

LIVING LEGACIES
AT COLUMBIA



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CHAPTER 44

Columbia's Russian Institute: The Formative Years

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The Soviet Union lasted a little less than seventy-five years. For the last forty-five of those it was the focus of study of Columbia's Russian Institute, from the onset of the Cold War in 1946 through the collapse of the Gorbachev regime in 1991. Since then the Harriman Institute, as it is now called, has concentrated on the Soviet Union's successor states and former satellites.

The academic mission of the Russian Institute—the first interdisciplinary effort to study the Soviet Union at a major American university—faced special challenges from the start. As the Cold War quickly grew more adversarial, the Institute encountered antagonism not only from Soviet government agencies and publications but also in an increasingly oppressive political climate at home, where Senator Joseph McCarthy identified two of the Institute's founding professors as members of the "Communist conspiracy." Even after the anti-Communist fever of the early 1950s subsided, the challenge of maintaining intellectual autonomy in the midst of the Cold War remained, particularly in the new discipline of Sovietology.

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Russian Literature at Barnard College and current director of the Institute, has told an important part of this story here, focusing on the background and early years of the Institute mainly through the experiences of its founders and first students.

—Tom Mathewson

The Russian Institute opened its doors to students on September 25, 1946, inaugurating a bold pedagogical and scholarly initiative, the first of its kind in the United States, designed to respond to the threat and promise of the

new world into which the country had emerged from the Second World War. Not only had the war thrust an isolationist and reluctant nation onto the international stage as victor and power broker, but it had transported thousands of young men from Main Street, USA, into contact with exotic peoples and places on the other side of the world. Clearly the United States would need specialists in the regions that would dominate international politics in the postwar world. In June 1945, just as the war was ending, Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler announced plans to establish the Russian Institute with a generous grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. It was to be the first of six regional institutes "for the study of the life and thought of principal areas of the modern world." The same press release announced the establishment of the School of International Affairs, which was to "function in close association with the institutes." Butler did not downplay the significance of the endeavor: "I regard this whole undertaking as one of outstanding importance not only in the history of Columbia University and its worldwide relationships, but in the history of higher education generally," he said. "It is constructive and forward-facing, and points the way to what will soon be recognized as a dominant worldwide interest in the field[s] of government, economics, and the intellectual life."

It was appropriate that the Russian Institute was the first of the area institutes, since no territory presented a more urgent challenge than the Soviet Union, our wartime ally and ideological rival, also poised by its triumph over Hitler to assert itself more forcefully in the world. Perhaps equally important, the USSR seemed particularly well suited to study founded on the "integration of disciplines," a fundamental tenet of the area studies approach. As Philip E. Mosely, then director of the Institute, explained in 1954, "The Soviet ideology and system of control assume that all aspects of life must be closely interrelated and directed by a central purpose. This assumption, even if fulfilled imperfectly, challenges workers in many disciplines to combine their efforts to study a regime which attempts to control or direct all human activities on the basis of explicitly defined programs."

THE FORMATIVE WARTIME EXPERIENCE

The concept of "area studies" (routinely enclosed in scare quotes in the early days, even after the founding of the Institute) had been a subject of discussion before the war, and one of the directors of the Russian Institute would later point to classics as the original model of transdisciplinary studies. Nonetheless, the wartime experiences of those who would become the core faculty of the institute unquestion-

ably gave shape and urgency to the project, just as military service redirected many young men toward careers in what would later come to be known as Sovietology.

In particular, academics were recruited to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Office of War Information (OWI). At least indirectly, the work of such anthropologists as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, especially Benedict's study of Japanese culture for the OWI, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, sensitized policymakers to the value of studying regional cultures. As for Soviet studies, it was the OSS—and specifically the USSR Division of its Research and Analysis Branch, headed by Columbia professor Geroid Tanqueray Robinson—that served as incubator.

Robinson, the founding director of the Russian Institute, was a leading member of the rare breed of prewar Russia specialists. As a Columbia graduate student, he was one of the few American scholars who conducted research in the Soviet Union before World War II. He completed his doctorate and joined the Columbia faculty in 1924. Robinson's dissertation, published in 1932 as *Rural Russia under the Old Regime*, established him as one of the foremost authorities on the region. He was promoted to full professor in the history department in 1938.

Robinson was summoned to Washington on September 1, 1941, to assemble a team of American-born researchers—it was assumed that any Russian émigré volunteers would compromise the scientific objectivity of the project—to penetrate the veil of secrecy that had fallen between the Soviet Union and the West in the prewar years. Given the scarcity of established experts, the Division culled its personnel largely from talented younger scholars without previous specialization in Eastern Europe. Their experiences in the OSS would transform them into the first postwar generation of Sovietologists, among them Robert C. Tucker and Barrington Moore, Jr. (both originally trained as classicists), and the newly minted Ph.D. in economics Abram Bergson. The Division could also call on an impressive cadre of consultants, like Philip E. Mosely, a Balkans specialist then on the Cornell faculty, and John Newboldt Hazard, who spent the war years in Washington as deputy director of the USSR branch of the office responsible for Lend-Lease. Hazard also came to Washington with unusual experience. After what he later recalled as a brief stop in "gloomy" Russia "with its communist inefficiency and even brutality" on a round-the-world trip following graduation from college, he hardly expected to go back. But while studying at Harvard Law School, Hazard was offered a fellowship to continue his studies in the USSR, where he spent three years studying law at Moscow University, finishing at the height of the Stalin purges in 1937. Bergson, Mosely, and Hazard would join Robinson on the original Russian Institute faculty.

