



Francis King, “Soviet Studies, Russian Studies, Ukrainian Studies... Politics, war, and ‘horizons’”, *New Area Studies* 3:1 (2022).

Soviet Studies, Russian Studies, Ukrainian Studies... Politics, war, and ‘horizons’.

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Abstract

This article looks at the development of Soviet, Russian and Ukrainian Studies as academic disciplines in the English-speaking world, and considers how the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991 affected their approaches, conceptual horizons, and reception within the former Soviet space. It argues that the distinct ‘Western’ schools of area studies looking at the former USSR and its constituent republics have not simply merged with their counterparts in the areas under study, as might have been expected once the political and institutional barriers to international scholarly cooperation had been removed following the end of communist rule. On the contrary, they have survived and retained their vitality for a combination of economic and political reasons, and the narrowing scope for free academic enquiry in both Russia and Ukraine means that they are unlikely to lose their relevance any time soon.

In the academic specialism of area studies, one unintended consequence of Russia’s brutal assault on Ukraine since 24 February 2022 has been a mini-boom in media demand for ‘specialists in the area’ to help make sense of what has been going on. At the same time, the war, and the political conflicts which led up to it, have brought into sharper relief some of the unresolved issues within the community of academic specialists on the former Soviet space: What ‘areas’ are we qualified to study? How are those areas defined? How far are specialists on ‘Russia’ fit to pronounce, or teach, on Ukraine? This article seeks to explore some of the background to, and ramifications of, these contested questions.



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Before 1991

As a postgraduate student in the mid-late 1980s, researching the early development of the Soviet economic planning system, I was sometimes asked by colleagues in the USSR: ‘what is your *spetsial’nost* [academic specialism]?’ My standard answer was ‘Sovietologist’. That term, and its related discipline ‘Soviet Studies’, designated a geographical area (the USSR), and a timeframe (1917 – ?). But as an area studies specialism it had serious deficiencies, in that it implicitly *included* and *excluded* certain lines of research. Themes like mine – the politics and economics of the USSR’s state project to construct a socialist alternative to capitalist society – were clearly *in*. Other themes, such as continuities across the revolutionary divide of 1917, cultural comparisons between Soviet citizens and diaspora communities, Orthodox Church history and theology, or the folklore and customs of various nationalities in the USSR, could not comfortably fit that rubric.

At that time, British universities did not offer undergraduate courses in ‘Soviet Studies’. The courses which existed were generally called ‘Russian Studies’, and offered Russian language with options in literature, linguistics, politics, economics, history, culture and so forth. But their *geographical* horizons were the Russian Empire before the revolution, and the USSR afterwards. ‘Russia’, in the narrow sense of just Great Russian ethnic heartlands before 1917 or the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR – the largest of the 15 republics of the USSR) thereafter, was almost never considered separately. To most British scholars the Russian heartland and its Imperial or Soviet periphery came all as one piece, and were considered through a ‘Russian’ lens. The few who looked at the USSR’s non-Russian areas and cultures generally did so as specialists on linguistics, translators, and students of literature or folklore, many of them from a diaspora background.

In Britain, since the 1950s there had been two specialist academic associations, one for ‘Slavists’, and the other for ‘Soviet and East European Studies’, which merged in



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1989 to form the ‘British Association for Soviet, Slavonic and East European Studies’ (only to have to drop the ‘Soviet’ from its title three years later).ⁱ Although BASEES and its predecessors sought to cover the whole area of their remits, Russianists have always predominated in these academic bodies. This is unsurprising, given the relative numerical weight of Russians among the Slavic nations and the imperial status of the Russian language in much of the area covered by those bodies.

In North America, by contrast, alongside a thriving academic Russian/Soviet Studies sector, Ukrainian Studies had been developing there as a distinct discipline since at least the 1960s, fostered by scholars from the large community of postwar émigrés. In the 1970s, specialist institutes for Ukrainian Studies were established at Harvard and Alberta, producing publications covering a wide range of subjects.ⁱⁱ Although it remained a niche specialism, with few scholars from outside the diaspora community, Ukrainian Studies was unique; no other individual Soviet republic had that critical mass of specialists to sustain an ‘area studies’ approach in the English-speaking world. That said, across the English-speaking world, most scholars trained in ‘Russian Studies’ did not regard Ukraine as beyond their specialist area. Why would they? Ukraine and Russia had been united in one state for over three centuries. Ukrainian history is inextricably intertwined with Russian and Soviet history, sources were mainly in Russian, and Russian-speakers have little difficulty reading Ukrainian anyway. Specifically *Ukrainian* Studies, as it developed in North America, was not simply a more specialised and narrower branch of area studies – it was part of a distinct political project.

