

### COLUMBIA | HARRIMAN INSTITUTE Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies

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Cover image: Vlodko Kaufman, *A Conversation*, an exhibition at The Ukrainian Museum, New York City. Photo by Mark Andryczyk.

Image on this page: From Vlodko Kaufman, A Conversation, courtesy of the Ukrainian Studies Program at the Harriman Institute.

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Opposite page: Alexander Cooley (Photo by Jeffrey Schifman)





his is the first and, we hope, the last issue of *Harriman Magazine* to be produced remotely from start to finish due to the coronavirus pandemic. Our previous issue went to print just as the pandemic hit the United States, and it was difficult to fathom just how lasting and damaging the effects would be.

We wish all our readers health, safety, and strength during this difficult and unpredictable period. We are incredibly grateful to the Harriman community and delighted to read your updates in our alumni notes section.

Our alumni are doing exceptional things all over the globe. In this issue, we profile Joshua Yaffa, a 2008 graduate of SIPA and the Journalism School and former Harriman visiting scholar. A Moscow correspondent for the *New Yorker*, Yaffa has contributed to a deeper understanding of Russia and Ukraine through his nuanced reporting.

My colleague Lara J. Nettelfield, a Harriman alumna and former postdoctoral fellow, writes for us about her oral history project on the refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East. Our postdoctoral fellow Daria V. Ezerova, who has co-organized a wealth of cultural events at the Institute since joining us last year, interviews filmmaker and writer Michael Idov, who screened and discussed his film *The Humorist* for us last year.

It is an honor for us at the Harriman Institute, the proud namesake of Governor W. Averell Harriman, to publish an excerpt from Catherine Grace Katz's widely reviewed new book, *The Daughters of Yalta: The Churchills, Roosevelts, and Harrimans.* The excerpt gives us a window into the life of Harriman's youngest daughter, Kathleen, and her role in the preparations for the 1945 Yalta Conference.

We also have a short story from prize-winning Russian author Polina Barskova; a write-up of Vlodko Kaufman's exhibit *A Conversation*, mounted at the Ukrainian Museum as part of last year's conference on the war in Donbas (a photo from the exhibit is also our cover image); and an interview with me about my new book, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*.

As always, enjoy the issue and please be in touch with any comments or ideas. We love to hear from you!

All the best,

Alexander Cooley

Director, Harriman Institute





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### **COVER STORY**

Vlodko Kaufman's *A Conversation* at the Ukrainian Museum By Mark Andryczyk

The Ukrainian Studies Program's 2019 conference, "Five Years of War in the Donbas: Cultural Reflections and Reverberations," moved from Morningside Heights to the Ukrainian Museum on Manhattan's Lower East Side for its final event, an exhibition by the Ukrainian artist Vlodko Kaufman.

The audience found itself surrounded by four gallery walls plastered with scraps of paper—receipts, transit tickets, everyday miscellany—each covered with a drawing of a soldier. Arranged in endless rows and columns, the multicolored miniportraits produced a dizzying effect on the viewer that was only intensified by the looping, piercing noise of a drone. Kaufman conceived his exhibit of installed graphic art *A Conversation* as a way of trying to coexist with the war that invaded his homeland—as a way to continue to react to the daily news reports officially updating the numbers of casualties of the war.



Can America's Global Leadership Survive? An Interview with Alexander Cooley By Sabina Lee

Cooley discusses his new book, Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order.



Reporting on Russia's Gray Area: Joshua Yaffa in Profile By Masha Udensiva-Brenner

In 2012, Yaffa ('08) moved to Moscow as a freelance reporter without a plan—now he's a Moscow correspondent for the *New Yorker*.







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The Daughters of Yalta: The Churchills, Roosevelts, and Harrimans: A Story of Love and War By Catherine Grace Katz

The opening chapter of *The Daughters* of *Yalta* centers on Kathleen Harriman, younger daughter of Averell Harriman, at the time U.S. ambassador to the USSR, and her role as unofficial deputy in the preparations for the 1945 Yalta Conference at war-ravaged Livadia Palace, formerly the tsar's summer residence.

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The New Humanitarians: The Volunteers of the Refugee "Crisis" By Lara J. Nettelfield

Why do people put their lives on hold to help refugees and migrants traveling along the so-called Balkan route? Nettelfield discusses her oral history project.

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Interview with Michael Idov By Daria V. Ezerova

The writer and filmmaker on his career, working with Serebrennikov, Russians and the BLM movement, and post-COVID filmmaking.

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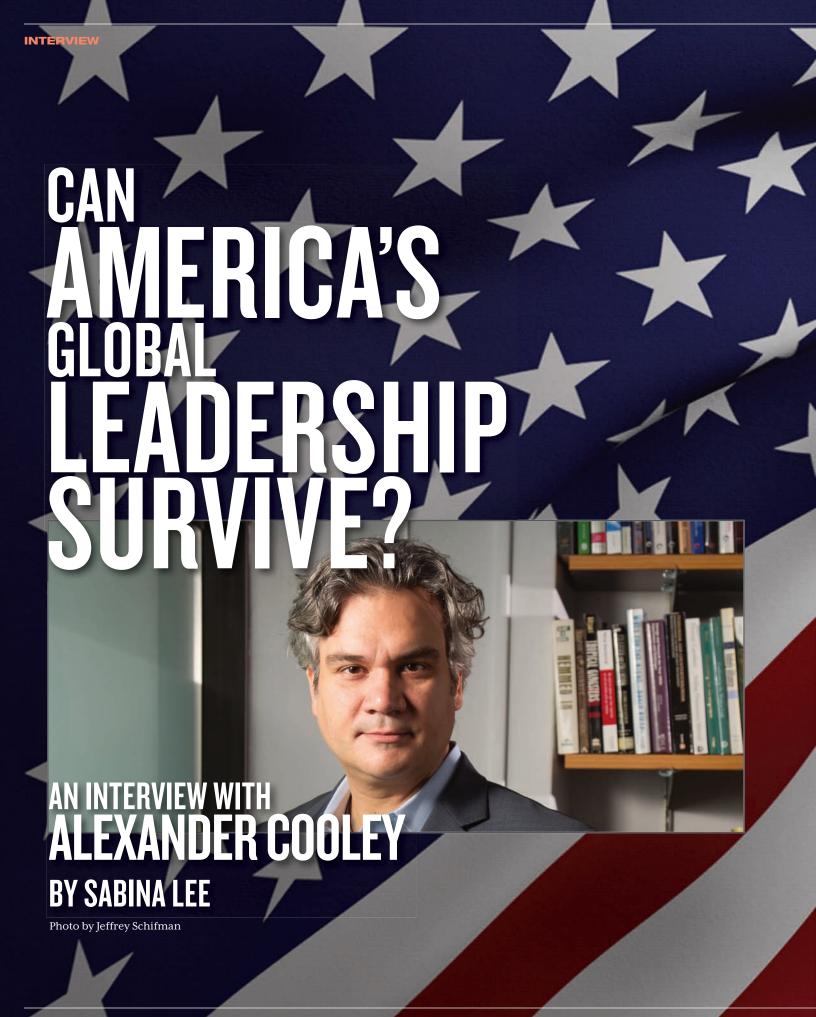
Reaper of Leaves By Polina Barskova Translated by Catherine Ciepiela

A short work in prose from the collection *Tableaux Vivants* (2014), for which Polina Barskova was awarded the prestigious Andrei Bely Prize.

Alumni Notes

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Giving to Harriman



Alexander Cooley talks about his new book, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*, coauthored with Daniel Nexon, which examines the evolution of the American international system since the end of World War II to Donald Trump's presidency.

**Sabina Lee:** You have stated that American hegemony is ending. Tell us why.

**Alexander Cooley:** American hegemony is unraveling because the United States is no longer the "monopolist" in international affairs that it was in the 1990s. It was the main supplier of ideas and expertise immediately following the Soviet collapse, but the U.S. role is now challenged and contested in all these areas. Other countries, especially China, now provide international services such as development assistance and investment. New regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization promote the agendas and values of competitors like China and Russia. The once-dominant networks of Western-funded NGOs spreading liberal principles and values are actively being blocked by governments and contested by illiberal counterparts. Liberal democracy is no longer a fashionable political system for countries to emulate. Moreover, increasing polarization within the U.S. has undermined its ability to promote the international liberal order. The U.S. is still the most powerful state in the world-militarily and financially-but it is no longer a

global hegemon, with the capacity to unilaterally shape and dictate the nature of international affairs.

**Lee:** How has the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the global power balance?

ALEXANDER COOLEY AND DANIEL NEXON

EXIT
FROM
HEGEMONY
THE UNRAVELING OF THE AMERICAN GLOBAL ORDER

Cooley: COVID has magnified and accelerated several of these trends. The U.S.'s image as a global leader has been further undermined by its relatively ineffective domestic

response and withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) in the midst of a pandemic. The lack of U.S. leadership in coordinating a more robust global response has been widely interpreted as irresponsible

and counterproductive. In contrast, China, despite being the country of the COVID-19 origin and covering up details of the virus outbreak, has attempted to rebrand itself as a global provider of emergency health goods worldwide, while publicly stressing the need for international cooperation in global public health.

**Lee:** What are the main concerns for U.S. relations with China and Russia?

Cooley: China and Russia undermine U.S. hegemony in multitiered ways. They have established new regional and international organizations, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Eurasian Economic Union. They have sought to undermine and divide the censuses with the West on issues like partnering with China on 5G technology or rolling back

sanctions imposed against Russia for its actions in Ukraine. Each has undertaken important new individual initiatives: Russia's intervention in Syria promoted an image that Moscow would defend political clients even outside the post-Soviet region, while China's one-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is as much an infrastructure investment program in more than 70 countries as it is an attempt to create more China-friendly partnerships and communities in foreign affairs. These efforts create new networks of geopolitical influence and feedback on existing power structures. For example, in June 2017, Greece-now a major BRI partner for China-refused to sign off on an E.U. statement that would have criticized Beijing's human rights practices.

Lee: How do you see the future of international leadership, including IGOs such as the United Nations and WHO?

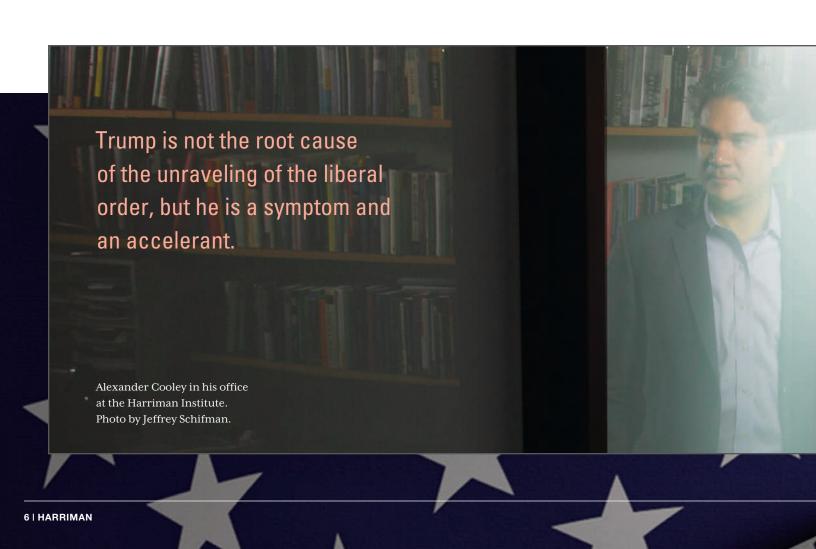
Cooley: The Trump administration uses its public disdain for multilateral institutions, like the U.N., as a bargaining tactic. Threatening to defund or withdraw from international agreements can sometimes be leveraged to obtain greater voice and control in international organizations. This tactic, however, can backfire if other countries are willing to substitute for U.S. funding and influence. In the case of the WHO, U.S. withdrawal created a vacuum for China to fill, especially during a global pandemic, where the international body, despite its problems, is viewed as indispensable for global health cooperation and information exchange.

Far from being sideshows or irrelevant bodies, U.N. agencies

are essential arenas of geopolitical competition. The Trump administration belatedly recognized this by appointing, earlier this year, a special envoy to counter Chinese influence at the U.N., but this will do little on its own if Washington keeps withdrawing from and defunding these institutions.

**Lee:** What is Trump's impact on the liberal order, domestically and globally?

Cooley: Trump is not the root cause of the unraveling of the liberal order, but he is a symptom and an accelerant. Trump is actively dismantling many U.S. power resources and infrastructures, such as by taking a more confrontational



Far from being sideshows or irrelevant bodies, U.N. agencies are essential arenas of geopolitical competition.

and transactional approach with traditional allies within NATO and East Asia. At the same time, Trump's own illiberal rhetoric and support for global strongmen helps delegitimize the importance of liberal principles in other countries and across global governance institutions.

**Lee:** What's your plan for the 2020 U.S. election night?

Cooley: Well, I'm no U.S. politics specialist but I am a politics junkie, so election nights tend to be quite personal as I hunker down with my laptop and try to look at a range of returns and races. I think that this year the whole world will be watching the November election as a key moment in not only U.S. history but also global

politics. So, I'm sure I'll be on the phone with relatives in Greece and France, as well as interested colleagues in Russia, soon after the results are in.

Alexander Cooley is director of the Harriman Institute and the Claire Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College.

Editor's note: A version of this article originally appeared in Columbia News on July 13, 2020. It has been reprinted with permission.

Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon Oxford University Press (2020) ISBN 978-0190916473



#### **PROFILE**

Opposite page: Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia Joshua Yaffa Tim Duggan Books (2020) ISBN 9781524760595



# JOSHUA YAFFA IN PROFILE

### **BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER**

It was by no means surprising that when the *New Yorker*'s Moscow correspondent Joshua Yaffa (Journalism '07/SIPA '08) came to the Institute to discuss his new book with Columbia Journalism's Keith Gessen, the conversation started with the

West's misconceptions about Russia. The Harriman Institute—the oldest U.S. institution dedicated to the study of the former Soviet Union—has long been a bastion where regional specialists discuss the nuances missing from Western narratives.

It was January 2020, and Yaffa's first book, *Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia*, had just been released. As he discussed the book's origins, Yaffa summarized the typical Western refrain: "As the story goes, Putin leads over a population of

### BETWEEN TWO FIRES



TRUTH, AMBITTON, and



COMPROMISE IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA



JOSHUA YAFFA



one hundred and forty-five million people, trapping them in a cage welded shut by propaganda and repression."

But, while this is certainly true for some parts of the population, Yaffa said it was far from the whole story. Many ordinary Russians that he encountered "showed no sign of being somehow held against their wills." Instead, they felt apathy toward the state. "They treated it as a given. Neither good nor bad, but simply there, like an element in the Earth's atmosphere around which they constructed their lives," he said.

Yaffa has been living and reporting in Russia since 2012, and he's covered topics ranging from the disappearance of a Russian soldier in Ukraine (*New York Times Magazine*), to the Siberian train that provides medical care for remote Siberian towns (*National* 

Geographic) and the clandestine internal struggle between Russia's Federal Security Service and its Interior Ministry (New Yorker). But what he found most interesting in his reporting was a segment of the Russian population "who believed the best, if not the only, way to realize their vision was in concord with the state," he said. As Yaffa traveled around the country for his reporting, he met all sorts of people who lived this way. "Fiercely proud and brilliant men and women—activists, economists, journalists, business owners," he said, who cooperated with the state in order to maximize the chances of living the life they wanted to live. "I came to understand that in Russia, the two forces, state and citizen, speak in dialogue, a conversational timbre often missed by the foreign ear in Moscow."

"Between two fires" is a Russian expression describing a state of entrapment between two dangers, and the necessity to compromise in order to make the threat less severe. Yaffa chose to use the phrase as part of his book title because he was fascinated by the moral quandaries confronting people in Putin's Russia. Many opposed the regime, but, in order to direct films, write books, or practice their activism, they had to participate in keeping that regime in place. "It was hard to believe they were wrong," said Yaffa. "Nor was I confident I would choose any differently."

