



Alexander J. Motyl
in front of the Hotel
Chelsea, New York. Photo
© Anne Mandelbaum.

The Non-Russians Are Coming!

FIELD NOTES FROM THE
FRONT LINES OF SOVIET
NATIONALITY STUDIES

BY ALEXANDER J. MOTYL

The Non-Russians Are Coming!

Perestroika had just begun, and I happened to be at a conference evaluating its implications for the Soviet state. At one point during the discussion, I suggested that Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms had to be viewed in the context of the USSR's multinational character. The Russian/non-Russian dynamic was, I said, critical. A seasoned Sovietologist turned to me and said, "But Alex, the non-Russians just don't matter."

Obviously, they did matter, so much so that the Soviet "nationality question"—which Gorbachev, like most mainstream Sovietologists, never quite understood—arguably brought the Soviet empire to its knees. Once that happened, all students of the USSR and its successor states were compelled to incorporate the non-Russians into their research and teaching.

The exception to this rule was Columbia University, not because it was a laggard, but because it had a long tradition of studying the non-Russians. Back in the 1930s, the university offered courses in Ukrainian, and a distinguished historian, Clarence Manning, wrote extensively about Ukraine and even translated a condensed version of Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky's multivolume *History of Ukraine-Rus'*. (Hrushevsky also served as independent Ukraine's first president in 1918.) The Kharkiv-born linguist George Y. Shevelov focused on the Slavic languages in general, and Ukrainian and Russian in particular, after coming to Columbia from Harvard in 1958.

The study of the USSR's non-Russian nations began taking institutional shape in 1970,

when Columbia's premier Central Asian specialist, Edward Allworth, established the Program on Soviet Nationality Problems. Conferences, workshops, brown-bag presentations, and publications followed. Professor Allworth's most important publication may have been *Ethnic Russia in the USSR: The Dilemma of Dominance*, one of the first sustained scholarly efforts to treat the Russians as part of the USSR's nationality question. It was in 1984, just after I received my Ph.D. in political science from Columbia, that Professor Allworth asked me to deliver a talk on the Ukrainian famine of 1932–33 and explicitly asked that I address the question of whether or not it had been engineered by Stalin. As I recently looked back at my notes from that talk, I was somewhat surprised to learn that I had argued that the famine was indeed man-made—a



Seweryn Bialer, Robert and
Renée Belfer Professor of
Political Science

I was somewhat surprised to learn that I had argued that the famine was indeed man-made—a position that has only now become the conventional wisdom among most reputable historians.

position that has only now become the conventional wisdom among most reputable historians.

Edward Allworth wasn't the only Columbia scholar interested in the non-Russians. Natalya Sadomskaya examined them in her courses on Soviet anthropology. Robert E. Lewis, of the geography department, trained a cohort of excellent young geographers, most of whom specialized in the interaction of geography and national identity; unfortunately, the university closed down Bob's department just as its relevance to Soviet studies was growing exponentially. Historians also got in on the act. Marc Raeff revealed that Ukrainian intellectuals and religious men had a fundamental impact on imperial Russia's ideology and identity; Michael Stanislawski studied imperial Russia's Jews; Nina Garsoian offered courses on Armenia. Andrzej Kaminski and Istvan Deak of the Institute on East Central Europe focused on the multinational character of, respectively, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My own dissertation adviser, political scientist Seweryn Bialer, wrote a seminal article, "How Russians Rule Russia," for *Problems of Communism*; devoted a key chapter to the non-Russians in *Stalin's Succes-*



Robert Legvold, director
of the Harriman
Institute (1986–92)

sors, the book that garnered him the MacArthur Prize; pushed me to think of the USSR as an empire; and suggested that I write my dissertation on “ethnic stability” in the USSR—which I did. Professor Bialer and I eventually organized an international conference on the emerging nations of East Central Europe and the Soviet West (“Toward a New Eastern Europe”) at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio estate. Its participants included key opposition figures from Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland.

It was thanks to Professor Bialer, Institute director Robert Legvold, and former Harriman director Marshall Shulman that the Institute received a generous grant from the Mellon Foundation to establish the Nationality and Siberian Studies Program in 1988. I was offered the position of program director and assigned an office on the thirteenth floor of the International Affairs Building, then occupied by Professor Bialer’s Research Institute on International Change (formerly Zbigniew Brzezinski’s Research Institute on International Communism). My assistant, Ph.D. candidate Charles Furtado, and I spent the next four years following in Professor Allworth’s footsteps with a slew of conferences, monthly workshops and seminars, and publications. The program funded courses in the Georgian and Ukrainian languages, Siberian geography, and Georgian politics; invited Leslie Dienes, Tadeusz Swietochowski, and James Mace as visiting scholars; published five books (in particular, *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities* and *The Post-Soviet Nations*, which attempted to incorporate nationality studies into the study of ethnicity and of the USSR); and came



Elizabeth Valkenier, Richard Ericson, Jack Matlock, and Alexander Motyl speak to the press about the October 1993 crisis over Boris Yeltsin's relations with the Supreme Soviet.

to serve as the central forum for Soviet nationality specialists residing in the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut areas. It was then that we established a strong working relationship with the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) and its flagship publication, *Nationalities Papers*—in particular, with ASN president Michael Rywkin and the journal editor, Henry Hutten-

Some of us argued that Gorbachev was destabilizing the Soviet multinational state; others, that the USSR was likely to survive.

bach, both at the City College of New York. By the mid- to late 1990s, that relationship culminated in the Harriman's decision to collaborate even more closely with ASN and its president Ian Bremmer and launch what has now become a mainstay of the university's academic calendar, the annual ASN convention.