All scholars in Western countries who engaged in Soviet, Russian or Ukrainian Studies enjoyed one inestimable advantage over their counterparts within the USSR – the freedom to research and write about any topic, from any standpoint, without having to observe any official taboos or submit manuscripts for censorship. This more than made up for the lack of access to relevant archives in the Soviet Union, and it gave

the field a particular intellectual – and political – value. Our scholars were permitted to discuss things Soviet scholars could not.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 along the borders of its constituent Union republics changed things radically (see figure 1). The European former Soviet republics proclaimed their acceptance of academic freedom and began to open their state archives to domestic and foreign researchers. ‘Soviet Studies’ became an exclusively historical discipline,ⁱⁱⁱ and, in Russia in particular, domestic researchers began to produce some high-quality academic works based on formerly closed archival sources, sociological surveys and suchlike material. Academic exchanges and collaborative research projects between Western and former Soviet scholars became commonplace in the 1990s. For a while, it looked as though our specialism was going to become largely redundant. It seemed that only the profound economic crisis which afflicted the entire former Soviet space in that decade, with its collapse in funding for academic research in general and the Humanities in particular, was granting our specifically Western discipline a stay of execution.

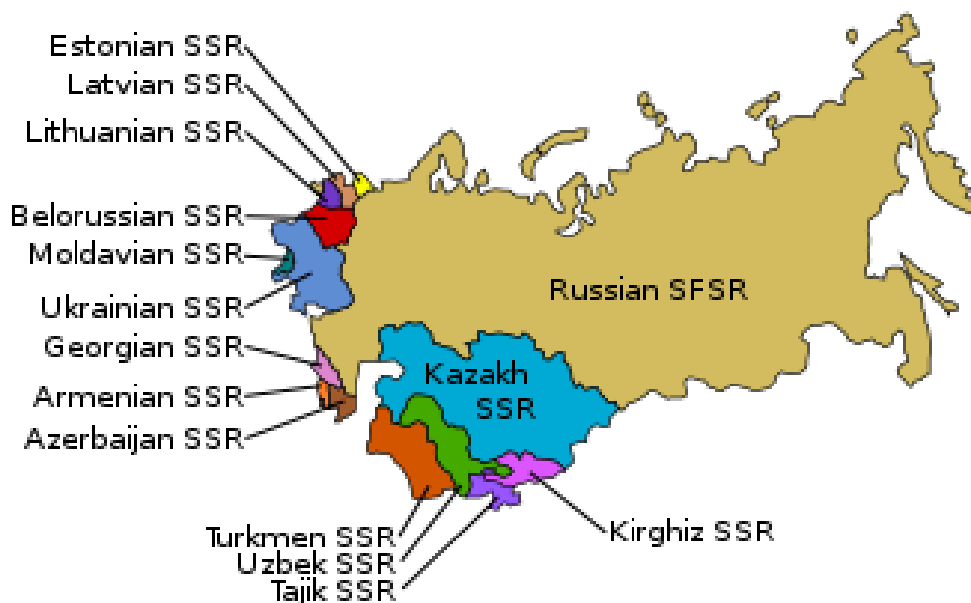


Figure 1: Union Republics of the USSR in 1991.^{iv}



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Ukrainian Studies seizes the moment