Yaffa's interest in Russia predates his desire to become a journalist. As a child growing up in San Diego, he was always interested in foreign affairs. He started reading the





international section of the newspaper as an elementary school student and envisioned himself becoming a diplomat or foreign policy professional. In 2000, he enrolled at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service as an undergraduate. When faced with a language requirement, he chose Russian. It was an unpopular selection—Russia seemed geopolitically inconsequential at the time—but Yaffa felt drawn to it, possibly due to "some kind of childhood curiosity" about the Cold War, he told me over the phone from Moscow in July.

After college Yaffa spent two years working for a multilateral nonproliferation program that provided grants and other assistance to help former Soviet weapons scientists transition into civilian jobs. Though he took the job as a pathway into the field of foreign policy, the experience made him realize that he was more interested in the nitty-gritty details of how societies function and the richness of individual experience than in big-picture geopolitics. That's why he decided to pursue journalism. "It suited my personality," he said. "I saw it as a more lively and freeing way to explore the world."

When he returned to the U.S. in 2006, Yaffa applied to a dual-degree program at Columbia's Journalism School and School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). During his SIPA year he took the Harriman Institute's core course, "Legacies of Empire and the Soviet Union," taught by the late Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy and Alexander Motyl. Up to that point he had only experienced more specialized training in diplomacy and international relations. "Legacies felt like the American liberal arts education I never got,"

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against their wills."

*Opposite page*: The Moscow metro during the COVID-19 pandemic on March 25, 2020. Photo by P. Fisxo via Wikimedia Commons.

Above, left: Joshua Yaffa in Moscow in February 2020. Photo by Oksana Yushko.

Above right: Church in Russia's Tarusa district. Photo by shakko via Wikimedia Commons.

he said. "It struck me as education for its own sake—a refreshing, purely intellectual pursuit."

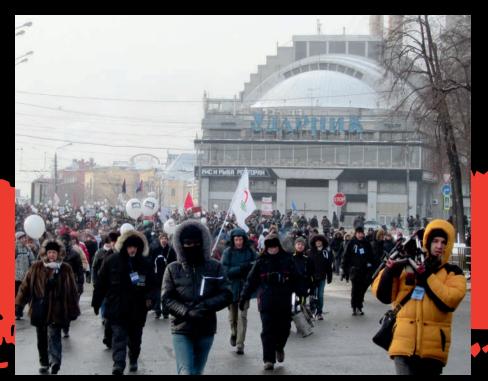
When he graduated in 2008, Yaffa took a job as an editor at *Foreign Affairs*. He wouldn't return to reporting for another four years, when he quit his job and went to Moscow on a whim. At the time, he was living in Brooklyn and watching the Bolotnaya Square protests in Moscow unfold from afar. The series of antigovernment demonstrations was the biggest event to happen in Russia since he had started studying it, and he felt that if he didn't go, he might lose the opportunity of a lifetime. He booked a flight to Moscow with no plan, no employment, and the idea that he would return to New York six weeks later. But he never did return—the *Economist* hired him to be its Moscow correspondent for a year, and his career took off from there, eventually landing him at the *New Yorker* in 2016. The impulsive trip to Moscow "was the greatest, craziest decision I ever made," he said.

The year 2020 brought big changes for Yaffa. In the space of a few days in January his book was published and he got married. His wife, Julia, grew up in Moscow and works in education policy. The Harriman talk was among the first in a book tour meant to culminate in May with events at the Sydney Writer's Festival and in the UK. But the tour ended prematurely. In early March, as Yaffa and his wife set out for a weekend getaway in Tarusa, a small town about two hours south of Moscow, the realities of COVID-19 crept into their consciousness. The following week, the world was an entirely different place.

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*Below, left*: Protesters walking toward Bolotnaya Square.

Below, right: Artemy Troitsky singing at Bolotnaya Square rally. Photos from February 4, 2012, by Bogomolov P.M. via Wikimedia Commons.





Yaffa and Julia converted their small two-bedroom apartment in Moscow's storied "House on the Embankment" into a shared home office and remained on strict lockdown, leaving the house a few times a week for groceries. He reported remotely, covering the potential reasons behind Russia's low reported COVID-19 numbers; what the coronavirus crisis has exposed about the power structure of Putin's regime; and, as Black Lives Matter protests unfolded in the U.S. and monuments toppled, he wrote about what Americans could learn from the toppling and relocation of Dzerzhinsky's statue in Moscow. His most recent article, in the September 14, 2020, issue of the *New Yorker*, investigates the extent to which Russian disinformation campaigns actually affect U.S. politics. Yaffa found it disorienting to conduct remote interviews. "It was a strange journalistic experience to report on huge stakes but not being able to feel or observe those stakes myself," he said.

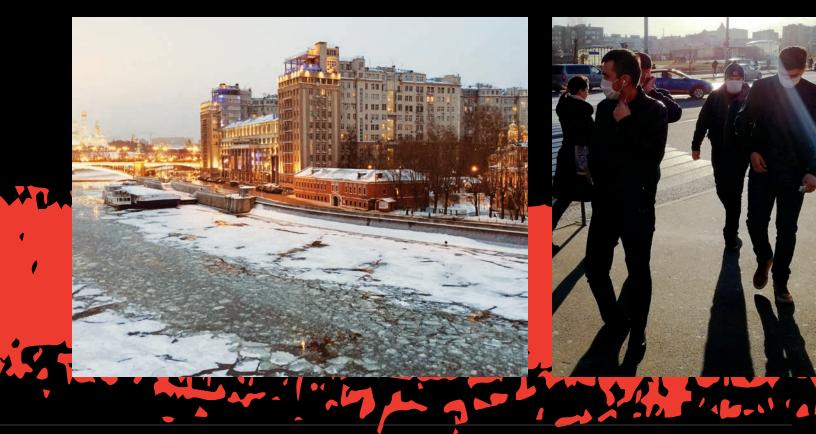
By the time we spoke in July, Moscow had reopened. Yaffa told me he found the pace of reopening alarming. He had not yet ridden the metro and was limiting his social interactions to outdoor spaces. It was early evening, and Yaffa was about to take a bike ride through Gorky park and grab dinner with friends at an outdoor café.

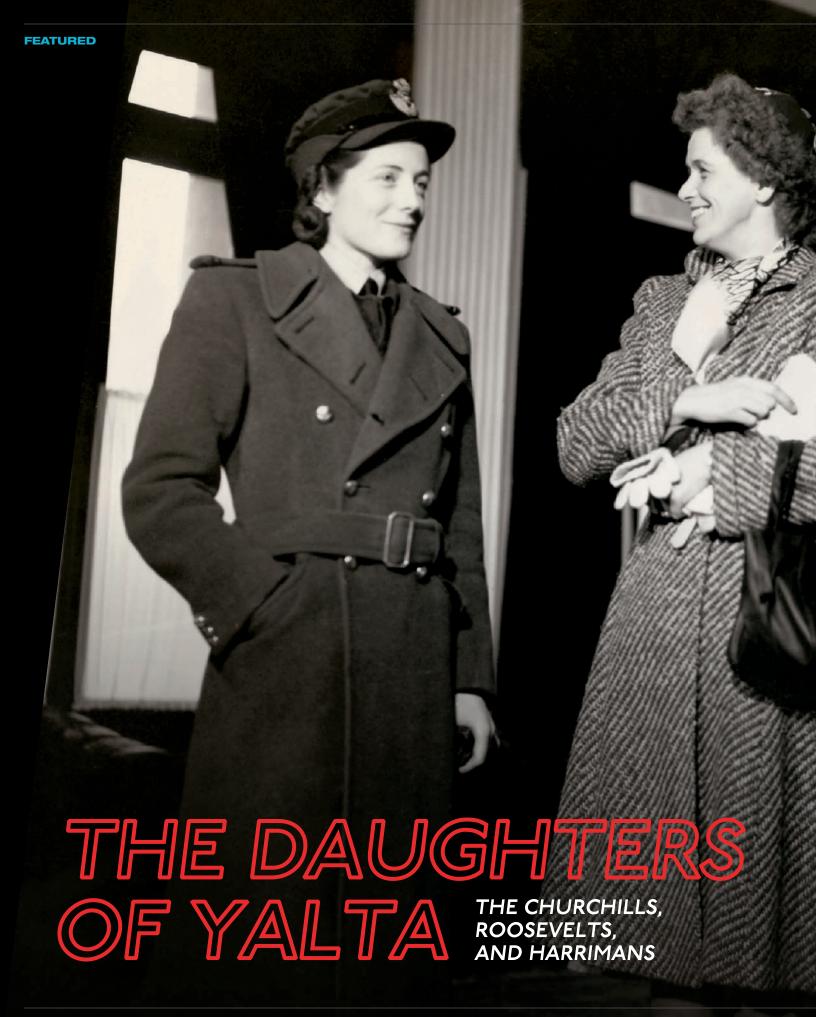
As we moved to get off the phone, I asked how his reporting had evolved since his arrival in Moscow. "I came to understand that Russia is a place where the real story often happens in the gray area," he said. "Where things are complicated, fraught, and it's not always clear what's right and what's wrong."

i. You can read "Russia's House of Shadows," his story about the building, in the October 16, 2017 issue of the *New Yorker*.

*Below, left*: Moscow's House on the Embankment. Photo by Gennady Grachev via Wikimedia Commons.

Below, right: Pedestrians outside the Moscow metro during the COVID-19 pandemic on March 25, 2020. Photo by P. Fisxo via Wikimedia Commons.





# Editor's note: Excerpted from chapter 1 of The Daughters of Yalta: The Churchills, Roosevelts, and Harrimans: A Story of Love and War by Catherine Grace Katz. Copyright © 2020 by Catherine Grace Katz. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Pictured from left to right: Sarah Churchill Oliver, Anna Roosevelt Boettiger, and Kathleen Harriman at the Yalta Conference (Livadia Palace, February 1945). Photos of Kathleen Harriman courtesy of David H. Mortimer.

### A STORY OF LOVE AND WAR

### BY CATHERINE GRACE KATZ

n the winter of 1945, Livadia Palace, its once snow-white façade now covered in grime, stood empty on its perch above the Black Sea. The furniture and priceless art were long gone. Sinks, toilets, and lamps had been ripped from their fittings and pulled from the walls. The Nazis had stolen everything, even the brass doorknobs.

Situated less than three miles down the coast from the resort town of Yalta, on the southern tip of the Crimean Peninsula, this palace had once been the summer home of the tsar and tsarina, Nicholas II and Alexandra. They had torn down the old Livadia Palace where Alexander III had died and replaced it with a new 116-room imperial retreat better suited to family life. The Mediterranean climate and black pebble beaches offered the tsar, tsarina, and their five children a respite from the humidity and opulence of Saint Petersburg. Palms and cypress trees filled the lush gardens surrounding the neo-Renaissance Italianate palace constructed from white Crimean stone. The tsar and his children bathed in the sea, played tennis, and rode horses over rocky trails while the tsarina sold her needlework at the bazaar, to raise funds for the local hospital. But amid the relative simplicity, there remained splendor. In the white ballroom, where French doors opened onto a courtyard, the tsar's eldest daughter, Grand Duchess Olga, celebrated her sixteenth birthday with a grand soiree. She swirled through the night in her pink gown, her hair swept high on her head for the first time, while her first jewels-a necklace made of 32 diamonds and pearlssparkled in the chandeliers' light.

The tsar and his family visited Livadia only four times before they were murdered, in 1918, in a basement outside the city of Yekaterinburg. This brutality marked the end of the Romanov dynasty and imperial Russia. The Bolsheviks soon transformed the palace into a sanatorium for favored Soviet workers needing rest, quiet, and treatment for tuberculosis. The comrades sterilized the gleaming white palace and removed or covered all signs of the Romanov family, just as they tore down monuments to royalty across Russia, replacing them with monuments to themselves. Then came the war, the second in a quarter century. In 1942, the Nazis overran the Crimea after a monthslong onslaught of the nearby port city of Sevastopol, part of the grisly and ultimately ill-fated Operation Barbarossa, when the Nazis broke their non-aggression pact with the Soviets and charged east across the steppe. Only the tsar's summer palace would do for the Nazis' Crimean headquarters, so the invaders commandeered Livadia. In the spring

of 1944, the Soviets finally reclaimed the Crimea and pushed the Nazis out, but not before the retreating enemy plundered Livadia Palace, taking everything they could carry.

It was here, in this despoiled palace in February 1945, that Kathleen Harriman, the glamorous, twenty-seven-year-old daughter of the fourth-richest man in America, now stood. Thousands of workers crowded the palace and the gardens, sawing, hammering, painting, fumigating, polishing, and planting, not to mention installing much-needed plumbing. Cots had been set up for the conscripted laborers and the Romanian POWs the Soviets had brought in to clear the area of the wreckage the war had left behind, but there were still hardly enough places to sleep for everyone toiling away across the once imperial grounds.

Kathy and her father, W. Averell Harriman, the United States ambassador to the Soviet Union, had arrived several days earlier from

> Moscow, where they had lived for the past fifteen months. They had intended to fly, as they had little more than ten days to oversee final preparations for one of the most crucial conferences of the war, but bad weather had kept them grounded. In the end, their eight-hundredmile journey by train had taken nearly three days as they crawled past the bombedout villages and trampled countryside to which Kathy had grown accustomed over these past months. Every train station she saw was in ruins. "The needless destruction is something appalling," Kathy wrote to her childhood





governess and friend, Elsie Marshall, nicknamed "Mouche," back in New York. (Whether or not this observation would make it to Mouche was up to the censor.) To her older sister, Mary, she wrote, "My God but this country has a job on its hands—just cleaning up."

Though the war was by no means won, by late 1944, British and American forces had liberated Rome, Paris, Brussels, and Athens from German and Italian occupation, while the Red Army marched westward across Poland and Romania. The British prime minister, Winston Churchill; the president of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt; and the Soviet general secretary, Joseph Stalin, realized they had reached a critical juncture in Europe. As their armies raced to Berlin, the three leaders were facing complicated questions about the end of the war on the continent, questions they could resolve only face to face.

It was not the first time they had called such a meeting. In late November 1943, the "Big Three," as they were known, had conferred in Tehran to lay the foundations for the long-awaited second front, which they launched just seven months later, on the beaches of Normandy. At the time, in an effort to appeal to Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill had generously made the arduous journey to Tehran, a location significantly closer to Moscow than to London or Washington. Now it was only fair that Stalin should come to them. [...]

The Black Sea coast was as far west as Stalin was willing to travel, and the string of resort towns along the southern coast of the Crimea, a stretch nicknamed the "Romanov Route" for the number of residences that once belonged to the imperial family and

their aristocratic friends, still held a certain allure among high-ranking comrades. Though the Soviets decried the corruption of the imperialist age, they apparently had no moral qualms about using these luxurious palaces themselves. After assessing various locations around the Black Sea, from Odessa to Batum, the Soviets and the Americans deemed Yalta and Livadia Palace the best of several options; the other choices were too damaged by war to accommodate large delegations or were less accessible by ship or plane. Harriman and the American embassy in Moscow begrudgingly agreed, even though, as Churchill underscored, the Black Sea was still littered with mines, making it impossible for the leaders to risk traveling to Yalta by ship-though some of their support staff would have to do so. By the New Year of 1945, it was decided: Roosevelt and Churchill would rendezvous on the island of Malta, sixty miles off the southern tip of Italy, and fly the remaining distance to the Crimea to meet Stalin at the former tsar's summer palace.

Though Livadia was an imperial residence, it was smaller than the 100,000-square-foot mansion in the Hudson River Valley where Kathy Harriman had grown up. It was also too small to house all three of the delegations, which seemed to swell exponentially with every passing day. Playing the genial, accommodating host, Stalin had graciously offered Livadia to President Roosevelt. As the largest palace of the several nearby, its ballroom was perfectly suited to hosting the formal meetings of the Big Three and their advisers, and, given that Roosevelt was paralyzed from the waist

Opposite page: First U.S. food ship in Britain under Lend-Lease. Kathleen Harriman on far right with Lord Woolton and Averell Harriman (1941).