A highlight of our collaboration was the publication of three special issues of *Nationalities Papers* in 1989–1991. All three (subsidized by the program) featured the redacted transcripts of all-day workshops dedicated to investigating the relationship between perestroika and the nationalities. Some of us argued that Gorbachev was destabilizing the Soviet multinational state; others, that the USSR was likely to survive.

The titles of the special issues nicely reflected the rapidly changing environment in the Soviet Union. The first issue was simply entitled “The Soviet Nationalities and Gorbachev”; the second was “The Soviet Nationalities against Gorbachev”; the third was “The Soviet Nationalities without Gorbachev.” Our Soviet guests weren't particularly happy with that last title, though they had to admit that it was not wholly inaccurate.

The timing of the Nationality and Siberian Studies Program's founding couldn't have been better. As we began our work, the USSR began visibly to come apart at its seams, as the non-Russians that hadn't mattered suddenly seemed to matter above all else. The world was utterly unprepared for the advent of the

nationalities. Most Sovietologists were uninterested in the non-Russians; Washington DC's collective knowledge was pretty much confined to one State Department analyst, Paul Goble; journalists had no clue about where the "Stans" were, and the public was almost completely ignorant about half the USSR's population. One European diplomat who was about to be posted to Ukraine asked me to brief him about a country he knew nothing about. His colleagues felt sorry that he was being demoted in so rude a fashion. His spouse wondered whether the east Ukrainian city of Kraków was worth visiting. The diplomat asked me what he should know about Ukrainian literature. I said that, if asked, he should always note Ukraine's three greatest poets—Taras Shevchenko, Lesya Ukrainka, and Ivan Franko. Sure enough, a few weeks after his posting to Kyiv, *News from Ukraine* (a KGB-run English-language newspaper) ran an interview with the diplomat and he claimed these very three poets as his personal favorites.

Those of us in the nationality studies community had inhabited an academic ghetto until perestroika shattered the USSR into its constituent republics. We then burst onto the stage of policy relevance and journalistic interest and, for some five years, dominated the public discourse. Moody's sent an analyst to attend our seminars on Gorbachev and the nationalities. Tom Friedman, then a little-known foreign correspondent, visited me in my office to talk about the non-Russians. Ersin Kalaycioglu of Istanbul's Bogazici University and I tried to establish a Black Sea studies program; we failed to find the funds, but still managed to organize several conferences and enabled

Russian-language instructor Edward Beliaev and Ambassador Jack Matlock to teach at the former Roberts College. In 1989, as the countries of East Central Europe were poised to shed their communist regimes, I had three meetings with a highly placed official at the East German Mission to the United Nations. During the first, he assured me that the Party would easily deal with the demonstrations in Leipzig and other East German cities. During the second, as the demonstrations snowballed, he assured me that the Party would learn from its mistakes. During the third, sometime in August or September, when thousands of East Germans were escaping to West German embassies, he asked me if I thought it possible for him to embark on graduate studies in the United States. I knew then that the Wall would soon fall.

One of the key issues dividing scholars in the late 1980s was whether or not perestroika and glasnost would lead to the USSR's collapse or regeneration. Duke University's Jerry Hough famously insisted almost until the very end of 1991 that the ongoing disturbances were all part of Gorbachev's master plan. I personally thought that perestroika wouldn't rock the boat too much until I was asked to attend a CIA conference on possible scenarios of the USSR's collapse and prepare a scenario on a revolt by the non-Russians. To my surprise, the scenario came easily and logically, persuading me that perestroika could actually subvert the entire Soviet system. Another conference, organized by the Center of Austrian Studies at the University of Minnesota, focused on a comparison of the Habsburg Empire and the Soviet Union. My assignment was to compare and contrast their

The Soviet Union's collapse also compelled the Harriman to rethink its mission.

declines. Once again, I discovered that the case for Soviet disintegration was strong and that the case for thinking of the USSR as a declining empire was especially strong. That conference led to a decade's worth of writing on Soviet imperial collapse in comparative perspective.