The prospects for the small western Ukrainian Studies sector looked rosier in 1991. Alongside the Russian Federation, fourteen ostensible nation states had sprung up around the rim of the former USSR; each with its own ‘national’ language,^v and each needing to foster a ‘national’ historical narrative for use in its newly independent education system. For Ukraine in particular, diaspora scholarship – not least the output of Ukrainian Studies institutions and journals – was well-positioned to fill the historiographical gap. It had a ready-made national narrative tailored to the geographical horizons of the new state. And it had material resources that were sadly lacking for domestic Ukrainian scholars. A leading light in North American Ukrainian Studies, Orest Subtelny, observed in 1993 that diaspora scholarship was regarded in Ukraine as ‘more authoritative’ than that of local historians.^{vi} Given that before 1991 the worst aspects of Soviet rule in Ukraine had been off-limits for research or publication in the USSR, this was scarcely surprising. Moreover, Subtelny recognised, diaspora historians’ work had been ‘focused on building a historical case for Ukrainian self-determination’,^{vii} and this had now become a vital need of the independent Ukrainian state. Within Ukraine itself, Subtelny noted, L’viv University in the west of the country was coming to the fore as a centre of historical research; he suggested that this was a result of western Ukrainians’ ‘more developed national (and historical) consciousness’.^{viii} To Subtelny, as to most of the Ukrainian diaspora of his postwar generation, this ‘national consciousness’ of western Ukrainians – their sense of a ‘Ukrainianness’ distinct from, and often opposed to, ‘Russianness’ – was unquestionably a positive thing. But his remark hinted at an uncomfortable fact for Ukrainian ethnolinguistic national consciousness: its imagined Ukrainian nation which longed to consolidate itself around its distinct history and language, did not correspond to the actual people, with their diversity of perspectives, identities and personal connections, living on the territory of now independent Ukraine. The inhabitants of the south and east of the country were far less likely to share the western Ukrainian ‘national consciousness’, with its emphasis on using the Ukrainian



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rather than the Russian language, and its cultural orientation towards ‘Europeanness’ rather than towards an affinity with Russia and Russian culture. As we shall see, the attempts by these Ukrainian nationalists to impose their vision of a national identity, and their narrative of Ukrainian history, became entangled with current political struggles. On some particularly contested issues, especially in relation to World War II, it has resulted in a full-blown memory war, as the military exploits of armies which fought one another with extreme ferocity are commemorated by different sections of the population.

What is Russia anyway?

Meanwhile, in the former RSFSR – the truncated remnant of the USSR now known as the Russian Federation (RF) – there were different questions of identity to tackle. What is Russia? Where is it? The RF is at one and the same time both more, and less, than a Russian nation-state.^{ix} On the one hand, the RF’s still-vast area encompasses not only the bulk of the Russian nation, but also dozens of other national groups, most of them not Slavic at all. But on the other, at the end of 1991 overnight a significant proportion of the Russian nation found itself living outside its new, smaller, ‘national’ territory. The political and social problems stemming from this sudden loss – not only of empire, but of places which had been inhabited by Russians for generations – remain unresolved and probably unresolvable in the foreseeable future.

For area studies, the indeterminacy surrounding the term ‘Rossiya’ [Russia] has generally meant that the broader, expansive, imperial horizons of ‘Russian Studies’ have retained their currency. Russian history certainly cannot be squeezed into the boundaries of the present-day RF, and it would be absurd for ‘Russia’ specialists to attempt it. In Soviet times the politics, economics and culture of Russia played out at the all-Union level (analogous with the situation with England vis-à-vis the UK). In pre-revolutionary times ‘Rossiya’ commonly denoted the whole of the Russian Empire. ‘Russian Studies’, and in particular research into Russian history, necessarily impinge



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on the study and the histories of all the other former Union republics. This routinely leads to complaints, most recently increasingly expressed in the fashionable discourse of ‘decolonisation’, that Western academic specialists ‘view the post-Soviet world through a Russian prism’.^x This may be a little unfair. Several paradigm shifts have taken place in English-language Russian (and Soviet) Studies since the collapse of the USSR. An ‘archival turn’, enabled by the opening of state archives at both national and regional levels led naturally to a certain ‘regional turn’ in research topics, as it became possible to look at how events played out on the ground outside of the more familiar capital cities of Moscow and Leningrad/Petersburg. The fact that many of these archives are located in former Union republics, with their own access provisions and so forth, has naturally resulted in a greater sensitivity to the specificities of these non-Russian areas of the USSR, even among researchers who resist working in the framework of the ‘national’ horizons of specific former Soviet nations.

The evolution of mainstream Russian academic perspectives on what constitutes their own national history can be gauged by looking at the main professional journal on that subject in the RF, *Rossiyskaya istoriya* (Russian history), published by the Russian Academy of Sciences (before 1991: the Academy of Sciences of the USSR). The journal was founded in 1957 as *Istoriya SSSR* (History of the USSR), in 1992 it changed its name to *Otechestvennaya istoriya* (Fatherland history), changing again to its current designation in 2009.^{xi} Looking through the contents pages over the years, the ideological changes from the Soviet period to today are clear enough, but any changes to its territorial horizons are very minor. Articles focusing *solely* on areas outside the present-day RF seem to have become more infrequent since 1991, but otherwise its geographical remit remains unchanged.

