved. In its infinite wisdom, however, the Foreign Ministry instead approves her NPR application. This little story illustrates quite plainly the importance of personal connections in Gorbachev’s Russia and the illogicality of the omnipresent Soviet bureaucracy.

Cooper refers to the “accident of timing” in regard to her Moscow years—that when she arrived in December 1986 it was still the gray Soviet Union, but that this changed almost immediately with the release of Sakharov and political prisoners such as Lev Timofeyev and Sergei Grigoryants in 1987, among many earth-shattering events. She also credits the year 1987 with two “defining moments” that influenced how she would report the story from Moscow. The first is a series of phone calls made to her home by Russian sources informing her that Fyodor Finkel, a Jewish refusenik who had been on a hunger strike, had received permission to emigrate. Not just one call, but three or four. And it finally dawns on her what has changed:



From top to bottom: In front of Yeltsin's White House a few days after the August 1991 coup attempt failed—remnants of the barricades built by Yeltsin supporters remain on the site; Cooper's press credentials in the Soviet Union as NPR correspondent

"They're calling me at home." Russian citizens simply did not call foreign journalists at their home as everyone assumed that the phones would be bugged, just as foreigners never called Russians from their hotel or apartment, but always from a pay phone on the street. (Foreigners instantly became hoarders of two-kopeck pieces for the street pay phones.) When Cooper asks the Russian callers what has changed, has the KGB stopped bugging the phones, the reply is revelatory: "No, but it doesn't matter anymore."

The second defining moment is the August 1987 anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the nonaggression treaty between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and the public demonstrations and rally held at the Adam Mickiewicz Monument in Vilnius, Lithuania, despite the Soviet ban on such protests. Cooper attended the demonstration and interviewed participants, whose numbers grew as the day wore on. Cooper was struck by a number of things, including the fact that the public protest was not shut down—as virtually any such attempts at protest had been for decades; people were willing to be interviewed, despite the obvious presence of KGB personnel; there were no arrests; and, finally, the protest was written about in advance in the Soviet press—albeit in a negative light.

These two moments early on in her tenure as Moscow bureau chief led Cooper to the conclusion that the story she most wanted to cover, the story that would define the era, was the "disappearance of fear." "People were losing their fear and speaking out as never before. It was both exhausting and exhilarating," she observed. The story could be broken down into many constituent components (economic and political reforms, religious freedom, environmentalism, reclaiming Soviet history)—foreign correspondents and Soviet journalists could barely keep up with breaking events—but on some very basic level it all came down to the disappearance of fear, a theme in many of her stories, and the focus of a long analysis she did for NPR in 1990.

Cooper ends the narrative of her Moscow years with two events from 1991: the Soviet invasion of Lithuania in January that did not succeed in bringing the country back into the Soviet fold, and the failed coup in August. Cooper writes about how the foreign press reported the latter in the volume she coedited, *Russia at the Barricades: Eyewitness Accounts of the August 1991 Coup* (with Victoria Bonnell and Gregory Freidin). From the time



that she received news of the coup, while in Lithuania researching a story on Lithuania's independence campaign, through the uncertain but exciting days of navigating the barricades at the Moscow White House and the return of Mikhail Gorbachev, Cooper chronicles those three days in August that come to an end with an emergency session of the Russian parliament called by Boris Yeltsin. At that session she meets a smiling Lev Timofeyev, the same Timofeyev from that early AP story, who greets her with the words, "We've won." She wants to check the rumors that the tanks are leaving Red Square, but needs to rush home to file her report for NPR's *Morning Edition*. While preparing her report, she receives confirmation from her chauffeur, Volodya, that the tanks are leaving the Kremlin.

