Cold Wars and the Academy

AN ANALYTICAL HISTORY OF THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Alexander Cooley became director of the Harriman Institute during a sad period—three months earlier, in March 2015, Catharine Nepomnyashchy, the Institute's first woman director (from 2001 until 2009), had passed away after a battle with cancer. Less than a year before that, the Institute had lost former directors Robert Belknap and William Harkins. And the year prior, Peter Juviler, alumnus, longtime faculty member, and founder of Barnard College's human rights program, had also passed away.

The quick succession of losses was upsetting, and it was also an awakening: many key actors who had shaped the Institute and watched it evolve since its inception were growing older and, if the Institute did not act quickly to record them, their memories and insights might disappear forever.

"There's this assumption that we all know what the Institute was involved in and how it had evolved, but it wasn't at all clear that we would actually be able to

Left to right: Ambassador Jack Matlock, Padma Desai, Marshall Goldman (Harvard Russian Research Center), and Kimberly Marten on a panel at the Harriman Institute (1990s). Matlock, Desai, and Marten are all narrators in the oral history project.

preserve that," Cooley told me in his office on a hot July day in 2018.

Within a month of starting his directorship, Cooley decided that the best and most efficient way to preserve the Harriman's institutional memory would be to conduct an oral history—a series of interviews with select alumni, faculty, former directors, and any other influential actors, whose transcripts would be published as a resource for scholars, journalists, and other interested parties. The goal of the project would be to illuminate not only the Harriman Institute's evolution as an institution, but also the wider impact of the Institute and the field of area studies on both the academic and policy-making spheres.

"I didn't want this to be a vanity project," Cooley told me. "I wanted to open this up to the kind of analytical inquiry that students and faculty would apply to anything else we do at the Institute. And I wanted to debunk the perception that area studies as a cold war discipline hadn't contributed anything independently outside of its object of study, which is the region."

The Russian Institute (now the Harriman Institute) was founded in 1946, in the aftermath of World War II, at a time when U.S. government officials were struggling to understand their new Soviet adversaries and pushing for more experts on the region. The Institute's creation was grounded in a partnership between government and academia. It was also the first manifestation of the area studies model—interdisciplinary research concentrated on one geographical area.

Over the decades, the rise of think tanks and the prevalence of regional experts within government agencies eroded the relationship between government and academia, and diminished the influence of area studies in the policy-making world. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, a growing number of academics began to question the value of area studies altogether.

The focus shifted from the perceived threat of the Soviet Union to the anticipated democratic transition of former Soviet republics and satellites. Meanwhile academics became increasingly absorbed in their disciplines. Political scientists, in particular, gravitated

Left to right: Marshall Shulman, Ambassador Jack Matlock, and John Hazard.

toward quantitative methods and sought out theories they could apply universally rather than from a regional perspective. For many, the regional and interdisciplinary approach of area studies seemed outmoded, particularly in the context of globalization, and institutions like the Harriman Institute had to determine their roles in this new context.

The debate surrounding area studies is one of the many themes addressed in the first 26 interviews of the Harriman Institute's ongoing oral history project, recently released in collaboration with Columbia's Center for Oral History Research at the Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE). The interviews include figures ranging from Ronald Suny, a renowned historian and political scientist who was key in the formation of nationalities studies; to Ambassador Jack Matlock, who served in the Reagan administration and helped negotiate the end of the Cold War with Mikhail Gorbachev; to Jeri Laber, a pioneer of the human rights movement who founded Helsinki Watch, the international human rights organization now known as Human Rights Watch.

The Harriman Institute's oral history set out to address three broad themes, defined at the outset in a strategic blueprint written by George Gavrilis, a political scientist and independent consultant who worked on the project: the Institute's evolution as a source of policy advice and influence in government; the Institute's capacity to promote and sustain the relevance of area studies as a tool for training new generations of decision-makers, regional experts, and diplomats; and the Institute's role in shaping academic fields such as nationality studies and human rights.