Memory politics, war and revolution

While the USSR existed, the October Revolution of 1917 was *the* foundational event from which the state derived its legitimacy. After 1991, it could no longer serve that



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political purpose. In the RF, where surveys show the population is divided in its attitude to the revolution,^{xii} the state has been content not to have an official line on the events. In Ukraine, on the contrary, the state has been keen to foster an alternative interpretation, tailored to the requirements of Ukrainian national history. In this version, 1917 saw the outbreak of a *national* revolution on Ukrainian soil against Russian domination – a revolution which was challenged by both Red and White Russian forces, and which went down to defeat with the restoration of Russian rule after 1921. Special educational materials for schools were prepared in 2017 putting these arguments.^{xiii}

In 2007 Ukraine followed Poland and certain other states by setting up a special ‘Institute of National Memory’ (Ukrainian acronym: UINP), answerable to the government, to ‘implement state policy in restoring and preserving the national memory of the Ukrainian people’.^{xiv} Thus Ukraine has an officially-sanctioned version of its past, which has fluctuated with changes of government. The so-called ‘Maidan revolution’ of 2013-2014 radicalised the work of UINP under its new head, the nationalist activist historian and politician Volodymyr Vyatrovych. In a context of a radical deterioration of relations with Russia and the ascendancy of ethnonationalist ideas in Ukraine, UINP successfully pushed through some significant historical memory laws in 2015. One, ostensibly ‘anti-totalitarian’ but essentially directed against Ukraine’s communist past and anyone inclined to express a positive view of it, provided the framework for a campaign of ‘decommunisation’ of Ukraine, including the removal of any remaining communist symbols, monuments and toponyms.^{xv} The entire Soviet period of Ukraine’s history is to be presented as seventy years of occupation, repression, and resistance. Another law, drafted by UINP and introduced by the right-radical politician Yuri Shukhevych, prohibited public criticism of ‘fighters for the independence of Ukraine in the twentieth century’, in particular, the wartime ethnonationalist Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukrainian acronym: UPA), of which Shukhevych’s father had been a leader.^{xvi}

The question of the UPA and its political leader Stepan Bandera is probably the most toxic historical issue, both within Ukraine itself and in its relations with Russia. In the more 'nationally conscious' west of Ukraine, and particularly around L'viv and the areas annexed to the USSR following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, the heroic memorialisation of the UPA and Bandera has been developing openly since the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Bandera was the leader of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, the UPA's political wing, which welcomed the Nazi invasion of the USSR and attempted on 30 June 1941 to proclaim an 'independent' Ukraine as a German ally. He only avoided the ignominy of being remembered as a Nazi puppet ruler because the Nazis had no use for an 'independent' Ukrainian state and did not allow one to be created. Bandera himself spent most of the war in German captivity, but his army waged a guerrilla struggle, mainly against Soviet partisans and those the UPA believed were helping the partisans (especially Jews), in occupied Ukraine. Its collaboration with the Nazis, far-right ideology, and active role in facilitating the Holocaust in Ukraine is well documented.^{xvii} Yet in Ukraine, stating these inconvenient facts is technically illegal. Officially, Ukraine also commemorates the defeat of Nazi Germany, and honours the veterans of the Red Army who fought in the war. But this creates an uncomfortable position in which the state is honouring the veterans of two mutually hostile armies who had spent the war trying to kill each other.

The glorification of the UPA by official bodies within Ukraine has outraged opinion within Russia. It is not hard to see why. Russian propagandists, increasingly preoccupied since 2014 with 'proving' that Ukraine is a puppet state of the USA and NATO, ruled illegitimately by Russia-hating Nazis, have seized on the official lionisation of Bandera and his comrades. It has been an ideal issue for them. The memory of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, including the partisan struggle in the occupied territories, has acquired an almost cult-like status in Russia. Now that the anniversaries of the October Revolution are no longer officially marked in Russia,

Victory Day, 9 May, has taken on all their state-legitimising pomp and ceremony, and has increasingly come to be seen as 'Russia's victory' rather than that of the entire USSR. In 2014, Russia also adopted laws against 'rehabilitation of Nazism' which forbid, *inter alia*, 'deliberate spreading of false information about the actions of the USSR during the Second World War, or about the veterans of the Great Patriotic War, in public'.^{xviii}