In answer to the question, "Were we too romantic in our expectations and reporting in Moscow?" Cooper replies that perhaps the West and Western correspondents covering the final stages of the Soviet Union were too enamored of free speech and the sight of large, peaceful demonstrations. Those were real, dramatic, and important—but so was the economic collapse that was taking place at the same time. And it turned out that for some people, the prospect of hunger, job loss, or devalued rubles was so frightening that those fears began to outweigh the exhilaration over the growing political freedoms people enjoyed.

"I tell my students, learn from me, learn from the Arab Spring and what came after, and what happened after the color revolutions. Now the landscape is littered with examples like these," where euphoric political change is followed by political disappointment, or chaos.

Both the unsuccessful Soviet invasion of Lithuania and the aborted coup seemed to ring the death knell for the Soviet Union, which indeed did dissolve at the end of the year. Today with the hindsight of a quarter century we can see that another narrative was taking shape. Cooper now invites Harriman Director Alex Cooley, author of the essay "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms" (*Journal of Democracy*, 2015), to speak to her classes about this other story, which was completely overshadowed by the hopeful picture of a democratizing Russia, but which has taken center stage today.

Moscow, however, represents only some five years from an extraordinary career as journalist and educator, so I would like to step back and see how Cooper came to be in Moscow at this crucial historical juncture.

When I sat down with Cooper in her office on the sixth floor of Pulitzer Hall, she recounted how her interest in journalism all began with a high school English teacher, who complimented Cooper on her writing and suggested that she enroll in her journalism class. By senior year Cooper was editor of the high school newspaper, and that set her on her career. She majored in journalism as an undergraduate at Iowa State University, which later honored her with its James W. Schwartz Award (1997) for service to journalism, as well as its Alumni Merit Award (2006), in recognition of her "outstanding contributions to human welfare that transcend purely professional accomplishments and bring honor to the university." As Cooper wryly put it when describing her undergraduate days, she "majored in something that doesn't exist anymore: home economics journalism." Journalism, like so many of the professions in the early 1970s, was essentially a man's world.

She landed her first professional job as assistant to the food editor in the summer of 1971 at the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, one of the great regional papers. The rise of the consumer movement, personified by political activist Ralph Nader, highlighted national issues concerning food, including things like fat content, bacterial contamination, and food labeling. Cooper seized the opportunity and was soon doing stories for

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the newsroom on food issues and eventually moved to the newsroom full time to devote her energies to consumer reporting in general.

During her tenure at the *Courier-Journal* Cooper attended a weeklong educational seminar organized by the Washington Journalism Center and devoted to consumer reporting. That week in the nation's capital,



Cooper in Perm, interviewing Soviet men who had served in Afghanistan, for a story on how the public was finally beginning to learn about the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. This was in the winter of 1989. She was the first American allowed into Perm since Stalin closed the city. Gorbachev opened the city the following year.

during which she met with a number of prominent figures in the consumer movement, whetted her appetite, and in 1974 she returned for the Center's four-month fellowship, again meeting a number of up-and-coming politicians and newsmakers, including Joe Biden, and falling in love with D.C.

Back in Louisville and looking for a job in D.C., she landed a position with the Capitol Hill News Service, popularly known as the Nader News Service in recognition of the support it received from Nader's Public Citizen, Inc. Capitol Hill News was founded by Peter Gruenstein, a D.C. attorney who had authored a study for Nader on how the press covers Congress, finding that only 27 percent of U.S. dailies had their own correspondents; the majority relied on press releases sent out by the offices of congressional representatives, which hardly presented an unbiased picture. All the Capitol Hill News staff were paid the un princely sum of \$8,000 a year, which, as Cooper noted, "even then was not much money. But we all so believed in what we were doing. And it was a lot of fun."

From the mid-seventies Cooper stayed in D.C., working at Capitol Hill News, *Congressional Quarterly*,

the *Baltimore Sun*, and *National Journal* magazine—all print platforms, which reflected her journalism training. And then she made the move from print to broadcast journalism and traded D.C. for five years in Moscow. In addition to covering events in the Soviet Union, during her Moscow tenure NPR sent Cooper to Beijing to cover Gorbachev's historic rapprochement with China. Shortly before the Gorbachev summit, the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests (1989) began, and when Gorbachev made a hasty departure from Beijing, Cooper stayed on to cover the growing protest movement.

