A Comeback for Soviet Studies

After a 15-year decline, scholarship on the U.S.S.R. and East Europe is being bolstered by new programs and money

It is one of the many ironies of the day that as the United States defense budget becomes ever more bloated, the state of research and training about the nation's principal opponent has been allowed to wither to what many believe is the lowest point since World War II.

Department chairs have gone begging, fellowships have dried up, hardly anyone has been studying Russian, and the country's universities have been producing an average of half a dozen new Ph.D.'s a year on Soviet international relations.

The last year and a half, however, has seen an extraordinary mobilization of concern over the state of American expertise in Soviet and East European affairs. Foundations, which abandoned the field in the late 1960's, are coming back in with a series of grants to Soviet study centers. And in December, Congress added a 10-year measure to the State Department authorization bill, sponsored by Senators Richard G. Lugar (R–Ind.) and Joseph R. Biden (D–Del.), which is expected to put $5 million into the field in fiscal year 1985.*

It is too early to say the turnaround has been accomplished, but the level of optimism and excitement in the field is the highest it has been in two decades.

Soviet studies enjoyed a boom after the war which can be dated to 1946 when the Ford Foundation made possible the establishment of Columbia University's Russian Institute. But both government and private support began to wane in the mid-1960's. According to Vladimir Toumanoff of the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, the field suffered a stunning 77 percent decline in constant dollars between 1968 and 1982.

An unfortunate set of circumstances converged to reduce Soviet and East European studies to their downtrodden state. The Vietnam war not only shifted much scholarly attention away from East-West issues, but campus rebellions resulted in the abolition of many traditional course requirements. Many of the most capable students turned their attention to domestic problems and those interested in foreign area studies headed for the Third World. Detente, initiated in 1972, reinforced a certain complacency about the Soviet Union.

What's more, the money troubles afflicting all of academia fell particularly hard on area studies. Departments such as economics and political science drew back to their essential functions, which meant that instruction in Soviet economics, for example, was regarded as peripheral and therefore dispensable. Says John Stremlau of the Rockefeller Foundation, "Soviet studies have become residuals of history and linguistics departments."

The result of these circumstances has been what Marshall Shulman of Columbia University calls a "lost generation" of Soviet experts. Within Sovietology the age structure is weighted toward the mature end of the spectrum. At the current rate of training, says Toumanoff, there will be no replacements for half of those who retire. "There's such a shortage of talent we're reduced to stealing each others' stars," says Alexander George of Stanford University.

> Withering of the field has resulted in a "lost generation" of experts.

Language training is a fundamental problem. There are plenty of Russian-speaking literature students but few Russian speakers who are also schooled in contemporary affairs. And the number of people studying Russian and other East European languages has declined drastically. According to the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, enrollments in Russian language courses in higher education have dropped by 40 percent since 1965. At present, it says, there are fewer college students—about 24,000—studying Russian than there are studying Latin. There are approximately five students of Uzbek, the language of 40 million Moslems in the U.S.S.R. The United States is turning out 100 people a year who are fluent in an East European language.

Ironically, the decline in American involvement in Soviet studies has been matched by significant expansion of scholarship about the United States in the Soviet Union. Not only is English a staple requirement for many disciplines, such as physics, but programs linking knowledge of a foreign area with a particular specialty, such as geology or agronomy, are firmly entrenched. The Soviet Academy of Sciences' new Institute of the U.S.A. and Canada alone houses over 300 experts. The Soviets have roughly three times as many people working on U.S. foreign relations as vice versa, according to Robert Legvold of the Council on Foreign Relations.

By 1980, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the sorry state of American Soviet studies had spurred foundations, university officials, think tanks, and associations into feverish rounds of talks and reports. The death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982 underscored the fact that few people knew anything about the upcoming generation of Soviet leaders. Underlying all this, of course, was the greatly intensified concern about the nuclear arms race.

These events led to congressional hearings, which culminated in the new legislation. Meanwhile, the foundations have been moving back in. The Ford Foundation, perhaps the steadiest contributor to the field, has since 1979 funded a program of international fellowships to promote "dual competence" in Russian or East European affairs and arms control and security. Then last year, the Columbia Russian Institute obtained a commitment for $11 million from Averell Harriman and has renamed itself the W. Averell Harriman Institute for Advanced Studies of the Soviet Union.

The Rockefeller Foundation held a much-heralded competition designed to revive the study of Soviet international behavior and has announced the award of three grants: $1 million apiece to Columbia and to a joint program at Stanford University (which has a strong arms control program) and the University of California at Berkeley. Another $500,000 has been committed to a joint program on Soviet international behavior at the Rand Corporation and the University of California at Los Angeles. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has also jumped in with matching grants of up to $750,000

*Roughly speaking, this might double the government's contributions to the field, which now come primarily through three channels: the 1958 National Defense Education Act (the money is now administered through the Higher Education Act) which last year allotted $1.6 million to Russian study centers; the National Council for Soviet and East European Research which distributes funds mainly from intelligence agencies; and the International Research and Exchanges Board, which runs virtually all government-funded exchanges of Soviet specialists.

apiece for Soviet studies at six universities.† Says Marshall Goldman of the Harvard Russian Research Institute, "Now foundations are talking to us that wouldn't let us in the door before." New long-term projects include plans by the Joint Committee on Slavic Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council to build up basic scholarly resources and fund fellowships for students of Soviet economics and Soviet sociology.