Above: Portrait of Kathleen Harriman by Cecil Beaton.



down and confined to a wheelchair, Stalin thought the president would be most comfortable if he did not have to travel to the conference sessions each day. Meanwhile, Churchill and his party were to be accommodated at Vorontsov Palace, another Russian aristocrat's home the Soviets had nationalized, which was a thirty-minute drive down the road. Stalin opted for a slightly smaller estate nearby referred to as both the Koriez Villa and Yusupov Palace, which was

"My God but this country has a job on its hands— just cleaning up."

Above: Kathleen Harriman skiing in Sun Valley, early 1940s.

conveniently situated between the American and British residences. [...]

Once it was decided that the three leaders would gather at Yalta, the Soviets had just three weeks to turn the ransacked villas into a site fit for one of the largest and most important international summits in history. Lavrentiy Beria, the forbidding head of the Narodny komissariat vnutrennikh del-the dreaded NKVD, the Soviet Union's secret police-and the man Stalin could always rely on to execute his most unpleasant tasks, took charge of the preparations. This encompassed overseeing everything from structural repairs to the transport of provisions to the removal of any "undesirable elements" from the surrounding areaincluding 835 supposed anti-Soviet individuals discovered over the course of the 74,000 security checks the NKVD had conducted within twenty kilometers of Yalta. Ambassador Harriman was to arrive approximately ten days before the conference to see that the improvements were up to American standards and to ensure that the logistical and protocol-related matters were in order, so that no problem, no matter how small, could hamper the progress of diplomacy.

responsible for the conference's final arrangements, but in reality, that was not exactly the case. Averell never passed up the chance to be at the center of the day's action. In early 1941, isolationism still ran rampant in the United States and the nation remained neutral. Roosevelt had been eager to support the fight against the Nazis but could do so only while maintaining a position of neutrality. Thinking creatively, he discovered a loophole that accomplished his objectives, and the Lend-Lease program was born: the United States would provide Britain and its allies with food, fuel, ships, airplanes, ammunition, and other war material that Britain would theoretically return after the war. When Roosevelt named Averell the Lend-Lease envoy in February 1941, he moved to London without a moment's hesitation to take up the post, despite the fact that the Blitz raged on. But after the United States entered the war, the action shifted east, and Averell was eager to follow it. Roosevelt offered him the

In theory, Averell Harriman was

position of ambassador to the Kremlin in the autumn of 1943, and he left London for Moscow without delay.

This time was no different. Three days after Averell and Kathy arrived in the Crimea, he flew off to Malta to meet Churchill and Roosevelt, eager to take part in any important pre-conference

developments. Meanwhile, Averell left his daughter in Yalta to carry out the rest of the preparations at Livadia over the week that remained before the delegates arrived.

While surprising at first glance, it actually made perfect sense for Kathy to supervise this work. She spoke Russian; Averell did not. Realizing that her father would never have time to master the language while also performing his ambassadorial duties in Moscow, Kathy had decided to learn Russian for both of them. As soon as they arrived in Moscow, where she was to serve as the official hostess of Spaso House, the residence of the American ambassador, Kathy hired a tutor. The small number of English-speaking Russian tutors in Moscow were already engaged, so she had to employ a French-speaking tutor and translate from Russian to French to English. Kathy practiced her Russian at every opportunity, listening intently during productions at the renowned Bolshoi and Maly theaters and mumbling Russian phrases to herself as she walked down the street. Sometimes the locals gawked at her, but, as she told her sister, Mary, they tended to stare at her anyway because of her fur coat and silk stockings, scarce luxuries few in Moscow could afford. Her Russian was hardly perfect, but she spoke well enough to act as her father's

interpreter at social gatherings. Now she took on the task of communicating with the Russian sentries, bureaucrats, and laborers in the melee at Livadia. Even if she struggled occasionally, she hoped the Russians would forgive her, just as she forgave them as they struggled to properly pronounce her name. [...]

It was not the first time Averellalways Averell or Ave, never Father or Daddy-had left Kathy to fend for herself in a remote place. During her four years at Bennington College in Vermont, Kathy spent her winter vacations at Sun Valley, Averell's ski resort in Idaho. It was the first of its kind in the United States. When Americans caught the ski craze following the 1932 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, Averell realized that an enormous opportunity lay before him. As chairman of Union Pacific Railroad. he was looking to increase business on western railroad lines. People needed a reason to go west, and a glamorous ski destination rivaling the Alpine resorts of Europe would be just the thing. [...]

While Averell chased across the world, attending to his various endeavors, first in business, then increasingly in government, he left Kathy as his deputy for weeks at a time to assist with the day-to-day operations of the resort: assessing slope conditions, seeing to publicity, and looking after celebrity guests such as Ernest Hemingway, who soon called Sun Valley home. She even performed the occasional bit of reconnaissance on rival resorts, which had begun to spring up in the west. [...]

In many ways, helping to manage Sun Valley was the ideal preparation for the work Kathy now faced. But nothing could truly ready a person for the overwhelming amount of Though Livadia was an imperial residence, it was smaller than the 100,000-squarefoot mansion in the Hudson River Valley where Kathy Harriman had grown up.

labor that had to be done before Roosevelt and his party arrived at Livadia Palace. Under Lavrentiv Beria's direction, the Soviets were frantically restocking the villas with whatever could be spared from Moscow's luxury hotels. More than fifteen hundred railcars, laden with building supplies, tools, furnishings, rugs, light bulbs, art, dishes, cookware, and food, had heaved along on the thousand-mile journey to the Crimea. It seemed as if every movable object within Moscow's renowned Hotel Metropol had been packed up and transported. Even the maids' uniforms for the conference were embroidered with the Metropol's distinctive "M." In addition to the obvious beds, tables, and chairs, the more mundane items of daily life, such as coat hangers, shaving mirrors, and ashtrays, had to be supplied. Kathy presumed some of these things were "just being 'requisitioned' out of homes" from the war-battered towns nearby.

There was also the problem of evicting the current residents, who had moved in when the Nazis moved out: bugs. The palace was infested with lice and bedbugs. As the motley team of Beria's NKVD forces, Red Army soldiers, local peasant laborers, and the Romanian POWs scrambled to

put everything in order, the U.S. Navy Medical Corps arrived to delouse the palace. They sprayed the furniture with a 10 percent solution of DDT in kerosene and dusted all the linens with DDT powder, but even that draconian dose did not get rid of the bugs entirely. Kathy herself was all too well acquainted with Russian insects. On the train from Moscow to Yalta, something had bitten her near her eve. Her skin had swollen so badly that for a day or two she could barely see. International wartime diplomacy could be distinctly unglamorous, but Kathy remained unfazed.

It was because of her stalwart and unflappable nature that Kathy had become a fixture in her father's world. Thanks to her fifteen months in Moscow and the two prior years in London, where she had worked as a war reporter, Averell Harriman's attractive, opinionated daughter was well known to the military and civilian leadership of all three Allied nations gathering at Yalta. Her presence at Livadia Palace would come as no surprise to any of them, not even to Roosevelt. "As this is her department, have arranged to take Kathleen along," Averell had informed FDR by wire on January 17. "I will leave her at Yalta to assist in the details of the arrangements there." Roosevelt did not object.

It was ironic that this advance work in living arrangements and hospitality had become Kathy's domain. She had moved to London at the beginning of the war to work as a journalist—not, as she insisted multiple times, to be her father's housekeeper. In fact, one of the last things she had written to her sister, Mary, before moving to Moscow was, "I only hope there'll be no entertaining." Kathy was woefully disappointed. Life in Moscow seemed

to be one lavish caviar-and-vodkafueled banquet after another. By now
she knew to expect that supervising
an enormous household staff and
entertaining guests would be part of
her work at Yalta, but over time she
had come to realize that her role as
her father's hostess and deputy was
much more complex than simply
organizing parties and managing the
house. Though never officially given a
title, she was essentially serving as the
Americans' protocol officer, a role often
overlooked and underappreciated yet
vital to international diplomacy. [...]

Important as the rituals of protocol were, Kathy was sometimes charmingly oblivious to them. Once, during a night out in London with her best friend, Pamela Churchill, the prime minister's daughter-in-law, she happened upon the king of Greece. Kathy greeted him with a simple American "How do you do!" Pam, by contrast, dropped to a deep curtsy. Kathy also was not inclined to defer to those who considered themselves her superiors. She had once caused a kerfuffle with Adele Astaire, the sister and former dance partner of the American movie star Fred Astaire, who had married Lord Charles Cavendish, after writing a rather sarcastic Newsweek article about Adele's contributions to the war effort. As a war reporter, Kathy had met and covered countless women who worked in factories, served as transport pilots, or nursed soldiers just behind the front lines. Adele's efforts as an "amanuensis"making improvements to the love letters soldiers sent home-could not compare (though Adele did make for good copy). In the article,

Kathy observed that Adele "still [wore] silly bows atop her graying hair."

Newsweek had also printed Adele's age—a generous forty-four—but

Kathy could blame that on her editor.

Unsurprisingly, Adele, a friend of

Kathy's stepmother, had not taken
kindly to this portrayal. When the
former starlet next saw the younger
woman at a restaurant in SoHo, she
shrieked at her, calling Kathy a "bitch
to end all bitches" and threatened to
"break" her in London. Kathy was
visibly amused, which made Adele all
the more furious.

Now, much as Kathy might have liked to laugh at the Russian maître d'hôtel as he worked out the optimal arrangements of china and crystal place settings, she refrained from sharing her frank opinions. A war was raging; a diplomatic approach was essential. Among people who cared deeply about protocol, it was imperative that everything was done just right. It was a thankless job. If she executed everything correctly, no one would notice her work; if, however, she made a mistake, her father would take the blame for failing to make every provision for cross-cultural harmony. Helping the myriad challenging personalities in Roosevelt's entourage adapt to Russian customs would be difficult, even without the added complication of the trying physical environment. The Soviets had done their best to ensure the comfort of their guests, but nonetheless, the navy medical team had to warn the American contingent to lower expectations and encouraged "a little good-naturedness" from all parties.

> As Kathy went from room to room at Livadia, inspecting the living arrangements, the ever-present NKVD officers in tow, she put her

Russian-language skills to use. FDR's suite, once the tsar's private chambers, including his office and private dining room, was one of Kathy's chief concerns. The room now serving as the president's bedroom had an ambiance of overbearing darkness. It was like a Pullman car carved from a heavy block of wood. The walls were paneled in mahogany; paintings in enormous gold-leaf frames lined the walls; orange-fringed silk lampshades abounded; plush green harem cushions were scattered across the floor. And in the middle was a massive wooden bed frame, an imposing style of furnishing the Soviets imagined that a visiting dignitary would desire. In pursuit of perfection, they had several times changed their minds about which Bokhara rug would best suit the room. Each change in opinion surfaced only after workers had moved the behemoth of a bed back into place.

But Kathy could be every bit as demanding and attentive to detail. When she found that painters in FDR's bathroom could not understand her Russian, she was undeterred. Catching their attention, Kathy pointed to the window and the sea beyond and then back at the walls. Back and forth, back and forth. The wall color, she tried to explain yet again, had to match the color of the water. Nearby, a plumber, who was supervising the repairs to the bathroom fixtures the Nazis had ripped from the wall, watched her. He did not seem amused. Perhaps this was because she had ordered the painters to change the color at least six times already.

Kathy had more important issues to worry about than the slighted feelings of the plumbers and painters. A battalion-sized contingent of Cabinet members, State Department officials, and top-ranking military officers—not

to mention the president of the United States—was about to arrive on the palace's doorstep. Bathrooms, or the lack thereof, were proving a particular nightmare, and Kathy did what she could to forestall ablution chaos. A mere nine toilets and four bathtubs were available to accommodate several hundred people, and only Roosevelt's suite had a private bath. Everyone else would either have to wait in line or use the latrines that had been hastily constructed in the garden. Even with the added nineteenth-century-style privies, thirty-five officers would be shaving in buckets beside their beds.

Rooming assignments also required strategic thinking. There were not enough private bedrooms in the palace to accommodate everyone whose credentials would have warranted the finest suites in New York's or London's most exclusive hotels. As it was, sixteen colonels would have to share one barrack-like room; junior officers would be stuffed in the eaves. The bedrooms on the first floor, nearest the president, Kathy reserved for his closest government advisers: his special adviser Harry Hopkins, Secretary of State Edward Stettinius, the Soviet expert and Russian interpreter Charles "Chip" Bohlen, the director of the Office of War Mobilization and elder statesman James Byrnes, and Averell. Topranking military leaders she assigned to the second floor. As army chief of staff, General George Marshall outranked everyone. Kathy awarded him the tsar's imperial bedroom. Admiral Ernest King, the second-most senior officer in the U.S. Navy, would have to be satisfied with the tsarina's boudoir.

[...] Outdoor explorations provided insights and inspiration for an additional assignment Kathy had to complete before the guests arrived. Together with Eddie Page, one of the young Foreign Service officers at the embassy in Moscow, she was writing a pamphlet to assist the Americans with their brief immersion in local culture. As most of the American delegation had never set foot in the Crimea, nor in fact in any other part of the Soviet Union, this pamphlet was meant to be a useful diplomatic instrument, full of information about the geography, history, and significance of this unfamiliar part of the world. The task lacked the journalistic challenge of the hard-hitting reporting about developments on the fighting fronts that Kathy had begun to write for Newsweek just before Averell was called to Moscow, but at least it was something.

When Kathy first moved to London, she had no journalistic training beyond a general education in international affairs at Bennington College and experience assisting with public relations for Sun Valley. But journalism had been her ticket to London-and to Averell's world. It was only after her mother died that Kathy had truly come to know her father. Shortly after Kitty's death, Averell had written to his two daughters. In this letter, he told them that he had somewhat radical notions about parenting. He would never be able to replace their mother, as he simply was not the warm, affectionate type who showered his children with outward signs of love. He could, however, offer them something different. [...]

When Averell wrote this letter, he could not have foreseen that in addition to working alongside him in Sun Valley, Kathy would spend

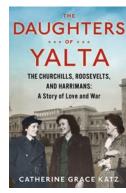
four years at his side, navigating diplomacy in two European capitals embroiled in war. Averell's second wife, Marie, should have been the one to accompany him, but because of trouble with her eyesight she had elected to remain in New York. Averell encouraged Kathy to go in her place.

Kathy was thrilled by Averell's invitation. But at first, the American government refused to permit Kathy to join her father in London as she was not considered essential personnel. Averell contacted his friend Harry Hopkins, FDR's longtime colleague, adviser, and the person closest to the president. Hopkins secured a visa for Kathy to work in London as a war reporter, despite her lack of experience. Undaunted, Kathy wrote to Hopkins, "Someone opens the door or passes the butter at the table—'thank you' is the polite result . . . But teaming that same 'thank you' with the opportunity you've made possible for me just doesn't make sense . . . I'm extremely grateful & will continue being so for a hellova long time." She flew from New York to Bermuda to Lisbon on a luxury "flying boat," the Dixie Clipper, and arrived in London on May 16, 1941, less than a week after the worst air raid of the Blitz. More than five hundred Luftwaffe planes had bombarded London for nearly seven hours, leaving the historic chamber in the House of Commons a smoldering pile of char.