Cooper followed up her Moscow assignment with a tour of duty in Johannesburg. The years 1992 to 1995 saw her traveling throughout Africa writing stories and analysis on the famine and international intervention in Somalia; the first multiparty elections in Mozambique and Malawi; and the crisis and cholera epidemic in Zaire, when hundreds of thousands of Rwandans fled there in 1994. Cooper's coverage of South Africa's first all-race elections in 1994 garnered NPR a duPont-Columbia silver baton for excellence in broadcast journalism.

After almost a decade abroad Cooper moved back to the United States, this time New York City, to take up the prestigious Edward R. Murrow Press Fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations (1995–96). Cooper studied refugee issues at the Council, a subject of which she had firsthand knowledge from her reporting in Zaire and elsewhere in Africa. During the term of her fellowship she traveled to Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Haiti, Kenya, Rwanda, and Zaire to produce a series of four reports on refugee policy for NPR's *All Things Considered*.

While many expected the refugee crisis to abate after the end of the Cold War, in fact it had grown more acute as the world became ever more unstable, and few could have predicted the vast global refugee crisis of the present day. In many respects, as Cooper has noted, the refugee problem has taken center stage now, and it's a subject that she continues to follow and for which she shares her expertise; see, for example, the interview with Joseph Erbentraut "How the Media Are Reporting on Europe's Refugee Crisis" (*Huffington Post*, October 9, 2015). As she says in that interview: "There's a lot of good coverage being done . . . , but it's not a brand-new crisis. I think one thing that's overlooked somewhat in the coverage of recent weeks is the degree to which some other countries—namely, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—have been dealing with this massive flow of Syrian refugees for a few years already. . . . Sometimes it feels like the human beings at the center of it become sort of anonymous numbers." While recognizing that fatigue can set in with a story like this and that sometimes it is hard to get people's attention, Cooper concludes her interview by saying, "I think good news organizations don't abandon these stories."

In 1998, after a year of reporting on the United Nations for NPR, Cooper was appointed executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a post she held until coming to Columbia eight years later. She had seen the "tremendous courage of journalists [in the Soviet Union]," as she stated when taking up the position. "It made me want to do what I could to defend journalists in other countries, who work without the press freedom protections that are a hallmark of our American democracy." CPJ brings attention to abuses against the press worldwide and also publishes articles, special reports, and news releases, as well as its annual report, "Attacks on the Press." Cooper has continued to write occasionally for CPJ, most recently a July 2016



*Top:* Cooper in Somalia with two international aid workers at a camp to which people from the countryside came during the famine; the woman on the ground is one of those who came looking for food. *Bottom:* In Spitak, Armenia, a few days after the December 1988 earthquake





essay about Belarusian journalist Pavel Sheremet, who was awarded in absentia the 1998 CPJ International Press Freedom Award at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York (Belarus officials would not allow Sheremet to travel to the U.S.); later that year Cooper presented the award to Sheremet in Minsk. Sheremet, still a CPJ case, was killed by a car bomb in Kyiv this past July. Another CPJ report from 2015, “The Death of Glasnost: How Russia’s Attempt at Openness Failed,” continues the story she began in *Russia at the Barricades*, but now the Russian government rules the air waves, and journalists are ever more at risk.

During her tenure at CPJ, Harvard University’s Nieman Fellows awarded the organization the 2002 Louis Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism: “As increasing numbers of journalists face censure and physical intimidation, the CPJ is a loud and aggressive voice against regimes, governments, and terrorists that seek to threaten human rights and pervert the truth.” CPJ chairman Paul Steiger had this to say on Cooper’s leaving: “Ann has built the programmatic and financial strength of the organization, even as she has become an important public face and voice for the global effort to protect journalists from incarceration and physical violence.”