Russia's President Vladimir Putin has also taken to making statements on Russian history which, while they have no legal status, necessarily carry weight in Russian politics. In his notorious article of 12 July 2021, he reiterated his view that Russians and Ukrainians were 'one people', and that since 2014, Ukraine had fallen under the sway of a malign, Western-controlled 'anti-Russia project'. He also drew attention, not inaccurately, to the fact that the borders of Ukraine had been drawn and redrawn during the Soviet times along lines that were generous to Ukraine. From this he concluded that 'modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era', and that 'Russia was robbed, indeed'.^{xix} He returned to this theme in a more menacing mood in the immediate run-up to Russia's invasion, claiming that Lenin had been the architect of modern Ukraine, and continuing 'You want decommunisation? That suits us fine too, but we shouldn't stop halfway. We are ready to show you what real decommunisation means for Ukraine'.^{xx} This fits generally with Putin's imperial, pre-revolutionary conception of Russia, the Russian people(s), their boundaries, and their history.

Meanwhile, in Western academia...

One of the most significant developments in Western-based studies of the former Soviet space since 1991 has been the expansion of Ukrainian Studies as a distinct discipline. The existing research centres and publishing projects in North America have continued their activities, and have been joined by a few new institutes and rather more chairs and lecturing posts. A current project to take stock of them has



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produced an up-to-date list and an interactive map, although some of those listed probably exist more as an aspiration than as a concrete reality.^{xxi} Within existing centres and institutes for Slavic Studies, there has been greater attention to Ukrainian language and history, although again this is difficult to quantify, and much of it has taken the form of increased recognition of Ukrainian specificity in programmes of teaching and research which are nonetheless mainly concerned with Russia and/or the USSR. Some Ukrainian specialists complain that this enhanced coverage of Ukraine still looks like an add-on or afterthought, rather than being given the importance it really deserves.^{xxii} An important initiative was launched in August 2019 within the H-Net academic network when a separate H-Ukraine platform was set up by a group of Ukrainian Studies specialists in the USA. Previously, Ukraine-related material had been circulated on the H-Russia platform. H-Ukraine has developed vigorously, and now seems much more active than its older sibling, H-Russia.^{xxiii}

Historically, a significant obstacle to the expansion of Ukrainian Studies has been the chronic poverty and disorganisation of the Ukrainian state itself – area studies dealing with foreign countries is typically fostered and part-financed by the states concerned as part of a programme of cultural diplomacy. Ukraine has been relatively slow off the mark in developing this area of state activity. Finally, in June 2017, the Ukrainian government established the ‘Ukrainian Institute’ as its instrument of international cultural diplomacy, which has given a significant fillip, among other things, to Ukrainian Studies abroad.^{xxiv} As well as encouraging the formal study of Ukraine and Ukrainian, it also supports existing voluntary and independent Ukrainian cultural and academic organisations around the world.

Since 24 February 2022

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February and subsequent developments, apart from being a disaster for Ukrainians, Russians and world peace, have had profound consequences for studies of the region in the West. The first reaction on the



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part of most Western specialists was one of shock and revulsion against Russia for its aggression and its war crimes, and an outpouring of sympathy for Ukraine. Among those scholars who express themselves on questions of current politics, relatively few have expressed outright *support* for the Russian position, but there are significant tensions between those who urge that we should align ourselves uncritically with Ukraine’s war effort, and those who prefer to maintain a critical distance and try to *understand* developments in both states. In recent weeks, buoyed up by Ukraine’s apparent battlefield success, the first group is cheerleading Ukraine on to what it imagines will be victory, with little concern or even a malicious pleasure about likely wider developments in Russia in the event of Putin suffering a humiliating defeat. The second group is generally more sceptical about claims that Russia is on its knees, hopes for de-escalation of the conflict and a reboot of diplomacy, and seeks to maintain contacts with colleagues in both Russia and Ukraine. Not surprisingly, some of the most hawkish supporters of Ukraine’s war effort have been quick to detect *zrada* (treachery) among their less enthusiastic colleagues. The kaleidoscope of opinions to be found at the journalistic end of the specialism, with particular emphasis on International Relations and military matters, can be found in English on the daily bulletin of Johnson’s Russia List.^{xxv} It is frequently dispiriting reading.