While in London, Kathy worked first for the International News Service and later for *Newsweek*, one of a number of businesses in which Averell had an ownership stake. But moving to the USSR with Averell meant resigning from *Newsweek* just as she was angling for a posting to cover the war in North Africa. "I am thrilled at what you have done—and very proud. Don't worry

about your future plans," Ave assured her in a note. Once in Moscow, however, her journalistic endeavors had been largely limited to clipping and mimeographing articles to include in the daily embassy news bulletin, a task she compared to "paper doll cutting." Now, compiling this pamphlet on the Crimea, Kathy found that information about local history, both ancient and from the nineteenth century, was abundant. But she was having much more difficulty learning about the Crimea's more recent past. One afternoon, she decided to pay a call on an elderly local woman, Maria Chekhova, sister of the famed Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. Seeking relief from tuberculosis, Chekhov had moved to Yalta with his mother and sister in 1898, and it was there that he composed two of his most famous works, The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard. The writer had died in 1904, but his eighty-three-year-old sister still lived up the road from Livadia Palace, in his elegant white dacha, with views of the sea; somehow she had managed to save it from Nazi wrath. Kathy's visit with Miss Chekhova seemed to hold potential: who could have a better view of the past half-century of Russian history and culture? But though Miss Chekhova was "charming, full of life and thrilled to be meeting some Americans," as Kathy wrote to Mouche, Kathy was "having a hellova time finding out about the pre-revolutionary history of this part of the coast, as the Soviets seem very reticent on the subject." Chekhova also refused to tell Kathy anything





"about what happened during the year and a half of occupation." As Kathy soon discovered, Maria Chekhova was hardly unique. At the palace, she found the same restraint. "The natives who work around the place here at Livadia don't seem to know anything either," she told her former governess. [...]

Kathy found the Soviet citizens with whom she had incidental contact in Moscow or on the ski slopes of the Lenin Hills "friendly and frank," but on an official level, it was nearly impossible to get to know anyone other than the most senior leaders in government, and not in any personal way. Kathy was far from the only person who encountered this difficulty. In the weeks before the Yalta Conference, the State Department had submitted a request to the American embassy, asking for biographical profiles of the Soviet bureaucrats with whom they would be working. George Kennan, Averell's chargé d'affaires at the embassy and one of the few Russian experts in the Foreign Service, responded that the request was impossible to fulfill. The Soviets never shared any kind of personal information about their bureaucrats with outsiders, except in obituaries, when "they can no longer be of use to the foreign world." Friendship, expressions of mutual interest, or acts of kindness counted for nothing. As Kennan explained, if a Soviet bureaucrat "does a kind or obliging act, it is because he finds it in

the interests of his government to do so," as "the personal views of a Soviet official have little or no influence on his behavior . . . The views of a Soviet official are manufactured for him." [...]

The ablest lieutenant now had just 72 hours left before the American delegation arrived at Livadia, and everything around her was still in an alarming state of extremes. There was more than enough caviar to feed a small city, but scarcely enough lavatories for a large family; bed linens acquired from one of the finest hotels in the world covered hard, thin mattresses riddled with bedbugs.

But that was Russia, a land of extremes and contradictions, a place where perception often had no relation to reality. Where Moscow shops beckoned passersby with tempting displays, yet inside there was nothing to purchase. There were luxuries, such as champagne for breakfast and bouquets of irises and dahlias for Kathy's bedside table, that no American would ever expect in wartime at the embassy residence, yet no glass in the south- and east-facing windows for more than two years after nearby bombings of the Battle of Moscow had shattered them to pieces. And here, in this vestige of empire on the Black Sea, the three most powerful men in the world would gather in a tsar's palace, that, save for some furniture and a coat of paint, otherwise would have been condemned.

The Daughters of Yalta: The Churchills, Roosevelts, and Harrimans: A Story of Love and War Catherine Grace Katz Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company (2020) ISBN 978-0358117858

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Above, left: Crimean conference, left to right:
Secretary of State Edward Stettinus, Maj. Gen. L. S. Kuter, Admiral E. J. King, General George C. Marshall, Ambassador Averell Harriman, Admiral William Leahy, and President F. D. Roosevelt (Livadia Palace, February 4, 1945).

## The New Hu

Below: Zrinka Bralo (left) at the front of the "Refugees Welcome Here" march in Parliament Square. Photo by Peter Marshall via Alamy (London, September 2015).



Bottom right: The Syrian and Iraqi residents of the makeshift camp in Piraeus were transferred to a camp in Trikala in July 2016. Photo by Lara Nettelfield (August 2016). All photos in this article were taken by the author unless otherwise noted.

# manitarians

### The Volunteers of the Refugee "Crisis"

BY LARA J. NETTELFIELD

### **DECEMBER 2015**

arajevo native Zrinka Bralo stood on the shore of Lesvos waiting for a boat filled with refugees to arrive from Turkey. After it landed, she helped the children change into dry clothes, careful to make sure the parents were in sight. That year multiple boats arrived day after day, making dangerous landings. Running motors threatened to maim passengers. Sharp rocks loomed underfoot as they walked to shore. Some Greek villages were welcoming over 5,000 people per day.

I interviewed Zrinka about the three weeks she spent volunteering in Greece during her winter holiday, helping people make it to Europe safely so they could exercise their right to seek asylum. That December most of the arrivals were from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The frenetic day on the shore of Lesvos was like many others Zrinka experienced that month.

"The whole thing is so absurd . . . You spend the morning getting people off the boat; sometimes you watch lifesaving interventions by lifeguards and doctors that are just so emotionally powerful," she told me.

Zrinka had to make do with whatever provisions were available to the volunteers. If she ran out of socks, she would rip apart a foil emergency blanket to make them.

"So there are people coming off the boat, and they're in shock, and you're taking their socks off, and





*Left*: Refugee Rescue's Mo Chara boat (Skala Skamineas, Lesvos, August 2017).

Below: Volunteer Keegan "Kiki" Nashan (Subotica, Serbia, 2017). Photo by Fareed Cheema courtesy of Keegan Nashan.

you're taking their shoes off, and you're wrapping this sort of golden stuff around their feet, and they're just looking at you, wondering what's going on," she recalled.

Some children still managed to find beauty in the scene.

Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, who set up a temporary studio on the island that year, told Zrinka how children on the boats saw the gold and silver emergency blankets from afar and thought that "we [the volunteers] were angels . . . holding them and waving at them. They could just see the reflection of gold and silver," she remembered.

Zrinka was one of the many volunteers waiting to add a bit of order, and compassion, into the chaos. She and hundreds of thousands of volunteers on Lesvos and across Europe were taking up roles usually assigned to states and international humanitarian organizations.

I wondered why.

Why did people like Zrinka put their lives on hold to help refugees and migrants who traveled along the so-called Balkan route, during a year in which over a million people arrived on European shores?



#### THE PROJECT

To answer this question, I started a project called The New Humanitarians. For the past four years, I've conducted ethnographic research and oral history interviews with the volunteers, including refugee volunteers, who worked along the Balkan route. This effort seeks to document an underreported aspect of what has become known as the European refugee "crisis"—but has proved to be a crisis of political will.

I wanted to understand who these volunteers were, what they did, how the experience affected them, and what it meant to them.

What is emerging is a social history of the "solidarity movement": a diverse constellation of people, projects, and motivations, working for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. This documentation project is crucial as many of these efforts now exist only in the memories of the volunteers and those they helped. There are no official records of makeshift kitchens, unofficial refugee camps, community centers, and occupied hotels and buildings. There are limited accounts, mostly on blogs and closed social media

groups, of the experiences of people who walk the streets at night from Athens to Bihać to distribute food and blankets to those who have no shelter.

Zrinka's life story helped me place this newest crisis in context. She had been a refugee herself. Over two decades earlier she had left Sarajevo under siege amid a genocidal war to seek refuge in London. Her experience had been very different from that of the refugees she encountered on Lesvos.

She had been a journalist during the war. Her United Nations press credentials enabled her to safely board a Hercules plane that brought humanitarian aid into the city and allowed a small number to escape. The survivors she met on Lesvos had left their war-torn homelands with no option for safe passage, making their way to Europe mostly on foot and by boat. Constant rumors circulated on social media and in the camps about which borders were open and which nationalities would be allowed entry into which country.

"People were taken out of their homes, out of their comfort zones, [in] total uncertainty, in sheer panic because rumors were absolutely out of control," she said.

According to the Pew Research Center, 1.3 million people sought asylum in the European Union in 2015. The UK had only 32,733 asylum applications that year—a consequence of the conservative government's restrictive policies. In her role as head of London-based Migrants Organise, Zrinka lobbied to increase those numbers and provide safe passage for asylum seekers and refugees.

"I went to Lesvos because I was very, very angry and upset," she said.
"I was trying to do my best to get the government to increase the number of people who are coming here and to shift the public conversation towards welcome."

### ORAL HISTORY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

"Stories, and by that I mean poems, sonatas, plays, soliloquies as well as interviews, have circulated through history since the beginning of time as a way of capturing that which was lost, and then recreated from the dust and muck of history," the oral historian Mary Marshall Clark writes in the book *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

In my project, I wanted to capture the memories of volunteers during the refugee "crisis" to contribute to the historical record. I chose oral history, defined by the Oral History Association as "a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events," because of the field's commitment to including marginalized voices and to understanding the meaning people ascribe to historical episodes.

"In the aftermath of crisis, the oral historian can do much to help prevent gaps in journalistic coverage of an event from being reflected in the historical record by attending to how the event is being covered in the media and purposefully seeking out interviewees who can offer alternative perspectives," Mark Cave writes in *Listening on the Edge*.

I, too, was a volunteer along the Balkan route. I started at the height of the crisis, in November 2015. I spent a week in the Slavonski Brod Winter Reception and Transit Center volunteering with a Croatian NGO (Hrvatska strukovna udruga sudskih tumača [HSUST], the Croatian Professional Association of Court Interpreters), and living on the floor of a house that a local family generously donated to the volunteer

effort just after the camp opened. As a researcher who has spent more than seven years living in the region, I saw that many friends and colleagues there were quickly mobilizing resources, and I wanted to contribute, if only in a small way.

The previous summer, people were forced to walk through the fields of Serbia and Croatia, headed to seek safety in countries like Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Norway.

By November, asylum seekers were allowed to take trains from Serbia that stopped in the Slavonski Brod camp on their way to Slovenia. They were shuttled through ominous gates to register their arrivals and ushered to different gated sections of the camp to await the train. According to *Večernji List Hrvatska*, more than 650,000 refugees traveled through the Slavonski Brod camp until April 2016, when the Balkan route, and the camp, were officially closed.

Volunteers helped people off the train; got them medical assistance, food, clothes, and blankets. They shuttled between the refugees and a storage facility run by the Red Cross on the camp's grounds. The Moving Europe project later documented human rights violations in the camp.

The city and its residents were no strangers to displacement and its painful effects: during the Bosnian war, a five-kilometer-long line of People in the camp who had traveled thousands of miles to Greece were often still wet from the sea crossing. Some had all their earthly possessions stolen along the way. Cab drivers swindled them.



refugees once stood on the other side of the border waiting to enter a newly independent Croatia.

Decades later, as the city welcomed newly displaced persons once again, some extraordinary stories were coming out of the city. A volunteer told me that, in January 2016, a refugee notified a translator in the camp that he had just received a text that his relative was on a sinking boat in the Aegean Sea. The translator informed a camp official who was able to notify the Turkish authorities. A rescue operation ensued and the passengers were saved.

There would be many challenges along the Balkan route for all who made it safely to shore. People in the camp who had traveled thousands of miles to Greece were often still wet from the sea crossing. Some had all their earthly possessions stolen along the way. Cab drivers swindled them. Some were driven the wrong way and dumped along the side of the road. Almost everyone had a cough. It was a ubiquitous and dark chorus in the camp's large tents. Everyone needed something. While I was a volunteer, we never had enough men's shoes in size 42.

The volunteers I worked with were a diverse group of people: an architect

from the UK, an Israeli performer, a group of young Germans who drove down together, a handful of Czechs, to name only a few. After Croatia, I continued volunteering with a kitchen in Athens that distributed food in Victoria Square. The kitchen was started by a group of volunteers who came from Iokasti's Kitchen in Samos. Hundreds of people waited in line twice a day. I later joined a kitchen in the makeshift refugee camp in the port of Piraeus organized by the Khora Community Center. The next year, I volunteered for Refugee Rescue, a Belfast-based search and rescue organization on Lesvos. Everywhere I went, I met inspiring people who dedicated months and years of their lives to the cause.

When I started in Croatia, I had no plan to conduct research. Later, I realized that these stories were not being captured and that the media portrayal of the crisis was limited. The stories dedicated to the volunteers failed to capture the extent of their interventions, the different forms solidarity took, and how their politics intersected with state policies. Many researchers are compelled by events to document life histories as it turns out.

Above: Volunteers made a special visit to the camp in Trikala to organize activities for the children (Trikala, August 2016).

Right: Woman in Piraeus refugee camp in Greece (July 2016).





With no formal training in humanitarian crisis settings, he left strongly affected by what he had seen during the rescue operations.

"Compassion and chance pull oral historians into crisis settings more often than academic agendas," Mark Cave observes in *Listening on the Edge*.

### FROM GREECE TO SERBIA AND THE PUSHBACKS

Keegan "Kiki" Nashan first pitched a tent in the informal camp in the port of Piraeus, moving next to the only family out of hundreds who spoke Spanish, her second language. She stayed to help the families in the sweltering summer heat, rising at dawn and spending her days with the refugees, adapting her schedule to their rhythms. Later in the year, when other volunteers signaled an urgent need for help, she moved to the Serbian-Hungarian border.

There, her friends relayed stories of the illegal and violent pushbacks. In one instance, eight buses filled with refugees headed to a government camp in Preševo, but not everyone made it. They were pushed back over the border into what is now the Republic of North Macedonia. Kiki's refugee friend was taken into one of the buses. She described the incident, as relayed by her friend, in our interview:

"They woke everybody at, like, five in the morning and they had around

*Left*: A refugee trying to cross the border in the Republic of North Macedonia says he suffered cigarette burns on his arm at the hands of the same police officer during multiple attempted crossings. Photo by Keegan Nashan (Subotica, Serbia, August 2018).

Right: Volunteer Michael Cecil with his wife (Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland, August 2019).



50 police surrounding all the people that were living in the tents, outside the camp [in Horgoš]. They were beating on the tents to force the people to get out. They didn't let anybody collect any of their personal belongings; they didn't tell anybody where they were going.

"... They parked the buses, and one by one they took people off the bus. And they put them into a big military van with no windows. Indiscriminate of nationality, or of official status, or whether somebody had a valid asylum card. There were people that got [pushed back] that had had a place on the list [to cross] to Hungary. People who were unregistered, as well as people who were registered in Serbia but hadn't had their names put on the list yet. So everyone from Afghanistan, Pakistan. . . . there were some guys from Bangladesh. And there was also a guy from Sudan."

There were other harrowing stories. Another refugee friend told her that he encountered the same police officer whenever he entered the Republic of North Macedonia from Greece. Each time, the officer pressed a lit cigarette against his arm. He then robbed him of his possessions, pushed him back over

the border, and forced him to start from scratch. The friend showed Kiki a series of scars in varying stages of healing that marked every failed crossing.

#### A PERSONAL TOLL

Michael Cecil is a ferryboat captain on Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland, a picturesque place with a population of 150. He navigates one of Europe's most challenging sea routes between the island and Ballycastle on the mainland, a job that made him an ideal candidate for his work on Lesvos. He first went there in 2016 to volunteer for Refugee Rescue, which was forced to suspend operations in August 2020 due to the deteriorating situation on the North Shore of Lesvos. By the time I met him in 2019, he had made eight separate missions there and had also served as a board member—a role that demanded constant meetings to address daily developments.

With no formal training in humanitarian crisis settings, he left strongly affected by what he had seen during the rescue operations. He had to find a way to translate his experiences and the enormity of the situation to his family members and community back home. He told me that the things he witnessed were always on his mind:

"When you come across a boat in the middle of the night that's half on the rocks and half off of them, with 20 or 30 screaming children, and parents that are screaming because their children are screaming. And the chaos of that at night, which is okay at the moment when you're dealing with it, but it has an effect later on, even that same day, but especially weeks and months afterwards."

This was a sentiment shared by almost all of the volunteers I interviewed.

#### **NOT EVERYONE MAKES IT**

Many of the volunteers witnessed failed journeys and the false promise of a better life—often symptoms of a broken asylum system desperately in need of reform.