In 2006 Cooper came to the Columbia School of Journalism to head the school’s broadcast division. At the time journalism students picked a platform (newspaper, magazine, broadcast, digital), whereas now students explore multiple platforms as the profession has changed so much and expectations are that job candidates will have more than one field of expertise. Cooper has been a valued member of the Harriman Institute right from the start. She was tapped early on by Cathy Nepomnyashchy to speak at the institute’s “Legacies” seminar on the press in Russia and share her Moscow experiences, a role that she continues today with director Alex Cooley.

Cooper generously shares her expertise and contacts with the Paul Klebnikov Russian Civil Society Fellowship, which annually brings a working journalist to be in residence at the Harriman Institute. On April 14, 2015, Cooper chaired the panel “Ethics and Approaches to Covering Violent Conflicts,” which featured Klebnikov Fellow Maria Turchenkova, a photojournalist who had been covering the Crimean conflict, and two colleagues from the School of Journalism. (Video is available on the Harriman website.) In her opening remarks Cooper raised some of the problems journalists face in conflict

situations, not the least among them the difficulties for a journalist to cover both sides of the conflict and how you resist being coopted if you choose “to embed” with one party. Cooper takes the story back to the Crimean War in the 1850s—the same war in which Leo Tolstoy served—and William Howard Russell, commonly credited as the first modern war correspondent. Russell’s reports as a civilian journalist to *The Times* of London differed from the usual reports from the field sent by military personnel, who would be unlikely to speak to the unpreparedness of the troops and the poor medical treatment. In fact, Russell’s stories about inadequate medical care prompted a flood of donations and are credited with leading Florence Nightingale to revolutionize battlefield medical procedures, and with ultimately turning the English population against the war. What is the most surprising, perhaps, in this story is how journalists are still finding ways to cope with the issues that Russell singles out in his account of the “first” Crimean war.

Now director of the International Division at the School of Journalism, Cooper remains as much in demand as ever. In 2012 she contributed an article to the *Columbia Journalism Review* on the Putin television organ Russia Today, which had become a favorite platform for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Students in her 2011 “International Newsroom” class had studied RT and other English-language government-sponsored broadcasters. In their findings they quoted Hillary Clinton’s testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the United States is “engaged in an information war. . . . We are losing that war.” Words that have even more resonance today.

In 2013 Cooper interviewed Richard Engel, NBC chief foreign correspondent and the recipient of that year’s John Chancellor Award for Excellence in Journalism, which recognized his “courage under fire and reporting throughout his career that reflects a deep understanding of the Arab world.” (Video of the interview, “Covering Violence,” is posted to Cooper’s website at the School of Journalism.) It’s a great interview by a seasoned journalist, and not a bad starting point to gain an appreciation of Cooper’s broadcasting chops. Among the many questions: What is a journalist? What differentiates a journalist from an activist? How does one distinguish between what a colleague has termed “random acts of journalism”—for example, a bystander’s iPhone video of some incident that is sold to a broadcast

outlet—and that same material used “journalistically,” that is, to tell the story, to *report* on that same incident, making use of the same video? These are questions that Cooper has been tackling at least since her days at the Committee to Protect Journalists. But once you have come to terms with the abstract initial questions, you need to answer much more practical concerns, from the

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***—Paul Steiger***

basic importance of knowing the language and culture when setting off abroad as a journalist, to the more complex issues of journalists’ safety in a world where they can be targeted and murdered for their reporting, kidnapped as hostages, or detained for seemingly no reason. What certainly has changed since William Howard Russell’s day is that war has become even more deadly, and foreign correspondents are now more vulnerable than ever before. ■

*Facing page, from top to bottom: After an interview with Nelson Mandela in 1994, in the first weeks following his election as president of South Africa; in Mogadishu to report (early 1990s)*