Russian Studies in western countries has been hit hard by the war in Ukraine. The Russian authorities take the stance that their conflict is with the collective West, and the Ukrainian authorities are little more than a pawn of NATO. A combination of Ukrainian calls for an academic boycott of Russia, western universities’ and governments’ severing of existing academic ties, and increasingly stringent definitions of ‘foreign agent’ in Russian law to embrace almost anyone working with colleagues outside Russia, have effectively combined to destroy much of the collaboration which had become a feature of the post-1991 academic landscape. It has become much harder and riskier for citizens of NATO member states to visit Russia to use state archives, where these remain accessible at all. Whereas until recently Russian scholars



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were officially strongly encouraged to try to publish in western academic journals, the policy has now changed. The increasingly stringent measures to ensure ideological conformity among Russian academics also mean that attempting to work with Western colleagues is not worth the risk. In May 2022 Russia formally left the Bologna process for aligning its higher educational system with that of most of the rest of Europe. The comment of Valentina Matviyenko, the Putin-loyalist chair of Russia’s Federation Council, expressed the Russian stance:

In this case – we were still naïve then, with rose-tinted spectacles – we really wanted to appeal to the West. Now we can say that integration, joining the Bologna process, has not worked. For all the West’s promises about the complete integration of our universities and research centres into the European research environment, no such thing happened, alas.^{xxvi}

It seems highly unlikely that the damage inflicted upon the entire sphere of Russian-Western academic cooperation and exchanges will be repaired any time soon. Russian higher education has turned decisively away from trying to find partners in Europe and North America in favour of seeking them in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Among Russianists in the West, the mood is very gloomy. Those who teach the history and politics in higher education remain busy, but those whose research entailed travelling to Russia and doing fundamental research there, or formal collaboration with colleagues in the country, are wondering whether it will ever be possible to resume normal activities. Some, particularly in North America, have become performatively self-critical in the spirit of decolonisation and post-colonialism. For example, Susan Smith-Peter at New York University, in a think-piece published on 1 April 2022 ‘What do Scholars of Russia owe Ukraine?’ declared that she was ‘undergoing a process of self-reflection and questioning’ about her previous



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perspectives on Russia, and called on all her fellow Russianists to ‘join me in recovery from our addiction to the Russian state’.^{xxvii}

On the other hand, some nationally-conscious Ukrainian scholars based in the West see Russia’s aggression as yet another demonstration of the correctness of their views. One of the most outspoken has been Alexander Motyl, who in May challenged Russianists to confront ‘difficult questions’ if they wanted to ‘retain their integrity as scholars and, ultimately, as human beings’. This would involve them recognising ‘Russia as a force for evil’ and confessing ‘their shameful roles in sustaining Putin’s Russia’.^{xxviii} At the BASEES conference in April, the keynote speaker Olesya Khromeychuk, head of the Ukrainian Institute London, also challenged her audience to consider their assumptions about Ukraine. She asked us all to think about our ‘mental maps’ of Europe – where was our continent’s Eastern border? Her own answer was implicit in her assertion that Ukraine was ‘the largest state in Europe’: Ukraine was part of Europe, Russia was not.^{xxix} This is a traditional theme of the western Ukrainian national idea: that Ukraine is ‘European’, unlike its larger neighbour to the north-east. She also criticised the neglect in the West of specifically *Ukrainian* culture, which was either absent from ‘the canon’ or misidentified as ‘Russian’, and suggested a constellation of first-rate Ukrainian writers and artists who should be better-known, first and foremost the poet, playwright, author and translator Lesya Ukrainka. It was powerful and articulate speech which made a compelling case for greater recognition of Ukrainian culture.

Nonetheless, there are serious problems with the currently ascendant west Ukrainian nationalist narrative. It is simply impossible to disentangle ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Russian’ culture. The state borders of 1992 – the only aspect of the Soviet legacy which modern Ukrainian nationalism considers sacrosanct – do not neatly delineate two distinct cultural spaces. Not only did the Ukrainians living in the areas near the border with Russia generally have more contact, and more in common, with the Russians living



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across the border than with people in Galicia or Volynia, but throughout the centuries that Ukraine and Russia were part of the same state, people moved about. They might move from Kyiv to Petersburg to Moscow to Kharkiv without ever imagining they had gone ‘abroad’. Some of the absurdities of the attempt to separate ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Russian’ culture are well illustrated in the campaign waged since the summer by the Ukrainian Writers’ Union and others to close the house museum of the writer Mikhail Bulgakov in Kyiv.^{xxx} Bulgakov, a native of the city, wrote in Russian and had been uncomplimentary in some of his stories about the politics of civil-war-era ‘independent’ Ukraine. For this he has been regularly accused of ‘Ukrainophobia’. The story illustrates some of the consequences of the nation-building efforts of the current Ukrainian authorities and their outriders, which under the banner of ‘de-Russification’ seek to expunge not only the cultural influence of Russia, but also of the wrong sort of Ukrainians.