Charlotte Cheeseman, a long-term
British volunteer in Greece whom I met
while volunteering in Athens, recalled
a group of Pakistani miners leaving
Better Days for Moria, an unofficial
camp where she spent a few months.
The miners knew they were about to
be deported. As they walked from the
camp, a line of volunteers clapped and
high-fived them, a gesture of support
for their next journey: the return home.
"They were singing their miner songs
as they were walking out . . . singing
and dancing and chanting as they

walked down the road to the official camp. We just all stood at the top of the hill watching. Incredible people. They had so much dignity and strength and courage in the situation."

Psychologist Alice Miller introduced the idea of the "enlightened witness," an understanding person who helps a victim "recognize the injustices they suffered" and "through his or her presence gave them a notion of trust." The volunteers have often played this role, and some scholars have argued that oral historians can as well.

### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS— THE PANDEMIC AND NEW ROUTES

The Balkan route is officially closed, but people are still crossing borders. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, more than 11,971 people had arrived in Greece as of August 31, 2020, almost 40 percent of whom are children. Since the pandemic swept through the region, refugees and asylum seekers have suffered in our time of great immobility.

At the time this issue of *Harriman Magazine* went to print in October 2020, the infamous Moria camp on

Lesvos had recently burned down in a fire that left over 13,000 people homeless. The original camp was a space intended for fewer than 3,000. This tragic event was a predictable consequence of years of EU and Greek policies that purposefully engineered the suffering of refugees there in the vain hopes it would stop people from seeking asylum. People in the camp lived with no electricity, little water, overflowing toilets, and, for most, no shelter. Also, the lockdown in Greek camps extended past the end of August-much longer than it did for the Greek population at large.

In Athens, evictions of refugees in squatted properties have continued unabated since the election of a right-wing government under the leadership of Kyriakos Mitsotakis. People reported seeing uniformed police officers under the windows of a squatted building in the Exarcheia neighborhood of the capital shouting, "Prison and the baton are coming for you!" at 2:00 a.m., just hours after the election results were announced in July 2019. People fleeing the Moria camp for the mainland are being taken from Victoria Square to camps far away from the city center. Others sleep on the streets.

This tragic event was a predictable consequence of years of EU and Greek policies that purposefully engineered the suffering of refugees there in the vain hopes it would stop people from seeking asylum.



Left: Young children holding a sign at an Athens pro-refugee protest (July 2016).

Farther north along the Balkan route, people are taking the new and more dangerous routes through Albania as identified in Nidžara Ahmetašević's recent report, "Limits to Access to Asylum," for Refugee Rights Europe. The report notes that over 65,000 people have entered the region since 2018. That year, there were more than 1,000 illegal pushbacks that affected over 10,000 people in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, and Romania.

All along the route, the lack of access to adequate housing and medical care threatens the lives of asylum seekers. Meanwhile, states in the region are developing asylum systems in environments in which many policymakers view people fleeing dangerous situations as security threats and not individuals with rights. Also, efforts to criminalize humanitarian assistance under the guise of prosecuting trafficking all along the Balkan route, and in Europe generally, have made it more difficult for volunteers to assist them.

The pandemic has made things even more dire: Foreign volunteers have by and large left their posts along the Balkan route, and there are not enough people on the ground to meet the needs of forced migrants.

The task of supporting people fleeing conflict and persecution shouldn't have fallen to individual citizens to begin with, but they have been an integral lifeline to people on the move. Ultimately, the work the volunteers continue to do for refugees is in support of the right to life.

"They all had a plan for life. That's part of that survivors' resilience which happened to me and many of my fellow Bosnians in London," Zrinka said. ■

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i. Alice Miller, "The Essential Role of an Enlightened Witness in Society," The Parenting Shift, https://theparentingshift.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/enlightened\_witness.pdf.



Right: From protest in support of Aleppo (Athens, December 2016).



n November 2019, the Harriman Institute hosted filmmaker Michael Idov for the screening and discussion of his directorial debut, *The Humorist*. The event brought together more than 100 people, with another 200 watching the live broadcast online. It was one of the Harriman Institute's best-attended events of the year.

Idov has been a prolific screenwriter, author, journalist, and editor in both Russian and English, and I've always been impressed by his genuine bicultural fluency. I interviewed him on July 7, 2020. What follows is an edited and condensed transcript of our conversation.

**Daria V. Ezerova:** Michael, you wrote an article for the *New York Times Magazine* called "My Accidental Career as a Russian Screenwriter." Could you discuss the trajectory of this accidental career?

Michael Idov: I'm still pinching myself about the fact that this story was actually published. It seems like such an odd story in and of itself, and private in the sense that it's not really illuminating of anything other than some fun facts about Russian pop culture. It became the germ of an idea for *Dressed Up for a Riot*, the book that I published two years later. But the short version is that I've always wanted to write for film and TV and have always been a little too timid to start doing it. I actually went to film school; I finished the University of Michigan with a self-designed dramatic writing degree.

After that I slid sideways into journalism through film criticism, and I stayed there for almost twenty years. It took me going to Russia and finding myself in the worst job I've ever had—editor-in-chief of a glamourous magazine [GQ] in Moscow—to reconnect with my repressed desire and perhaps repressed ability to write for film. The first two or three screenplays were all written without any further fate in mind. No one approached me to write them. And I think after the age of thirty or so you have a vanishingly small window to do things that no one's asking you to do. I was lucky that I had enough of a drive and felt enough desperation in my day job to start doing it. After that it was more or less a standard success story, just with a big Russian asterisk next to it.

Ezerova: After writing a number of screenplays, you directed your first film, *The Humorist*, in 2019. What was it like transitioning from screenwriting to directing?

**Idov:** It was very gradual. Working in TV helped. I can't really claim

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And then the song came in the mail, I opened it, and by the time I got to the line "Gold on my wrist—ya yumorist"
[I'm a humorist] I absolutely lost it and started yelling,
"That's a hit!"

that having showrun two series in Russia, Londongrad and The Optimists, made me a director, but it made me cognizant of everything that goes into the directing process. On The Optimists I had the unique chance to study literally behind the shoulder of one of the finest Russian directors of our time—Aleksei Popogrebsky—who directed the first season of the show. Roughly at the same time, my wife Lily and I wrote Leto (Summer) which ended up with Kirill Serebrennikov. I would say that my understanding of directing, at least when it comes to Russian film, is basically composed of everything I saw and stole from Kirill and Aleksei.

Ezerova: Films about comedians have existed in Hollywood for a long time. Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* and Eddie Murphy's *Dolemite Is My Name* come to mind. But there haven't been many Russian films about the topic. Why did you choose to tell the story of a Soviet comedian?

Idov: There's been at least one romantic comedy where the main character is a stand-up comedian. It's by Pavel Ruminov, and the main character is played by Danila Kozlovsky. But *The Humorist* does seem to be, as pointed out in one of the reviews, the first Russian movie ever with a Jewish main character not set in wartime. This honestly blew my mind. The first time I read it I thought, "that can't possibly be!" and then I started thinking about it, and it's true! The entire corpus of Russian cinema does not have any non-Holocaust, non-WWII stories with a Jewish protagonist.

In a weird way, "Jewish" and "comedian" are almost parts of the same whole for me in this movie. I think "comedian" is almost a code for "Jew." The otherness of the comedian and the otherness of the Jew in the official discourse and the official view of Russianness are very similar. What always fascinated me was that Soviet humor was very heavily Jewish. At the same time, the Borscht Belt school of American humor is that modern stand-up comedy is not just similar in terms of the Jewishness of its creators (it's people from basically the same

Below: Michael Idov in discussion with NYU graduate student Tatiana Efremova at the Harriman Institute in February 2020.

Opposite page: Kirill Serebrennikov (2012). Photo via Alamy.



shtetls, those whose parents just left earlier). We're talking about specifically Eastern European Ashkenazi humor and sensibility, filtered through the official commercial formats of its time, both in the U.S. and in the Soviet Union. It has become a little fraught to compare the Jewish experience to the Black experience, and yet Jews went through a very similar stage of acceptance in the Soviet Union. When, from the point of the dominant white culture, you are allowed to be an entertainer, an athlete, a musician, a comedian, and yet what seems like acceptance—because you get paid, and you are famous, and all the currencies of success are applied to you—is a clearly subservient position to the mainstream culture. This is what I wanted to explore within the figure of Arkadiev. And I didn't have to go far to find it. One of the reasons so many Jewish creatives went into comedy in the Soviet Union was that they were frustrated writers who wouldn't be taken seriously as novelists. Arkadiev actually hates comedy-he thinks of himself as a serious novelist. He's just found a way to monetize his natural caustic wit. He didn't get into the Writers' Union, and that's what Jews did in the Soviet Union: they became comedians, translators, or children's book authors. Those were the three fields that were considered okay for Jews. So it works symbolically, but it also works on the face of it historically because that's what things were like.

a humorist] I absolutely lost it and started yelling, "That's a hit!" The song has become the most popular track Face has ever done—the video that I directed got over 50 million views on YouTube. It's kind of unbelievable. We thought it was Face doing us a favor. But this bizarre collaboration—that by any logic should not have happened—has actually become his biggest hit.

Ezerova: You wrote the screenplay for *Leto*, a film about the career of Russian rock legend Victor Tsoi, which interpolates the style of the music video into a number of scenes. What role did your interest in music play in the creative process?

Idov: Before I answer, I should make it very clear that all these stylistic decisions, including the sort of music video inserts—that's purely Kirill. The film Lily and I wrote was a so-called backstage musical. But Kirill brilliantly expanded that vision into these amazing psychedelic visuals that he created for the film. Lily and I had nothing to do with that. I'm proud of the result, proud of Kirill for making it much better than what we wrote. But that said, the reason the script even ended up on our doorstep is because I've always been a very vocal fan of '80s Russian rock. So, it's not like I had to become anyone else in order to do this. I had most of the material in my head.

I remember the premiere of *Leto* in Cannes and the end of the movie, when the birth-and-life dates for Victor and Mike

**Ezerova:** The soundtrack for *The Humorist* was written by the Russian rapper Face. How did this collaboration come about?

Idov: This was kind of a high-risk, high-reward thing. Working with Face was a bit of a gamble because he was famous for intentionally dumb lyrics. But I wanted to show him the movie and see his reaction because he was a recent victim of an upswing in state censorship—his concerts would get canceled under a variety of pretexts. I wanted to connect the film with something that was happening in contemporary Russia, and this seemed to be a good way to do it.

Face said that he liked the movie and he'd do the song, but when he first sent the song, we didn't know if it was going to be any good. I remember talking to our producers before we got the first demo and saying, "Guys, are you emotionally prepared to just bury this song if it's not up to our standards?" Everyone said, "Okay. Worst-case scenario, we'll just have a really weird ringtone on our phones for a while." And then the song came in the mail, I opened it, and by the time I got to the line "Gold on my wrist—ya yumorist" [I'm



came on screen. There was a gasp—90 percent of the audience had no idea these were real people. They thought they were just watching a movie. The fact that this could work, that the music and the energy would work on people who had no context for it whatsoever, who didn't grow up on this, just shows how brilliant Kino is and how brilliant Kirill is. It was an enormous privilege to know that I somehow had a hand in bringing Russian rock to an international audience. That's probably the proudest I can be of anything I've done.

**Ezerova:** What was it like working with Serebrennikov, especially after he was put under house arrest?

Idov: The film went into postproduction by necessity, shortly after he was placed under house arrest, and he ended up editing it at home. He didn't have access to the internet but he had the raw materials for the film on a computer unconnected to the web, and so he spent three months putting it together. There were only two shoots after Kirill was arrested. One of them was right after his arrest. The other one took place about a month later using Kirill's written notes and film rehearsal footage—Kirill, being a theater director, very usefully films the rehearsal process. This was when we shot a crucial scene of a house concert at the end of the film.

Working with Kirill was obviously really amazing and, like I said earlier, I've basically tried to copy a lot of what he does. To connect it with *The Humorist*, the reason I picked Alexei Agranovich for the main role was in part that I saw him star in the Serebrennikov-directed play *A Common Story* and was blown away by his performance. So there's a lot of sort of Kirill-by-proxy in *The Humorist*.

**Ezerova:** What was your reaction to Serebrennikov's three-year suspended sentence?

Idov: It's disgusting to be put in the position where you have to sigh with relief when a demonstrably innocent person doesn't get full-on jail time.

This idea that we're supposed to be grateful or relieved that it ended up being a suspended sentence is precisely the so-called "salami tactics" for stripping people of freedom that we've seen play out in many ways in many cultures. The tagline of the Vysotsky biopic, Cnacu6o, umo xubou (Thank You ve for Being Alive), is a key phrase of the modern Russian psyche. Like, "oh, it sche could have been worse," but this is not a force majeure; it's not like his house we was picked up by a hurricane and he

survived. It's a demonstrable, provable injustice. And I hope that at some point it, and many others like it, will be reversed or addressed or redressed. That's the answer.

Ezerova: You are a figure of bicultural fluency, but your formation as a writer and a critic primarily took place in the U.S. Was it challenging transitioning to working in Russia when you first moved there in 2012?

Idov: Quite a bit, actually. And there are still some self-imposed limitations that I keep to. In English, I'm a good mimic. I can write for just about any education level or regional provenance. I've had a variety of experiences in the U.S.-I was a refugee, my family was on food stamps, we lived in Cleveland, etc. Whereas in Russia, I can only write about and for well-educated urban dwellers. I have the experience of my childhood in Russia's orbit, in Soviet Latvia, and my Moscow and St. Petersburg experience and points of reference—unruly privilege and hanging out with various elites. This is why, if I had to tackle a rural story or a provincial period story, I think it would be, for the lack of a better word, offensive to all parties involved. So if we're talking about directing, in the American context, I can be almost anyone. In the Russian context, I have to be the Russian Whit Stillman or something. Although Lily and I did write a feature that hasn't been produced yet that takes place in Rostov. But one of the characters is a rapper and another character is a court judge. So despite being in Rostov, we're still in our respective comfort zones. Lily is a former lawyer and knows that world very well, and I'm weirdly conversant in Russian rap.

**Ezerova:** How would you compare the Russian film industry to the U.S. film industry?

Idov: There is no juxtaposition between the Russian and the American school. There is a European school and an American school. They are very different. And it applies to both journalism and the film industry. The Russian school in both of these cases is part and parcel of the European school. There are incredibly minute differences between the Russian and, let's say, the French or the Italian or the German or the Polish film industries. When we were working with really established British TV writers on *Deutschland 89*, the people who worked with Armando Jannucci on *Veep* and beyond, they told

us that when they come to LA, they feel left out by the American film industry. They feel very much like Europeans when they come here to pitch. And again, these are people with Emmys for an HBO show. That's when I realized how big that divide actually is—not even having English as a first language is enough to bridge it. So yes, Russian film is just another European industry.

**Ezerova**: How has the pandemic affected your ability to work? What sorts of projects are you working on now?

Idov: We're definitely writing. It remains to be seen when all of this will be shot. We're lucky to have Deutschland 89 in the can. The second season of *The Optimists* is coming out this fall, but we didn't write it. They're using a few of the plotlines that we had developed when we were doing Season 1, and I also wrote a song for Season 2. Other than that, we're writing and we're waiting for things to open up. It's mostly English-language stuff. It's an American TV series, a Russian-German coproduction miniseries that takes place mostly in Berlin. And finally, I do have a Russian film that was supposed to be my follow-up to The Humorist. It was supposed to shoot in April, but it got frozen on March 15. There's now talk about restarting it in September. The Russian film industry has bounced back from COVID much faster than the American one. For better or for worse, everyone's back to filming. So, there's a chance we'll be filming in September. The film is called Jet Lag. It's about people who fly constantly. After all these period pieces, this was a self-conscious attempt for Lily and me to write a story that is set in the now, among people who look like us, and is inspired by ourselves and our friends. And then of course the moment we wrote something that's supposed to be ultracurrent, the world goes and makes it a period piece.