Naturally, I wasn't the only one to have begun thinking of the USSR as an empire. A large number of scholars, both at the Harriman and elsewhere, picked up on the theme and produced a rich historical and social science literature. At the Harriman, historian Mark von Hagen (who served as director of the Institute in the late 1990s), political scientist Jack Snyder, and sociologist Karen Barkey led the way. My own focus was on the dynamics of imperial collapse—the rapid and comprehensive dismantling of an imperial structure, as happened with the Soviet Union, Austria-Hungary, and Romanov Russia. Von Hagen's interest in empire eventually paved the way for his shift from studying the imperial core, Russia, to studying its periphery, Ukraine. Snyder incorporated nations and nationalism into his international relations perspective, while Barkey showed how relevant the Ottoman experience was to the Soviet demise.

The Soviet Union's collapse also compelled the Harriman to rethink its mission. In 1992, I succeeded Allen Lynch, who had accepted a professorship at the University of Virginia, as associate director. Economist Richard



Alexander Motyl (1990s)

Ericson was the director. Rick and I knew that the Harriman's program of study and regional focus needed some serious revision in light of the USSR's collapse and the fall of communism in East Central Europe. The first question that needed addressing was whether the Institute would devote itself to just Russia or to all the successor states. We opted for the latter. The next question was whether we should incorporate East Central Europe into the Harriman's

research agenda. Once again, Rick and I opted for a more expansive approach on the grounds that the entire postcommunist space still needed to be looked at as a whole, even as bits and pieces were drifting in different directions. After some debate, the Harriman faculty approved the changes. As a result, the Institute of East Central Europe became a center within the Harriman; students could fulfill their language requirement by devel-

oping proficiency in any language of the former Soviet space (with a reading knowledge in a second language); and a core course focusing on the Soviet legacies in the USSR and East Central Europe would be made mandatory so as to provide all Harriman students with a common intellectual experience.

One of the consequences of the Harriman's embrace of the entire postcommunist space was that the study of the non-Russians boomed. Ukrainian studies took off, in no small measure thanks to the generosity of a Ukrainian-Canadian philanthropist, Peter Jacyk. In time, the Ukrainian Studies Program was established within the Institute, offering courses in Ukrainian language, literature, history, and politics. Georgian, Hungarian, Serbian, Polish, and Central Asian studies also grew in size and vigor, while Russian studies remained at the core of the Institute's mission.

Greatly contributing to the Harriman's reputation as a center for nationality studies was its collaboration with the ASN. Ian Bremmer and I first organized two one-day conferences in the 1990s to see whether there'd be interest in actual conventions. Both events were successful, and we decided that a bona fide convention would be in order. The Harriman gave its support and agreed to serve as the venue for the annual gathering. The first convention was a bit of a touch and go affair. Ian and I met at a downtown Starbucks and discussed the format. He then gave me a sheaf of papers including the panel topics that had been submitted to the ASN. I proceeded to cut them into strips and lay them out on the floor

As long as the Soviet Union existed, it was perfectly possible to acquire genuine expertise in the nationalities.

of my studio apartment, arranging and rearranging them thematically until something resembling a full range of panels was on hand. By the time the second convention was to be held, we had developed a somewhat more sophisticated way of organizing the panels. Since those early days, the ASN has evolved into a highly professional organization and its conventions have become must-attend affairs for students of the “nationalities.”

Of course, sometime in the 1990s it became obvious to all of us nationality experts that the term “nationality” no longer applied. The Soviet Union’s fourteen non-Russian republics had become independent states; and the nationalities were now nations, with their own histories, cultures, politics, societies, and so on. In effect, that also meant that Soviet nationality studies—which had involved having an expertise in all or most of the fourteen non-Russian republics—was no longer possible. As long as the Soviet Union existed, it was perfectly possible to acquire genuine expertise in the nationalities. Soviet sources were few, much of the information they contained was repetitive and applied to all the republics, and Western publications could be fitted on one shelf. Knowledge of one non-Russian language and Russian enabled you to study the nationalities in general. After 1991, that was no longer true.

Developing an expertise in three or more independent countries, even those with common pasts, is extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible. I refocused on Ukraine and Russia. Others devoted their research to the Baltic states, Central Asia, the Caucasus, or individual countries of East Central Europe.

At the same time, as nationality experts were narrowing their research interests, mainstream Sovietologists were expanding theirs, usually adding some non-Russian state or states to their repertoire. Even more important perhaps, non-Sovietologists discovered the former communist space and began incorporating bits and pieces into their comparative research—whether on transitions to democracy, ethnic conflict, war, or marketization. In effect, nationality studies came to matter to the social sciences and humanities, in exactly the manner that the nationality studies community had always insisted they should. In so doing, however, nationality studies lost its *raison d’être*. Ironically, Soviet nationality studies disappeared at the moment of its greatest triumph. ■

Alexander J. Motyl is professor of political science at Rutgers University–Newark. He continues to teach at the Harriman Institute. He is a narrator in the Institute’s oral history project.



Early publications in nationality studies, including edited volumes by Alexander Motyl and the ASN’s *Nationalities Papers*.