The designers of these projects emphasize that the purpose is not to unleash vast numbers of Soviet experts on the nation but to put together programs that will create small, but top-quality cadres of experts in particular fields. To revive the field of Soviet foreign policy, for example, the annual output of Ph.D.'s might be upped to ten. According to figures from the International Research and Exchanges Board, the nation has about 1100 Soviet experts by "full time equivalent" calculations, and needs 900 more. The population of experts in such areas as the Soviet computer industry, Soviet agronomy, and even Soviet science is minuscule. Among many areas where scholarly coverage is threadbare are Soviet demographic changes and the implications of the shrinking proportions of ethnic Russians; political attitudes of Moslems in the U.S.S.R.; restiveness in Eastern European countries; the relation of communist movements abroad to Soviet communism; and Soviet activities in the Third World.

The government is going to be hurting soon for first-class expertise if such programs do not bear fruit. To illustrate the sparse state of Sovietology, people are fond of citing a comment by Robert Legvold: if one were to call together all the people in the government "who are expert on Soviet policy toward a key country—say, the Federal Republic of Germany—or an important region—say, Asia—they could meet around a card table." The State Department testified at Senate hearings that it was getting very few applicants trained in Soviet affairs, and a State Department official told *Science* that almost every senior specialist in Soviet affairs would be gone within the next 10 years. The deterioration of the academic infrastructure has led to erosion in the large Soviet research apparatuses of the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Sovietologists lament the fact that outstanding scholar-diplomats—the "Tommy Thompsons, the Chip Bohlens, the George Kennans" of yore—are no longer to be found in the ranks of the State Department. The lack of such authoritative figures, combined with what one official calls a "systematic" bias against career people in favor of political loyalists, mean that the voices of those with deep knowledge of the area are unlikely to carry as far as the Oval Office. The President himself has never been to the Soviet Union and did not go to the funerals of either Brezhnev or Andropov.

There have been a number of isolated manifestations of the deeper problem, such as the fact that when a Soviet soldier defected to the American Embassy in Kabul, there was no one there who could interrogate him in Russian. But the lack of a thriving Soviet studies establishment may be manifested more indirectly through the simplistic attitudes toward the opponent that many would say are reflected in government pronouncements and policies.

Arms control thinking reflects scant input from Sovietology.

The withering of Sovietology has been both a cause and effect of its estrangement from policy-making, particularly in the field of arms control and security. The arms control community as a whole reflects the simplistic polarization which many say afflicts academia—between those who take a "mirror image" view of the U.S.S.R. and those who see it as the "evil empire," single-mindedly out to maximize its international domain.

The arms control community has, at least until recently, been dominated by scientists. And even scientists, such as Sidney Drell of Stanford, agree with Sovietologists that the thinking has been overly dominated by technical considerations. Raymond Garthoff of Brookings Institution concurs that "there is more attention to technical military strategy . . . to some extent at the expense of looking at the general political context and Soviet affairs." Garthoff, who participated in SALT I negotiations, says there would be only one or two such specialists on a team of 100. He says the same proportion applies at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. He believes the imbalance has led to radical misperceptions by Americans of the Soviets' need for security as well as what can be accomplished by bullying them.

Seweryn Bialer of Columbia says the Administration's policies toward the Soviet Union are based on a number of such misperceptions. They include the assumption that the Soviets' international behavior can be affected by influencing internal developments; that their system can eventually be brought to the brink of collapse; and that they will respond favorably to attempts at coercion.

What is now being acknowledged, as passage of the Lugar-Biden bill indicates, is that Soviet and East European studies will not only fail to flourish, but they will not supply the manpower to fill the nation's needs if their support is left to the marketplace. Unlike most other area studies, there is virtually no support for them and no jobs to be had in the private sector, since almost nobody does business with the U.S.S.R. And without promising job prospects few students are prepared to make the enormous investment required to become marketable experts. Gail Lapidus of Berkeley says the new Berkeley-Stanford program will take twice as long to complete as the average graduate program, not only because of several years required to perfect the language but because of the inaccessibility and difficulties of using Soviet source material.

If the new initiatives bear fruit as planned, it will take up to 10 years for the effects to be manifest. Meanwhile, a stepping-up of student interest is already occurring. For example, Jonathan Sanders of the Columbia institute says that enrollment in the Russian history course he teaches has gone from 40 to 140 in the past 3 years.

There is also a quickening of activity in nonacademic quarters. The Federation of American Scientists has embarked on a major campaign to get people, particularly politicians, to travel to the Soviet Union. And increasing numbers of peace-seeking groups are flying to Moscow.

So far, the promoters of Soviet studies have coordinated closely and presented a united front: they want new money to go to existing centers of expertise; the focus is on policy-relevant training and on limiting efforts to creating small but top-quality cohorts of scholars. They are determined to avoid another "boom and bust cycle" and are more concerned with stability than magnitude of funding.

It remains to be seen how unified they will be once the crisis is securely averted. Says Arnold Horelick, director of the Rand-UCLA program, "when the time comes to divide up the $5 million in the Lugar-Biden bill, that will reveal the politics of the field."—**CONSTANCE HOLDEN**

†$750,000 apiece for Harvard and Columbia; $500,000 for Berkeley and Indiana; $400,000 for Stanford and Michigan.