Ezerova: Back in the spring, you tweeted: "The nearest future looks like a world of people in masks. I genuinely wonder if the movies will ignore this, the same way everyone in the movies still prints out documents." How do you think the pandemic will change cinema?

Idov: It might become a very specific marker 20–30 years from now. I envy future period movie writers because they will have such easy shorthands for everything. If you're setting something in 2018, people will have pink hats and RESIST stickers. 2019 is everyone in every scene, in every street scene, riding those goddamn electric

Right: Banner with portrait of director Kirill Serebrennikov at a rally in central Moscow (February 24, 2019). Photo by Nikolay Vinokurov via Alamy.



And then of course the moment we wrote something that's supposed to be ultracurrent, the world goes and makes it a period piece. Below: Rapper Face performs at a rally in Prospekt Sakharova Street in support of opposition candidates disqualified from the forthcoming Moscow City Duma election. Photo by Sergei Savostyanov via Alamy.

Opposite page: Scene from Michael Idov's film Leto. Photo via Lifestyle Pictures/Alamy.

So many of the self-described liberals in Russia just really, in modern Twitter parlance, showed their asses on this one.



scooters. Just have these scooters in every shot. If you're setting something in 2020, everyone's going to be wearing masks.

Personally, to me, wearing the mask has basically developed into a nervous tic at this point. I'm very curious to see how long it will take to get rid of it. Or maybe we're the generation that will just kind of keep on doing it. Look at the East Asian cultures who had to put on masks in 2004 after SARS and never took them off since. And it seems to have been a pretty good idea.

**Ezerova:** Where were you when you first realized that the pandemic was serious business?

**Idov:** In Moscow preparing to shoot *Jet Lag.* We were two weeks away from filming when things started shutting down. At some point we just froze the production. I flew back on March 15, and LA went into lockdown on March 16.

**Ezerova:** What has been most surprising to you about the experience of navigating it, both on a personal level and as a film industry professional?

Idov: As a film industry professional I've been toggling between cautious optimism and a truly apocalyptic mood. The benefit of being truly apocalyptic is that you don't really care about the film industry at that point. It just seems like, "Oh, yeah. This is kind of a silly thing we did in the before times, you know." So that's at least one less thing to worry about. "Oh well, we had a good run" is generally a very good outlook to have on the world.

Ezerova: Since we're talking about COVID-19, let's discuss other things that happened in the past few months. In the U.S., the pandemic was marked by the Black Lives Matter protests. Much of the reaction to these protests in Russia has been characterized by conservative or even overtly racist sentiments. Can you discuss the Russian reactions to these protests?

Idov: Oh my God. It's so bad. So many of the self-described liberals in Russia just really, in modern Twitter parlance, showed their asses on this one. Over the last week alone, I've seen Russians breathlessly extol the virtues of that St. Louis gun couple, saying something like, "This is the America that I actually like and respect. This is the America that I've been brought up to

venerate: somebody buying a house and restoring it with their own hands and then stepping out onto the porch to protect it from the marauding hordes." I've seen this widespread coverage of the "hordes bullying poor J. K. Rowling." It's literally every time. You can take feminism, you can take any topic, and the Russian quote-unquote intellectuals will find a way to reason themselves onto the absolute wrongest side of it. And I don't know why. Maybe it's Stockholm syndrome. Maybe the lack of stability in the Russian life makes them fast to embrace law and order in any sort of context. I can keep throwing these maybes but the point is, the society has to be deprogrammed, and I don't know who's going to do it. My only hope lies with people who are fifteen now. Looking at the Russian TikTok is a breath of fresh air. When we're talking about people in their 30s or 40s, there are maybe five or six journalists in Russia today that are worth reading among the sea of absolute garbage. We really need to either stop asking ourselves why and just actively fight it, or at least have some sort of academic consensus as to why this happening.

Unfortunately, this also happens to coincide with real and largely unexamined Russophobia on the American side. I constantly see outlets like the *New York Times* allowing just horrible essentializing. "Russians are like this, Russians are like that," "the bad Russians" who are "organically ruthless." It's painful both to see Russians engage in the conduct that invites this sort of thing and to see these horrible things in the American press. And that's because the American mainstream left has been using Russia as a way to shirk all responsibility about getting Trump elected. Which is terrifying because Putin didn't put Trump in power. Racism did.

Ezerova: In Russia, the pandemic has been the background for two contentious topics: the constitutional amendments and the Studio Seven (Serebrennikov) trial. There were no in-person protests, but there was still quite a lot of vocal public discontent. In your book *Dressed Up for a Riot* you describe your experience of being amid Bolotnaya protesters in

2012. What is your view of the state of activism in Russia now? How has it changed since 2012?

Idov: It's dead. Dead and gone. Bolotnaya was a beginning of or an attempt at a horizontal leaderless protest modeled on Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street, and now all of that is gone. Where there was protest now is only Navalny. When people say "opposition" in Russia, all they mean is the Libertarians. That's the bleak picture that I see. To the extent that I don't even know if anything else needs to be done until maybe some new generation comes along or a new catastrophe makes the changes somehow. I don't know. To make things a little less bleak on the Russian front, I will just repeat that I'm pretty hopeful about the young kids because, at least in terms of social liberties, it doesn't look like they're buying the official state line on almost anything.

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# Vlodko Kaufman's A Conversation at the Ukrainian Museum

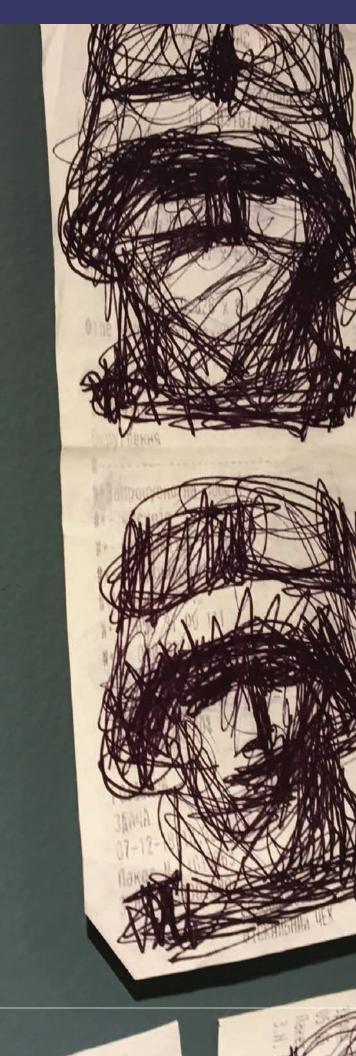
BY MARK ANDRYCZYK

crowd gathered in the basement of the Ukrainian Museum in the East Village on a Saturday evening in November 2019. An annoying buzzing that emanated from the gallery was drawing people underground.

Once they were allowed into the art space on the lower level, the people first noticed the noisy drone flying on a TV screen, as it flipped through hundreds of small pieces of paper, and then found themselves surrounded by four gallery walls plastered with those same paper scraps. Upon closer inspection, those papers were revealed to be receipts, transit tickets, and other everyday miscellany, each covered with a drawing of a soldier. Arranged in endless rows and columns, the multicolored miniportraits produced a dizzying effect on the viewer that was only intensified by the looping, piercing noise of the drone. Disturbed and dazed, yet chatty, the crowd was composed of art enthusiasts, members of the local Ukrainian community, and a group of scholars that had gathered in New York from various corners of the globe that weekend for a conference at Columbia University entitled "Five Years of War in the Donbas: Cultural Reflections and Reverberations." The exhibit on display was Vlodko Kaufman's A Conversation.

Organized by the Ukrainian Studies Program at the <u>Harriman Ins</u>titute, and cosponsored by the Ukrainian

*Right*: Photos on pages 42–44 by Mark Andryczyk, from the exhibition at the Ukrainian Museum, New York City; images on page 45 by the artist, courtesy of the Ukrainian Studies Program of the Harriman Institute.





Museum, the conference focused on the profound effect that the war between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas has had not only on society but also on Ukrainian literature, music, film, and visual art. The war, which began over five years ago and has led to more than 13,000 deaths and the displacement of about one and a half million people, has inspired Ukraine's leading writers, film directors, musicians, and visual artists, resulting in artistic endeavors that provide fresh perspectives on such salient topics as memory, displacement, gender, and identity. Works discussed at the conference included Yelizaveta Smith's and Georg Genoux's film School No. 3; Volodymyr Rafeenko's novel Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love; Serhiy Zhadan's novel Orphanage; Alevtina Kakhidze's performance Method for Construction of Political Truth; and Serhii Zakharov's Russian insurgent caricatures. The conference provided an opportunity to bring to light some of the diverse forms and novel approaches that have been engaged by creative individuals throughout Ukraine as they attempt to comprehend and live with the war.

For the past five years, at the dead end of Virmenska (Armenian) Street, not far from Lviv's Rynok Square, Vlodko Kaufman could often be found upstairs at Dzyga, sketching and making stamps of soldiers on bits of paper that had been used by him or by others as they went about their day living in a country at war. Kaufman works in the genres of happening, performance, installation, painting, and graphics. He is the cofounder and artistic director of the Dzyga Art Association. Born in Karaganda (Kazakhstan), he received his education at the Lviv College of Applied and Decorative Arts and the

Lviv Polytechnic and was a member of the artistic society Shliakh (The Path, 1989-93). He is cofounder and member of the Institute of Contemporary Art (Lviv, 2007): coordinator of the Festival Days of Performance Art in Lviv (since 2007); curator of the Week of Contemporary Art (Lviv, since 2008); and curator of the Triennale Ukrainian Cross-Section (since 2010).

Kaufman has mounted numerous exhibitions, performances, and projects in Ukraine and abroad, including the major, long-term projects (since 2002) *Quotes for Nests*; *Ekoteatr* (Ecotheater); *Ryboterapiia* (Fish-therapy); and *Ptakhoterapiia* (Bird-therapy). Dzyga has been a hub for cultural activity in Ukraine since the mid-1990s, where edgy visual art, music, film, and literature have found a home. Kaufman has designed books by many of Ukraine's leading authors,

Kaufman creates miniportraits of these anonymous soldiers both as a means of memorializing their deaths and dealing with the war on a personal level.







## Kaufman conceived his Conversation as a manner of trying to coexist with the war that had invaded his homeland.

including Yuri Andrukhovych, Ihor Kalynets. and Zhadan. Recently, he designed the U.S.-published, Englishlanguage anthology of contemporary Ukrainian literature *The White Chalk of Days*. Upstairs at Dzyga, he was trying to strike up a conversation.

Kaufman conceived his exhibit of installed graphic art A Conversation (in

Ukrainian, Besida) as a manner of trying to coexist with the war that invaded his homeland—as a way to continue to react to the daily news reports officially updating the numbers of casualties of the war. It was a tactic that was developed to keep awareness of the war's destruction from being tossed away like a used trolley ticket or stamp. Kaufman creates miniportraits of these anonymous soldiers both as a means of memorializing their deaths and as a way to deal with the war on a personal level.

Our conference wrapped up with the U.S. premiere of Kaufman's A Conversation at the Ukrainian Museum. At the exhibit opening, the artist shared with the public that the soldier portraits they see on the gallery's four walls are just a portion of those that he has created. When the war began, he decided that he would continue making them until it ended; as the war endures, the number of portraits continues to grow. Five years on, Kaufman expressed that what he had most feared had indeed come true-that people had become used to the horrors of the war, that they had put it out of their minds, that they preferred not to think about it. As with other uncomfortable things, the war is perhaps best forgotten so that it doesn't impede you from going about the tasks of your everyday life, like sending a letter or catching a trolley.

It is summer 2020, and the war in the Donbas continues. Vlodko Kaufman's *A Conversation* still hangs in a gallery at the Ukrainian Museum. He continues to produce his portraits in Ukraine—he's trying to keep the conversation going. ■

Video from the conference and of the drone's interaction with the soldier portraits is available at https://harriman.columbia.edu/event/conference-five-years-war-donbas-cultural-responses-and-reverberations.

Mark Andryczyk is associate research scholar for the Harriman's Ukrainian Studies Program. His publications include The Intellectual as Hero in 1990s Ukrainian Fiction (University of Toronto Press, 2012) and The White Chalk of Days: The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology (Academic Studies Press, 2017).







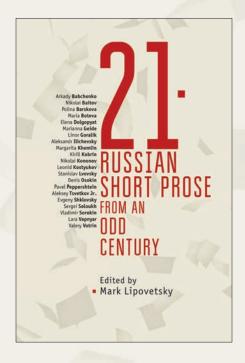
For Mark Lipovetsky, with gratitude for lessons in loving Soviet literature

# Where will the starlings make their nests, the ones without a nesting box?

I want to see all the way through him, as though he were a frozen January frog or a newborn eel, and reacquaint us with him, though we'll hardly welcome the renewed acquaintance. I mean to peer inside that machinery of word-production, the machinery which goes by the name "Bianci,"

and glimpse what has never been seen before. Influenced, perhaps, by his belief that hidden, invisible life is always more enthralling, more impressive, more elaborate than what submits to the indifferent eye or hasty conclusion, I find it comforting to think that nature is not what we imagine—nature not in the lofty sense of the great and lofty poet but in the plain sense of the poet who never developed, the clumsy poet.

It turns out that while we're floundering in snow and finding ice



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everywhere, underneath, far under, spring not only has quickened but is gathering-growing in earnest. Down in the burrows, in darkness and stench, a new harvest's offspring are crawling, water is pooling, dead plants begin to stir and roots spread to clutch at a new spring.

But where do we look for him, this observer of nature? And how will we recognize him when we meet him? The man who is my subject today did everything he could to cover his tracks, to draw predators and hunters away from his lair-both those who surrounded him back then and those who came later. The first predators and hunters were the kind who by means of flattery, cajoling, torture and forceful personal example pressured and seduced suppliers of words to assimilate, to change their nature for the sake of the things of this world—publishing and publicity, material comfort and a peaceful corner. Although the corners these lower-echelon wordsmiths got were fairly dank, the ceiling dripping into a saucer, drops splashing onto the cat's nose-he fastidiously shaking them off his whiskers, twitching his ears.

Whereas today's predators and hunters-from afar-are we, his readers, vigilant dividers of the wheat from the chaff (the hawk's pursuit, from up high) trying to consign to oblivion, to thoroughly douse in Lethe's sterile, uncreative solution, to judge and separate out the second-rate, the third-rate, the writers hopelessly trying to light a fire under the word. But the task of those writers was simply to stay alive and, if they succeeded, to preserve some small part of their real selves. Whatever that mirage meant to them—"realness"—this real part was

hidden in a desk drawer, pickled in alcohol or—and this was the most effective approach—openly displayed at the hunting grounds to deflect the interest of hounds and predators by its very availability, as though this real part were "carrion":

One of our forest correspondents reports from the Tver region: yesterday while digging he turned up, along with the dirt, some kind of beast. Its front paws have claws, on its back are some kind of knobs instead of wings, its body is covered with dark-yellow hairs like thick, short fur. It looks like both a wasp and a mole—insect or beast, what is it? The editorial view: It is a remarkable insect that looks like a beast called a mole-cricket. Whoever wants to find a mole-cricket should pour water on the ground and cover the area with pieces of bark. At night mole-crickets will seek out the damp spot, the dirt under the bark. That's where we'll find him.

Let's take a peek at the dirt under the bark—and see what there is to see.

### **Dueling Storytellers**

Vitaly Valentinovich Bianci lived for work and drink, and toward the end of his life his voice reached its zenith, became almost a squeak, a mosquito falsetto, while he himself grew heavy and legless, but still he could not stop himself and kept tapping out his tracks on the typewriter with one finger. Contemporaries recall his Bunyanesque strength along with Bunyanesque slowness, the fading aristocratic charm of his gradually swelling face, looking like he'd been attacked by midges. Of these contemporaries, the one most inclined to observation wrote,

Bianci grabbed me by the legs, turned me upside down and held me like that, laughing, not letting me go. Such an insult! It took me a long time to get over it. I wasn't physically weak but this I couldn't handle. Humiliating! The worst thing was his strength seemed rough and way beyond mine. A useless feeling that wasn't quite envy and wasn't quite jealousy consumed me. Eventually it passed. Bianci was simple and decent. But the devil had done his work . . .