Ukrainian academic institutions, encouraged by all manner of initiatives to foster contacts with Western counterparts, are keen to fill the gap left by the collapse in relations between Western and Russian universities and colleges. How useful this will turn out to be for the Western institutions remains to be seen. The Ukrainian language will never be as useful as Russian. It is specific to just one European country. Relatively few books have been published in that language, and for archival scholars the great bulk of documents relating to Ukrainian history in Ukrainian archives are in Russian. And the two languages are cognates – Russian-speakers can fairly easily decipher texts in modern Ukrainian.

Russian and Ukrainian Studies in the West: not yet redundant

Russian, Soviet and later Ukrainian Studies in western countries emerged in a very specific situation. In the USSR, the world’s largest state and the main geopolitical rival to the capitalist West, contacts with scholars abroad were severely circumscribed. Most archives were closed to foreigners. Politically inconvenient publications –



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including many which had originated in Russia or the USSR – were kept in sealed sections of research libraries. What scholars in the USSR could research, write and publish was strictly controlled. No approaches openly at variance with ‘Marxism-Leninism’ were permitted. In such circumstances, the scholarly community researching the USSR from outside the socialist bloc necessarily developed separately from their Soviet counterparts. Joint research projects in the Humanities were virtually impossible. Western scholars could of course freely access and use Soviet published material; some trusted Soviet researchers were allowed to look at certain Western publications and occasionally surveys of the latest ‘bourgeois’ scholarship would be published in Soviet journals. The readers of those survey articles, for the most part, could not readily check the references in them.

Most notoriously, up to the late 1980s, Soviet histories of the state’s foundational event, the revolution of 1917, would avoid naming many of the leaders of that revolution who had later fallen foul of the regime and been arrested. If naming them was unavoidable, they could only be mentioned in an unfavourable light. Soviet pre-publication censorship ensured that these conventions were followed. But the urge towards ideological uniformity and the taboos on any dispassionate discussion of certain ideas and historical figures meant that on certain sensitive questions – including much of the history of the USSR in the twentieth century – work published abroad was often considerably more academically rigorous than work published in the Soviet Union. This was an unusual situation for a developed country.

The collapse of the USSR and the end of the Communist Party’s political monopoly at the end of 1991 meant that local scholars were no longer constrained in what they could research or publish. Censorship and legal restrictions on importing published materials were lifted. Most official archives were opened to all researchers, citizens and foreigners, and ex-Soviet and western scholars were free to travel, collaborate, establish joint research projects and so on. In these new circumstances one would



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expect the centre of scholarly gravity in Soviet, Russian and Ukrainian Studies to shift decisively eastwards, and the fields themselves to become fully internationalised, as is the case with, say, French or German Studies. To an extent this process has been taking place, but there have been some major difficulties. Initially, the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s was accompanied by a massive financial crisis in the state academic sector. The incomes and status of lecturers and researchers fell precipitately, and many younger scholars abandoned higher education and academic study for more profitable occupations.^{xxxi} Western institutions continued to be major centres of research into the former Soviet space simply because they were, comparatively, much better resourced. But since the end of the immediate crisis of the 1990s, in both Russia and Ukraine there has been a creeping ideologisation of academic enquiry, particularly in history, to serve the political needs of the state and its rulers. Ukraine’s struggles around historical memory, so clearly related to national power struggles, have been among the starkest examples of this, but the more insidious process in Russia since 2000 has also had a chilling effect. Certain lines of research have become easier to pursue from outside the area.

All these negative tendencies have been made many times worse by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. In Humanities subjects, contacts and collaborations between Western and Russian institutions have all but ceased since February 2022, and interactions between individual scholars have sharply reduced. Ukrainian institutions, in contrast, seek partnerships with their Western counterparts, but the laws on historical memory and the understandable desire of many activists to expunge all trace of ‘Russianness’ from Ukrainian life do not create a good environment for sober, nuanced thinking or research. It looks as though circumstances have given the distinctive Soviet, Russian and Ukrainian Studies sector in Western countries yet another lease of life. Unfortunately, this is no cause for celebration.



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ⁱ See <http://basees.org/history-1> for details.