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As it happened, the initial 26 interviews took place from May 2016 until April 2017—the period spanning the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, the election of Donald Trump, and the start of the Russia investigation. Discussion of these events and the role of the Institute and the academic community at large in shaping the discourse surrounding current U.S.-Russia relations became another prominent topic in the project, and a good lens for viewing the evolution of U.S. diplomacy and the U.S. relationship with Russia.

Figures such as Institute alumna Toby Trister Gati, who advised President Bill Clinton on Russia and Ukraine; the eminent Sovietologist Stephen Cohen, whose recent views on the U.S.-Russia relationship have been controversial among fellow academics; and BP executive Peter Charow, who has been doing business in Russia since the Soviet collapse, were interviewed not only about the Harriman Institute's past but also about their broader experience in the region—and how that has shaped their perception of the current state of affairs and the Harriman's potential role in this new context.

Oral history interviews are long—some transcripts run well over 100 pages—and every interview conducted for the Harriman project addresses the narrator's personal background in addition to his or her take on a particular institution or event. Personal background might seem irrelevant when considering the project's analytical goals, but it serves an important function in the context of oral history. Mary Marshall Clark, director of Columbia's Center for Oral History Research at INCITE, who led the Harriman project and conducted many of the interviews, told me that understanding an individual's background and personal beliefs allows readers to understand the person in the context of history, providing framing points for that person's narrative.

"Oral history is about multiple layers of conversation," Clark said. "We learn more about each event or topic if we understand each individual's relationship to the world."

A case in point is Clark's interview with Institute alumnus Ambassador Jack Matlock, who revealed that his academic background in Russian literature was the key to his success in government. "Somehow being interested in some of their most typical writers and understanding them established almost immediate rapport. . . . I simply could not have had a better specialty," Matlock said during the interview.

Both Clark and Gavrilis identified Matlock's admission as a pivotal moment for them within the body of the transcripts, because it underscored the importance of the interdisciplinary area studies model, demonstrating

how knowledge in a field seemingly unrelated to politics can prove essential.

"That's something I would have never thought about, even though I value and like literature," Gavrilis told me. "For me it was really important."

Matlock's interview is revealing in other ways, too. When discussing his briefings with President Ronald Reagan he recalled Reagan's perpetual curiosity about what made Soviets "tick." Matlock said that when advising the president on how to interact with his Soviet counterparts, he would often warn that ". . . to criticize them publicly, particularly if it's something that's true, is considered a grave insult."

Reagan took this advice to heart, and Matlock believes that this window into the Soviet psyche is one reason he was successful during his negotiations with Gorbachev. He lamented during the interview that the desire for a nuanced understanding of Russia is no longer a factor in U.S. politics, that this element of Russian thinking is something to which "President [Barack H.] Obama seemed to be totally oblivious."

Matlock's interview highlighted the change in U.S. thinking and diplomacy over the years. It also highlighted one of the biggest revelations taken from the project as a whole.

"What we've learned is that—when area studies declined—this deep knowledge of a country with surprisingly good insights got lost," said Gavrilis. "And then the consequence of losing that is, Who informs your policy? Who warns you if a certain move you're making is going to irk the Russian leadership?"

In June 2018, the Harriman Institute celebrated the release of the initial 26 interviews of the oral history project with a panel discussion at Reid Hall, Columbia's Global Center in Paris. The panel, "Will We Ever Understand Each Other: Area Studies and Western Policy Toward Russia," examined the diminishing role of area studies in the policy-making world.

On a chilly mid-June morning in a hotel lobby in Paris, I met with Ronald Suny, an Institute alumnus who participated in the oral history project and in the Paris panel discussion. During our conversation, he reflected on whether academics should participate in shaping government policy. "Our role is subversive," he told me.

Ronald Suny, a narrator in the oral history project.

"Our role is to undermine unexamined assumptions and the existing inequitable, repressive power relations between genders, between classes, between ethnicities, between the state and the populations."