But the devil had done his work. The ethnographer of belles lettres repeats the phrase several times; it seems she likes it, it helps her diagnose the decline of her subject-a strong and benign creature warped by his own interpretation of affairs. Enter Evgeny Lvovich Shvarts, a dwarflike man with a head the shape of an egg, hands shaking from Parkinson's (sometimes he would leave the telegraph office with nothing accomplished, his hands shook so much that tracing a caterpillar of letters with the capricious rusty nib turned out to be impossible, with the line of people behind him simmering, irritableresentful). A dwarf who utterly lacked the gift of forgiving and forgetting, of looking the other way, probably the most perceptive and fastidious member of a generation covered in spiritual sores. (And that's a sanitary way of putting it. When I try to imagine that generation's spiritual condition taking visible-palpable form-oh, what it would look like! . . .) Shvarts was venomous (from a monstrous capacity to feel wounded) and recklessly brave-he was one of those rare "valued persons" who refused in the fall of 1941 to be airlifted from Dystrophy City (the name is one of Bianci's later witticisms). By the time winter arrived, they had

to drag him out of there, psychotic, demented from hunger.

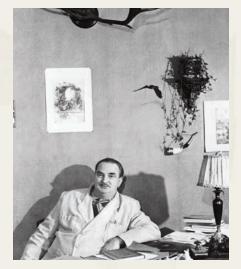
Photographs of him, and especially photographs of him in the company of women, stand out sharply in the general current of the time-the angular, mocking, delicate faces glow like seashells lit from within. Evgeny Shvarts was painfully large-spirited: in the "inventory" of his notebooks, he does not name the friends who made denunciations, scandalmongered, went into hysterics, blackened reputations. When you look at the minutes of official meetings where his friends acted the fool, attacking him as a talentless saboteur, and compare them to Shvarts's memoirs about these same people, you stop short in amazementdid he actually forgive them? Or did he cut off all feeling for them?

Like all the jokesters who in those golden years made careers rhyming, crowing, meowing and bleating for The Siskin and The Hedgehog, Shvarts was a libertine; he took his own and his companions' sins allegorically. Hence his choice of genre—after all, we're talking about fairy tales and fabulists. Hence also the refrain: the devil had done his work. Shvarts was interested-and following him, so are we-by the allegory of the human soul's duel with the devil of the times, the pitiful strategems used by those who inhabited those times as they tried both to placate and to hide from the devil. Bianci, soon after his second stroke, said to Shvarts, "If you want to know what it's like when it hits you, just put on those glasses." On the table was a pair of black glasses, the lenses made the world look dim. Black light enveloped the fabulist Bianci toward the end. The fabulist Shvarts witnessed and grimly confirmed this.



Heavy artillery at the Gates of Leningrad.









### **How to Translate White**

Bianci's grandfather, an opera singer, had the last name Weiss. This gentleman, at his impresario's request, translated himself from German into Italian to go on tour in Italy—the sound, the tune, changed, but the color remained. The sound was now weightless, lofting upward like a bubble—a bubble floating over a white, white field with just the tracks of small, tired paws along the edge: Take a guess, children, who can it be?

A young boy, darting up and down, passes dioramas of mounted animalsunder the silver hoof of an agitated, dead-eyed deer with flared nostrils (if they really shoot it up, does it make the taxidermist's job harder?) sprouts a dead mushroom. For some reason these little glass mushrooms are pinned all around the animals' legs-so we won't have any doubts, just recognize these forms of non-life with a guilty tenderness. Above the deer's head they nailed a woodpecker stuffed with shavings. Observe how the bird's eye knows no fear-it is open to the world and keenly focused.

The mounted animals were hideous, the aging Bianci recalls near the end of his story. "How can we bring them back to life?" old man Bianci asks in his child's voice. What you need are some good, strong words. "What you need is poetry": that unwieldy, cardboard word he carried around all his life, to no avail.

Before he discovered ornithology, the young boy was driven on another sort of hunt—soccer. He played for the storied clubs Petrovsky, Neva, Unitas. He was the winner, incidentally, of the Saint Petersburg season trophy for 1913. The season trophy—in April the wind from the Neva fills with the scent of dun-colored, crumbling ice.

Rostral beauties raise to the wind their buoyant, erect nipples.

Tall for his age, wearing gaiters, with a sweaty forehead and gritty, salty hair, the adolescent Bianci pursues the ball: his breathing grows sharp, with the occasional pleasurable ache.

His father, a famous ornithologist, the very one after whom the young boy trotted along the large-windowed, empty halls of the museum, did not approve of soccer—he wanted to see in his son a replica of himself, naturally. His son obediently enrolled in the natural sciences section of the Department of Physics and Mathematics at Petrograd University, but he never finished, since things finished of their own accord.

### Cold-blooded?

Almost a graduate, almost a poet, almost a scholar. "People touched by fire are sensitive, fragile." Those touched by fire, Shvarts observed, not wanting to observe anything, and those abandoned on the ice.

Now what should/shall I do? Stop dead? Go quiet?

Encased in ice, shall I pretend to be ice? Take the form of the coming winter? Freeze over, like a frozen dream: in the white-pink night the river Fontanka flows like tomato juice from a broken jar into a puddle, when actually it's your hands covered in blood. And I, who up to this moment have accompanied you at a delicately maintained distance and with res-PECT-ful aloofness, bow down to lick those idiotic bloody smashed huge fingers. Fighting off drunken surprise, you sternly say, "That doesn't give you the right to act familiar."

Yes—I think I'll pretend to be ice. Bianci himself, by the way, writes magical (that is, good and strong and useful) words about turning to ice. He spits on the end of his stubby pencil and writes not poetry but the diary of a naturalist. The onset of autumn's chill he depicts either as torture or as the act of love, there's no distinguishing:

The winds—reapers of leaves—tear the last rags from the forest. Having accomplished its first task—undressing the forest-autumn sets about its second task: making the water colder and colder. Fish crowd into deep crannies to winter where the water won't turn to ice. Cold blood freezes even on dry land. Insects, mice, spiders, centipedes hide themselves away. Snakes crawl into dry holes, wind around each other and go still. Frogs push into the mud, lizards hide under the last bark left on the tree stumps and enter a trance. Outside there are seven kinds of weather: it tosses, blows, shatters, blinds, howls, pours and sweeps down from the sky.

To become a motionless snake curling up against other motionless snakes, to hibernate—that is my task today. The leaf-reaping season is one you can survive, can overcome, only by metamorphosis: by changing your nature so you become part of the background, be it snow, dirt or night.

### A Tunnel and a Certain Someone

How can you make out white against white? Bianci hoped he could see it, while hoping others couldn't see him. Now for perhaps his most terrifying story.

### Mr. Fox and Mousie

Mousie-mouse, why is your nose so black? I was digging in the dirt. Why were you digging in the dirt? I made myself a burrow.

Why did you make yourself a burrow?

To hide, Mr. Fox, from you!

Mousie-mouse, I'll keep watch at your door!

Oh, I've a soft bed in my burrow.

You'll have to eat—then out you'll sneak!

Oh, I've a big cupboard in my burrow.

Mousie-mouse, I'll dig up your burrow!

Oh, I'll run down a little tunnel—

And off he goes!

It's likely Bianci was arrested by organs of the Soviet secret police more often than most of his literary colleagues—a total of five (5) times. Five (5) times in a row he repeated the drill: the awful wait for the inevitable, the awful relief when the awful event itself begins, the humiliation, the hopelessness, the hope, the despair, the weeks and months of paralysis, the miracle.

A local historian who got access to the archives reports:

While digging around in the files of the former archive of the regional committee of the Soviet Communist Party, I came across an interesting document completely by accident—a summary of charges written up on February 23, 1925, by the Altai office of the State Political Directorate to bring to trial a group of Socialist Revolutionaries living in Barnaul and Biisk. (All of them had arrived "from Russia," as they said back then.) It included several references to Vitaly Bianci. They are: "In November 1918, there arrived in Biisk one Belianin-Bianci Vitaly Valentinovich, an SR and writer for the SR newspaper The People, who was active in the Committee on Education and who around that time, fearing Kolchak's reprisals, changed his real name

The winds—reapers of leaves—tear the last rags from the forest. Having accomplished its first task—undressing the forest—autumn sets about its second task: making the water colder and colder. Fish crowd into deep crannies to winter where the water won't turn to ice. Cold blood freezes even on dry land. Insects, mice, spiders, centipedes hide themselves away.

*Opposite page, from top*: Vitaly Bianci in his office; Evgeny Shvarts.

from Bianci to Belianin. The said Belianin-Bianci, upon arriving in Biisk with his wife, Zinaida Alexandrovna Zakharovich, stayed at the apartment of local SR and member of the Constituent Assembly, Liubimov Nikolai Mikhailovich. It was through him that Belianin-Bianci began to make contact with the local SR organization . . . He entered the employ of the Biisk Agricultural Board as a clerk of the second class . . ."

In 1921 the Cheka in Biisk arrested him twice. In addition, he was imprisoned as a hostage for three weeks.

In September 1922 V. Bianci received word of pending arrest and, on the pretext of a business trip, left for Petrograd with his family.

At the end of 1925 Bianci was again arrested and sentenced to three years' exile in Uralsk for belonging to a nonexistent underground organization. In 1928 (thanks to constant petitioning by, among

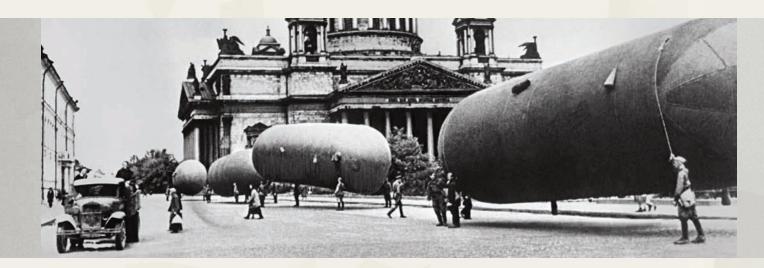
others, Gorky, who approached Cheka chief Genrikh Yagoda) he received permission to move to Novgorod, and then to Leningrad. In November 1932 came another arrest. After three and a half weeks he was released "for lack of evidence." In March 1935 Bianci, as "the son of a non-hereditary nobleman, a former SR, an active participant in armed resistance to Soviet power," was again arrested and sentenced to exile for five years in the Aktiubinsk region. It was only thanks to E. P. Peshkova's intervention that his sentence was commuted and Bianci was freed.

The bulk of his fairy tales are about the hunt and the chase, about deadly danger and struggle.

But what's most striking is his tone: not a trace of sentimentality, no sympathy for the preyed-upon or the fallen. Each death, each act of cruelty, belongs to the natural order. If you kill a bird with a metal ring on its leg, remove the ring and send it to a tagging center. If you catch a bird with a ring, write down the letters and numbers stamped on the ring. If not you but a hunter or birdcatcher you know kills or captures such a bird, tell him what he needs to do. No pity for anyone; the hunter is always justified in his desire to master and seize and sacrifice a life—and to turn it into a mounted specimen. Every victim gets his chance to escape, says Bianci, and it's a sorry fool who doesn't see it and grab it.

### "A Gust of Wind"

At first all of these words and shadows of birds and fish, and the giant with the voice of a munchkin, were indistinct forms inside me, and when they first took hold, they looked like this (autumn had just begun, and in the Amherst dusk you could hear all around the moaning of owls arrived *en masse* from God knows where):



Barrage balloons, used to defend against low-level aircraft attack, St. Isaac's Square, Leningrad.

The massive-awesome Bacchus Bianci
Thrusts fat fingers into suspicious cracks in the
Frozen earth, and from there (from where)
He harvests miracle-solace-refuse-sense;
Tipsy sober timid bombastic, he knows each
Root-tangle, and he writes, he almost pounces.
The stilling forest thrusts the wind's damp shag
Down his throat—the black box of
Night sky on the verge of winter.

Ready for first frost are you now yourself? Ready for first frost are you now an owl? Ready for first frost are you now a widow?

Here the author dozes off, and the owls, too. The author dreams of the other author's poem:

The wind roared up the riverbank, Drove waves upon the shore— Its furious whistle gave a scare To a red-throated loon.

It knocked the magpie from the grove, Whirled and dropped into the waves— There it took a giant gulp And choked, and down it dove. Why Vitaly Bianci
went to Leningrad
during the
blockade, how he
ended up there—
the explanations
we have don't
make sense.
Either he went to
bring food to his
Leningrad friends,
or he was trying to
get food from his
Leningrad friends.

The thing he did best was tracking birds.

### Notes of an Ornithologist

Why Vitaly Bianci went to Leningrad during the blockade, how he ended up there—the explanations we have don't make sense. Either he went to bring food to his Leningrad friends, or he was trying to get food from his Leningrad friends (both versions astonish), or he went just to have a look, or to make an appearance, or to punish himself. When he returned, he lay down and did not get up.

That is what his diary entries show:

April 6: Stayed in bed. April 7: Stayed in bed. April 8: Stayed in bed.

Nevertheless, everything he had heard/seen he well described and well (meaning, up to the day of his death) concealed. I am prepared to





Above, from left to right: Burying victims of Leningrad's siege, Volkovo Cemetery; siege of Leningrad, January 1943.



state that among those who visited during the blockade, the naturalist-dilettante Bianci turned out to be the most well-qualified, perceptive and methodical: what was impossible to look at, he examined and categorized. Nevertheless, his notebooks—fully published now—have not, of course, found their reader.

They've winged past us like yet another repulsive salvo from 1941—one today's readers try to duck as frantically as their unfortunate predecessors tried to duck bombs on Leningrad's streets, so visible and familiar to the German pilot.

Bianci—an unsuccessful/unrealized scholar, but a scholar nonetheless—organized his impressions under phenomenological rubrics: blockade style, blockade humor, blockade consciousness, blockade smile, blockade language, blockade cityscape, blockade femininity, blockade Jews. This is to say that in two weeks he understood what we have yet to formulate for ourselves: that the blockade was a unique civilization with the characteristic features of all human societies.

This is how they smile here.
This is how they barter here.
This how they fear, and no longer fear.

This is how they joke here, and it is this subject—which is curious and handy for our script—which brings them together: Bianci quotes Shvarts as one of the best blockade humorists. Since we know that Shvarts left the city in December, we may conclude that his jokes lingered in the city into spring—they didn't melt (in general, nothing in that city melted).

Yes, here they meet—two utterly different fabulists of the Leningrad scene, two magic wizards and didacts. The one had a bear and a dragon, the other had fireflies, titmice, shrews—all metaphors for blockade life. The writers themselves were transformed by the era into clowning tall-tale-tellers forced to camouflage their brutal and piquant observations about human nature.

Shvarts the blockade comic eventually produced the most important book we have on the phenomenon of "Leningrad literature of the mid-Soviet period"—his "phone

It turns out the blockade was the main event of Shvarts's life in Leningrad. He kept being swept toward the blockade winter that followed the Terror.

Above: Leningrad residents clearing snow and blocks of ice from Nevsky Prospekt (1942).

Opposite page: View of Nevsky Prospekt when Leningrad was under Nazi siege.



book" (variously, his "inventory"), a Kunstkamera of spiritual deformities and disasters. Among the era's victims is a cardiologist listed under the letter "D," a man with hideously burned hands. His patient Shvarts, seeing those two pink, tender, shining hands, reflects: "During an experiment an oxygen tank exploded, the door was jammed, and he forced open the burning panels with his bare hands. They were so badly burned that he almost lost them. He was considered one of the best cardiologists in the city. He was beaten to death for reasons far removed from science, but whether there were parts of his soul as deformed as the skin on his hands-I could not discern." That's precisely what he wanted to do-to discern, to see inside.