ⁱⁱ See <https://huri.harvard.edu/history-institute> and <https://www.ualberta.ca/canadian-institute-of-ukrainian-studies/about/index.html> for brief accounts of these institutes.

ⁱⁱⁱ The journal ‘Soviet Studies’ renamed itself ‘Europe-Asia Studies’ in 1992; other publications, societies and research groups experimented with circumlocutions like ‘post-Soviet space’ etc.

^{iv} Special:Contributions/Saul ip. Derivative work by Σ, CC BY-SA 3.0.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_USSR_with_SSR_names.svg

^v In some cases Russian was also retained as a secondary state language.

^{vi} Orest Subtelny, ‘The Current State of Ukrainian Historiography’, in *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 18, nos. 1-2, Summer-Winter 1993, p. 36.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 42.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 51.

^{ix} English, with its single word for ‘Russian’ can add to the confusion. The Russian language distinguishes between российский (rossiyskiy), which relates to the geographical space Россия (Rossiya, Russia), and русский (ruskiy) which denotes the ethnic group. Historically, the Eastern Slavic nationalities (or the ‘triune Russian people’ to traditional Russian nationalists) were designated великороссы (velikorossy, Great Russians, today’s Russians), малороссы (malorossy, Little Russians, today’s Ukrainians), and белорусы (belorusy, White Russians, today’s Belarusians).

^x See, for example, Oleksandra Gaidai, ‘Decolonizing Crimean history’, 30 August 2022, on the Atlantic Council website <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/decolonizing-crimean-history/>

^{xi} An almost unbroken digitised run of the journal from 1974 to the present is freely available on its website. See <https://российская-история.рф/archive>

^{xii} See e.g. <https://fom.ru/Proshloe/14489> for a breakdown of public attitudes to the revolution in Russia.

^{xiii} See <https://uinp.gov.ua/informaciyni-materialy/vchytelyam/metodychni-rekomendaciyi/metodychni-rekomendaciyi-do-100-richchya-ukrayinskoyi-revolyuciyi-1917-1921-rokiv> for the lesson plans and links to materials.

^{xiv} See <https://uinp.gov.ua/pro-instytut/pravovi-zasady-diyalnosti> for the legal status of this body.

^{xv} For the latest redaction of this law, see <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/en/317-19#Text>

^{xvi} For the text of this law, see <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/314-19#Text>

^{xvii} See Per A. Rudling, *The OUN, the UPA and the Holocaust: A Study in the Manufacturing of Historical Myths*, Carl Beck Papers No. 2107, Pittsburgh, 2011.

^{xviii} The law was incorporated into article 354.1 of the RF Penal Code. See

<https://www.ugolkod.ru/statya-354-1>

^{xix} See <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> for an English translation of Putin’s article.

^{xx} See e.g. <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/02/21/17325145.shtml?updated> for a contemporary Russian news report.

^{xxi} See <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/ukrainian-and-crimean-tatar-studies-abroad/> for an up to date list.

^{xxii} This point was eloquently made by Olesya Khromeychuk, the head of the Ukrainian Institute in London, as her keynote address to the BASEES conference in Cambridge in April 2022.

^{xxiii} See <https://networks.h-net.org/ZZ-about-ukraine-ZZ> for the network's mission statement.

^{xxiv} See <https://ui.org.ua/en/mission-2/> and <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/npas/250094619> for the foundation and mission of the UI.

^{xxv} See <https://russialist.org/>

^{xxvi} See 'Matvienko: integratsiya Rossii v Bolonskiy protsess ne sostoyalas', in *Kommersant*, 1 June 2022, on <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5381096>

^{xxvii} See <https://jordanrussiacycenter.org/news/what-do-scholars-of-russia-owe-ukraine-today>

^{xxviii} See <https://www.factsandarts.com/current-affairs/tough-times-ahead-russian-studies>

^{xxix} For a recording of this lecture, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJthJb1tK0Y>

^{xxx} See e.g. <https://strana.today/news/405569-natsionalnyj-sojuz-pisatelej-trebuetsya-zakryt-muzej-avtora-mastera-i-marharity-bulhakova.html> and links.

^{xxxi} On this process of decline and precarisation in Russia, see e.g. I. O. Shevchenko, 'Prepodavately vysshey shkoly v kontekste prekarnogo truda, in *Sud'by rossiyskoy intelligentsii: proshloe, nastoyashchee, budushchee*, Moscow 2019, pp. 291–296.