For this reason, Suny, a self-identified leftist, believes that academics should not cross over into government service. The academic who does, said Suny, loses the ability to remain subversive and becomes complicit in supporting the status quo. The tendency of academics to do so, he believes, has resulted in serious consequences for the field of Russian and Soviet studies. "Those people who are very articulate, who have access to the media—much more than normal, or critical, or leftist intellectuals—have created a discourse about Russia and Putin that has distorted our understanding of what is going on in that country," he said.

Suny's perspective is indicative of the diversity of opinions among the narrators in the oral history project. For instance, the political scientist Charles Gati,

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an Institute alumnus and protégé of the late Zbigniew Brzezinski—President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser—moved back and forth between government and academia throughout his career. Gati does not see any tension between policy influence and academic study. "There is no pure scholarship that's possible on contemporary political issues. . . . We can hide but we cannot get rid of our various biases," he said during his oral history interview.

The range of viewpoints is invaluable to the project, said Harriman director Alexander Cooley. "I think it's really important to understand these different perspectives on the relationship between the academy and other institutions of power. And I think there is validity in all of them."

The evening after my meeting with Suny, as Russia played Saudi Arabia in the inaugural game of the 2018 World Cup, an audience composed primarily of U.S. expats gathered at Reid Hall to listen to the panel discussion celebrating the launch of the Harriman Institute's oral history project. Cooley kicked off the discussion by referring to the decline of area studies in the '90s and the start of this century, and its resurgence during the Ukraine crisis. At the height of the crisis, said Cooley, people wondered: "Why don't we have regional experts anymore? Why don't we understand how Russian foreign policy is formulated? How can it be that we don't have nuanced historical and cultural understanding?"

The panel brought together two academics—Suny; and Julie Newton, a political scientist who heads the University Consortium, an interregional academic network that promotes engagement and academic exchange between Russia and the West—and BP executive Peter Charow, who left academia in the 1990s and has been doing business in Russia for more than 25 years. The discussion, which centered around the factors that led to the deterioration of the relationship between Russia and the United States, captured the spirit of the oral history project: all three panelists identified the lack of regional expertise and nuanced understanding of the Russian psyche as a reason for the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations.

A prominent theme to emerge from the oral history project was the 1990s as a crucial period of missed opportunities when it came to the U.S. relationship with Russia.

Charow, a narrator in the project who founded and led the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, and

participated in the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission established by Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin in order to increase cooperation between Russia and the U.S., summed it up in this way during the panel: "If Western policy makers had . . . acted correctly, and done the right things, and been good partners, and offered up the right help and support for the Russian people and the Russian government, then we wouldn't be in the position we're in today."

In general, the panelists emphasized the importance not only of training a new generation of regional scholars and practitioners, but also of engaging with the other side and establishing understanding on a psychological level.

"When we're going and looking for people to interact with, let's not just make it the folks who think like we do," said Charow. "Let's go looking for the people who think fundamentally differently than we do, and try to understand why they think that way."

The Paris discussion was just the first step in promoting and distilling the content of the Harriman's oral history project. There will be more events, and Cooley and Gavrilis plan to write a PONARS Eurasia (Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia) policy memo about the interviews. Eventually, Cooley would like to work with Clark and the oral history team on a book of excerpts from the project. And more interviews will be added to the collection over the years.

"The hope is that the oral history of the Institute now becomes a living, evolving part of the Institute," Cooley told me. "We can build on it, add to it, share it with other researchers, challenge some of the findings, or refine them." ■

Editor's note: The ongoing oral history project, "Cold Wars and the Academy: An Oral History on Russian and Eurasian Studies," can be viewed at oralhistory.harriman.columbia.edu; and a video of the Paris discussion is available on the Harriman Institute's website.

Top, left to right: Julie Newton, Peter Charow, and Ronald Suny at the Paris event on June 14, 2018; Colette Shulman, a narrator in the project; the late Catharine Nepomnyashchy, first woman director of the Harriman Institute.