It turns out the blockade was the main event of Shvarts's life in Leningrad—though the whole time he meant, he prepared, to speak about the Terror, his main conscious task. He kept being swept toward the blockade winter that followed the Terror—he could not control himself, couldn't help speaking about it. For him that winter illuminated and explained everything

and everyone, whereas the recent purges had made everything confused and unclear. Almost every topic, every figure, every character in his "phone book" reminds him of that winter, drags him back there. He remembers roofs, bombs, bomb shelters, the faces and conversations of his neighbors in the dark and, most of all, his failed intention to write about it, right then and there, in the wake of words just spoken-his failed play, in which he tried to render his strongest impression, the endless blockade night: "We descended to the bottom of the cagelike staircase and stood in a corner like a coven of witches, while the planes and their mechanical-animal whine would not relent, they circled and circled and with every pass dropped bombs. Then anti-aircraft fire-and when it hits its mark, there's a dry pop, and the smooth tin bird flaps its tin wings." Only in this avian metaphor will their visions of the blockade coincide: Bianci calls his blockade notes "City Abandoned by Birds." For him that's a euphemism, dialect for a curse, his "no" to hope.

Shvarts's notebook was a lamentation for his play that never quite appeared.

But through the notebook's scattered, roughly stitched-together human plots the blockade emerges as the true home for the soul of the Leningrad intellectual who lived through the '30s. In other words, it was hell, the only vale where the coward-soul, slave-soul, traitor-soul, the soul in constant pain, never and nowhere not in pain, might abide-those Leningrad writer-survivors who, in front of the witnessing Shvarts, go out of their minds (then later, reluctantly, taking their time, come back into their minds), faint noiselessly as leaves on exiting the torture chamber of Party hearings, and continually hone their skill at slander. Shvarts buried, escorted off and lost one by one all his titans, his cherished enemies (nothing matches the white heat of his elegiac and erotic hatred-passion for Oleinikov). All he saw around him now were Voevodins, Rysses and Azarovs and other small fry wiped out by the century: these characters were relieved to find themselves in the blockade—in what he called, narrowing his eyes, a benign calamity, the kind that kills you without implicating you.





Illustration by Alexei Radakov for *War of Petrushka* and *Stepka-Rastrepka* by Evgeny Shvarts (1925).

Can we say that for Bianci, too, the blockade was a benign calamity?

Apparently there is a phenomenon called "precipitous birth"—the infant bursts into the world through a mother who has had no time to get accustomed to that degree of pain.

The precipitous blockade of someone who visits the city suddenly and briefly is the precipitous birth of knowledge. He sees everything—not accustomed to the situation, not fused with it, he does not experience the slow, daily disappearance of meaning and God. On the wings of an airplane (which he immediately compared to a bird, Bianci was incapable of doing otherwise), he is transported to a place of blank, universal desolation—until then, he had only heard of it from the pitiful, apologetic letters of his dying Leningrad friends.

Shvarts's interest in the blockade was people, preferably the extras (the big stars for the most part nimbly made tracks to the east during the warm months of the year): children, old ladies, custodians, luckless local officials and spies, almost none of whom would live until spring.

But Bianci, hounded from childhood by the word "poetry," is interested in metaphors, namely, hybrid monsters: birds and fish fused with planes, fireflies joined with phosphorous metal in the night sky. How do fragments of blockade existence camouflage themselves, what forms do they assume? Here the blockade becomes a natural phenomenon; here emerges a kind of Naturphilosophie of the blockade world. From the very start everything looks unnatural; the plane's wings, unlike those of Bianci's bluethroats and starlings, are rigid—and the plane isn't even a bird but a fish, an aerial fish. Monstrous specimen!

All this he tries to discern in the blockade city—and can't find the direct words for (for which reason, most likely, he subsequently falls ill), so he reconstitutes it metaphorically. The dead city revives, acts like it's animate—like a museum diorama: The city spreads out around us farther and farther. Slowly, as in a slow-motion film, slowly people wander. Not people: monkeys with noses. Especially the women: boney faces, caverns for cheeks—unbelievably sharp, elongated noses . . .

As it was with that childhood diorama, it's impossible to make out what's dead and what's alive, what is a monkey with a nose and what a deformed blockade soul caricatured by dystrophy.

On returning from the dead city, he wrote down a terrible little poem; as often happened with him in moments of agitation, the words spilled out:

Unbearable: the cold like a wolf,
A growing list of deprivations,
A hammer going in my temples:
There people are dying, dying in vain!

### Wagtails. The Language of Birds.

On returning from the dead city, he slept as long as he could, scribbled something in his secret diary and again took to walking deep into the forest and just standing there—his eyes sometimes open, sometimes shut, listening hard, sniffing, studying. The world Bianci inhabited is alien; his words are obscure and hence alluring, and they unsettle us even as they speak to us:

Bluethroats and brightly colored stonechats are appearing in the wet bushes, and golden wagtails in the swamps. Pink-chested fiscals (shrikes) are here, with fluffy collars of ruff feathers, and the landrail, the corncrake, the blue-green roller have returned from distant parts.

So tell me—what are all these creatures? What do we picture as we follow the phrase "the pink-breasted shrikes," what sort of impossible, absurd marvel? It is perfectly obvious—perfect and obvious—that the author invented them all. Displayed before us is some other planet born from the imagination of a man who could not come up with a persuasive reason to inhabit his own.

Wagtails? What do you mean, wagtails? No, you're wrong, Bianci insists, that's us living on our planet, in our swamp—alien, blind, speechless, bereft.

We (meaning I) are not familiar with the bluethroat (bird of the thrush family, sparrow genus. Depending on classificatory approach, may, along with all varieties of nightingale, be ascribed to the family of flycatchers. In size somewhat smaller than the domestic sparrow. Body length about 15 cm. Weight of male is 15-23 grams, female 13-21 grams. Spine light brown or gray-brown, tail feathers reddish. Throat and crop blue with reddish spot in the center; the spot may also be white or bordered with white. The blue color below is edged first with black, then with red half-circles across the breast. Tail red with black sheen, middle pair of tail feathers light brown. Throat whitish, bordered by a brown half-circle. Bill black, legs black-brown.)

Whatever the throat and crop look like, when you descend into this prose, you descend into an invented, crafted world. The further you proceed into that crow-blue and green-azure language, the less you hear the waves striking University Embankment, and the farther all the hysteria-hypocrisy

of the city-with its literati stinging one other and raising glasses of poison, and its ultra-literary sidewalks-fades into the distance. Bianci remains, only Bianci, stepping into the slush of the frozen swamp, listening with his whole being-here you have the voices of birds, you have the voices of fish. That very same fairytale dunce who, scrambling to hide from the tsar, ran into a grove and suddenly understood the language of the forest. "I hope to create an explanatory dictionary of the language of local worlds." A language not of this world! In periodic self-imposed exile in the village of Mikheevo in the Moshensky region, where he landed-hid during that first winter of the war, he does not stop collecting the magical words that protect him: a hidden, invisible language, a collection of real wordshis article of faith.

### **A Happy Ending**

Our forest correspondents cracked the ice at the bottom of a local pond and dug up the silt. In the silt there were a number of frogs who had gathered there in heaps for the winter. When they pulled them out, they looked like pure glass. Their bodies had grown extremely brittle. Their tiny legs would snap from the slightest, faintest touch, and when they did they made a light ringing sound. Our forest correspondents took several of the frogs home with them. They carefully warmed up the frozen juvenile frogs in their heated rooms. The frogs came to life bit by bit and began hopping across the floor.

And off they go! ■

"Reaper of Leaves" is reprinted, with the author's and translator's permission, from 21: Russian Short Prose from an Odd Century, edited by Mark Lipovetsky, the dedicatee of this story. Lipovetsky, the author of 10 monographs and more than a hundred articles, joined the Columbia Slavic department in fall 2019. A profile of Lipovetsky will appear in the spring 2021 issue of Harriman Magazine.

Polina Barskova is associate professor of Russian literature at Hampshire College. To date Barskova has published 11 books of poetry, including three collections in English translation: The Lamentable City, translated by Ilya Kaminsky (2010); The Zoo in Winter, translated by Boris Drayluk (2011); and Relocations, translated by Catherine Ciepiela (2013). "Reaper of Leaves" appeared in her volume of short prose Tableaux Vivants (Zhivye kartiny, 2014), which was awarded the Andrei Bely Prize. She is the author of Besieged Leningrad: Aesthetic Responses to Urban Disaster (Northern Illinois University Press, 2017) and is the editor of Written in the Dark: Five Poets in the Siege of Leningrad (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2016).

Catherine Ciepiela is the Howard M. and Martha P. Mitchell Professor of Russian at Amherst College. She is the author of The Same Solitude (Cornell University Press, 2006), a study of Marina Tsvetaeva's epistolary romance with Boris Pasternak, and coeditor, with Honor Moore, of The Stray Dog Caberet (NYRB, 2007), a collection of poems by the Russian modernists in Paul Schmidt's translations. She is currently translating a book of Polina Barskova's poetic prose.

# **Alumni Notes**



Helen Dimos



Gerald Easter

I have changed careers several times since attending SIPA from 1966 to 1968. After observing the 1968 student protests at Columbia, I became fascinated by current political events, so I joined an all-news radio station, WCBS, for approximately two years. Then I became a freelance writer, and a writer in the National Affairs section of *Newsweek* magazine. After *Newsweek*, in an about-face and to earn a living, I became a commercial real estate broker for 10 years in Manhattan, eventually opening my own company with a partner (Hendler & Dimos Inc).

In 1990, tired of the shenanigans of real estate, my partner and I closed the company, and I enrolled at the City College of New York to earn a bachelor of science degree in landscape architecture. From 1993 to 1995, I worked as an assistant landscape architect for the Central Park Conservancy. Following that exciting job, I moved to Ridgefield, Connecticut, and embarked on a final and most fulfilling career—residential landscape design, which I have continued doing to the present day.

I am writing about my episodic career since 1968, because I would love to hear what other Harriman fellows have done since the turbulent '60s.

-Helen Dimos (M.I.A., SIPA, 1968)

I had the good fortune to be part of the 1980s cohort of Harriman Institute grad students, spending all my time on the 12th floor as a work study for the Institute and for Professor Leopold Haimson's Labor Project. I have just completed my 20th year as a professor of comparative politics at Boston College. Probably because I was trained in political science at Columbia in the 1980s, my most recent publication is a history book: *The Tsarina's Lost Treasure: Catherine the Great, a Golden Age Masterpiece, and a Legendary Shipwreck.* It is not typical academic fare. Back around 2013, I first heard the story of the *Vrouw Maria* shipwreck from excited news reports in Russia. The phantom wreck had at last been found off the coast of Finland, and would soon be raised and salvaged, revealing her amazing cargo to the world. *Vrouw Maria* was carrying a cache of Baroque masterpiece paintings to Empress Catherine II when lost at sea. The cargo included the most coveted piece of art produced during the Dutch Golden Age—*The Nursery*, an oak-paneled triptych painted by Rembrandt's student Gerrit Dou, who once surpassed his master in both praise and guilders. It seemed like a fun project to research, especially after working on the politics of taxation for ten years.

I dove into this Baltic mystery, along with my cowriter and wife, and we unraveled the story of Catherine's art wreck. The project also turned out to be a good form of couple's therapy after the birth of our twins! The book tells of the rise and fall of Gerrit Dou, the first international superstar of the Dutch Golden Age; the search for and discovery of *Vrouw Maria*; and, the inevitable battle over ownership of her prized cargo between the wreck hunter, the Finnish government, and a team of Russian oligarchs. Perhaps what was most interesting to learn were the many parallels between 18th-century Europe's geo-cultural politics and the persisting antagonisms between Russia and the West today,

especially as personified through archnemeses Empress Catherine and President Putin. My lessons in Russian politics and history, delivered by Professors Haimson, Bialer, Shulman, Rothschild, et al., served me well in this endeavor.

-Gerald Easter (Ph.D., Political Science, 1992)

I spent all of 2019 as the prime minister of Sarajevo Canton, one of the most challenging political executive posts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. My appointment represented a signal of change in Bosnian politics, which had been dominated by nationalism and populism since the U.S.-brokered peace agreement in 1995. The 14-month appointment was greeted with significant popular support and heavy backing of the international community, but ended in March 2020, after two coalition partners switched sides to join the nationalists. Right now I am working with my social-liberal party Naša stranka, preparing for the upcoming municipal elections in November 2020.

-Edin Forto (Harriman Institute East Central Europe Certificate, 2001; M.I.A., SIPA, 2001)

I started graduate work in the History Department and in the (then) Russian Institute in 1963. I was in Turkey, at the Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi, from January 1967 to January 1968 and then went to visit relatives in Russia. Upon my return to Columbia in the spring of 1968, I submitted my master's essay to the History Department and my certificate essay to the Russian Institute.

I taught at Rutgers University (Newark and New Brunswick campuses) from 1969 to 2012, attaining the rank of Professor II (Distinguished Professor in 1988), offering courses on the history of Central Asia, Islamic civilization, the Ottoman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the medieval Slavic world, and related subjects. I chaired the History Department (Newark) for eight years and was director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program (New Brunswick) during my later years. In 2019, I was elected as an Honorary Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in the field of Oriental Studies. I am the author, editor, or coeditor of numerous books as well as articles in English, Russian, and Turkish.

-Peter B. Golden (Ph.D., History, 1970; Harriman Institute Certificate, 1968)



Edin Forto



Peter B. Golden



Laura Trimajova



Doug Wake

I started my studies at the Harriman Institute—a small, tight-knit group of fellow classmates—as a Fulbright Fellow in 2012. During my time in the MARS-REERS program I focused on the Western Balkans. I wrote a thesis comparing the Serbian elections in 2008 and 2012 under the supervision of Professor Lincoln Mitchell. As a native Slovak, I was interested in the political developments across the entire post-Communist world. I found the Harriman Institute, Columbia University at large, and New York City to be the best places to be for gaining academic expertise in this field.

Since graduating in 2013, I have been working as a political adviser for the European Parliament in Brussels. I advise MPs on foreign affairs and specialize in EU enlargement with regard to the Balkans. I believe the time spent at the Harriman has given me a unique perspective on transatlantic relations. My degree has not only launched my career, but also it keeps me involved with the academic community—I try to come back every year and participate in the annual World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) organized at the Harriman.

### -Laura Trimajova (MARS-REERS, 2013)

Almost 40 years after I got my Columbia master's degree with a Soviet/Russia regional concentration, my wife, Connie Phlipot, and I continue to focus much of our personal and professional attention on the countries covered by the Harriman Institute. Since late 2018, I've been serving as a "senior expert" helping to start up a new Strategic Policy Support Unit in the Office of the Secretary General of the 57-member Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna, Austria. Previously I was a U.S. Foreign Service officer for 28 years, in postings that included Stockholm, Leningrad, Rangoon, Riga, Moscow, and Belgrade as well as Washington, the U.S. Mission to the UN, a midcareer fellowship back at SIPA, and a teaching stint at the U.S. Army War College. I left the State Department in 2009 to spend the next four years as First Deputy Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), a Warsaw-based institution of the OSCE perhaps best known for deploying election observation missions in Europe and Eurasia. In recent years I have also played various roles in several of those missions, including as the head of missions to observe 2016 presidential elections in Moldova and 2018 parliamentary elections in Hungary.

-Doug Wake (M.I.A., SIPA, 1980; Harriman Institute Certificate, 1998)

Looking for ways to engage with the Harriman community? Our alumni network is more active than ever. You can find our Harriman Institute Alumni group on Facebook and follow us on Instagram (@harrimaninstitute), Twitter (@harrimaninst), and LinkedIn (The Harriman Institute at Columbia University). Feel free to send us a message on our social networks—we respond there too! And finally, if you are not receiving alumni emails, including special event invitations, please send your information to Rebecca Dalton at rld2130@columbia.edu.

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