

## **Ideology and Identity in Teaching about Russia in the United States: 1945-1950**

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### **Abstract**

In 1945, predominantly white and male academics at elite postsecondary institutions, bolstered by nineteenth century industrialist wealth and connected to government and military elites, shaped and influenced the teaching of Russian in the United States in ways that remain traceable in the field today. Through critical inquiry the study finds that the field's progenitors reacted to war and McCarthyism in ways that were color-blind, politically-averse, and self-preservational, exposing the roots of white supremacy and Russocentrism in Russian language textbooks. Critical race theory helpfully frames matters of anti-discrimination law and interest convergence regarding *de jure* and *de facto* forms of educational exclusion. The study locates and illuminates significant developments in Russian language instruction during and after the war. It also assesses and presents ideologies about teaching and learning Russian that were expressed contemporaneously by practitioners.

# Ideology and Identity in Teaching about Russia in the United States: 1945-1950

Rachel Stauffer

## Introduction

The 1940s in the United States (US) witnessed a significant transition in teaching Russian and teaching about Russia.<sup>1</sup> Until wartime expansion efforts, teaching Russian was unusual as the language was orientalized and exoticized as Asian or Far Eastern.<sup>2</sup> The American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL) and the American *Russian Review* first appeared in 1941, but many other important developments in Russian language teaching occurred after the war. In 1945, the *American Slavic and East European Review* (now *Slavic Review*) was first published. The Russian Research Institute at Columbia (now the Harriman Institute) and the *Russian Language Journal* were both established in 1946. The Joint Committee on Slavic Studies (JCSS), the Russian Institute at Harvard (now the Davis Center), and the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (now the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies [ASEEES]) were all organized in 1948.

The rise of Russian language study coincided with the development of area studies programs, broadly conceptualized as education for purposes of national security. The Cold War began, emergent McCarthyism targeted celebrities and academics, and the legal and social landscape of Jim Crow segregation coexisted with the desegregation of the military and federal workforce in 1948.<sup>3</sup> As an example, Corliss Lamont, a Columbia University faculty member writing about the Soviet Union, was deposed by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1946, coalescing with philanthropic and government efforts to expand Russian

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the literature varies significantly in the way fields are described. This paper will use terms *education about Russia* and *teaching about Russia* interchangeably; *Russian area studies* and *Slavic studies* usually when describing the past, and *Russian Studies* or *Slavic and Eurasian Studies* when describing the present. Russian language instruction is specified as such.

<sup>2</sup> David Engerman, "The Ironies of the Iron Curtain," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 45, no. 3/4 (2004): 469.

<sup>3</sup> Harry S. Truman, Executive Order 9981, July 26, 1948, *Our Documents*, National Archives, accessed January 19, 2025, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9981>.

language instruction.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, instruction in the Russian language moved from grammar-translation to audio-lingual methods in the 1940s, largely owing to the success of the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), which set the stage for today's emphasis on communicative competence.

While significant scholarly attention has been directed to reforms impacting education about Russia after the Soviet launch of Sputnik in October 1957, less has been received by the often significant transformations and developments in the field after World War II. The scope of the present paper will, therefore, discuss identities and ideologies involved in teaching Russian during the period 1945 to 1950. The present study is critical and considers how race, sex, and class impacted access to the full menu of educational opportunities, including Russian language study. Critical race theory applied to matters of identity and ideology among those promoting Russian illuminates connections to a "regime of white supremacy."<sup>5</sup> The broader national security apparatus under construction in the US after World War II was constructed predominantly by white, elite men with access to generational, institutional, and systemic power.<sup>6</sup>

### Theoretical and Conceptual Assumptions

The premise of this paper is that teaching Russian is and has been distinctive from teaching other world languages in the US. Furthermore, the period 1945-1950 accelerated the rise of the necessity and availability of Russian studies in postsecondary settings. Since then, the US government has prioritized Russian as a critical language owing to geopolitics, militarism, arms development, and competition in science and technology. Government and military interests and values contributed to ideological and pedagogical conflicts in teaching Russian, requiring instructors "to simultaneously inculcate open-mindedness while encouraging conformity to white, middle-class norms."<sup>7</sup> Before and after 1945, efforts to expand area studies and Russian language study involved intermingling circles of power elites, "men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men . . . in positions to make decisions having major consequences."<sup>8</sup>

Teaching Russian was significantly influenced by well-connected and highly positioned white academic men who leveraged Ivy League status and unfettered access to intellectual, social, and financial capital. White industrialist wealth of John Rockefeller, Henry Ford, and Andrew Carnegie was dressed as philanthropy to support teaching and research about Russia. Ideologically,

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<sup>4</sup> House Committee on Un-American Activities, "Executive Session," February 6, 1946, Washington, DC: National Archives, accessed May 30, 2024, author's collection.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995), xiii.

<sup>6</sup> "Wealth also is acquired and held in and through institutions . . . the great inheriting families . . . are now supplemented by the corporate institutions of modern society" from C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Zoë Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

<sup>8</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 3-4.

these philanthropic organizations “mediate[d] among the concerns of the state, big business, party politics, and foreign policy-related academia; articulate[d] a divided system; and constitute[d] and create[d] forums for constructing elite expertise.”<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, the government leveraged the power of the purse to bankroll language instruction for predominantly white military servicemen via the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP).<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, this further bolstered a predominantly white “educational system, that was dominated by men, especially at the most influential universities in the field.”<sup>11</sup> Because US educational settings reproduced and reinforced features of white supremacy, including race-based educational exclusion, teaching Russian during this time contributed to an unintended, but impactful result, in which elite “social arrangements . . . create[d] structural disparities.”<sup>12</sup> This inequity of access to education is observable even now in the predominantly white composition of student and scholar identities studying Russian in the US today.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, this, too, was and is a distinguishing feature and flaw of the field.

The stories supplied in contemporaneous and retrospective memoirs and reports written by those teaching Russian, and relatedly, Slavic languages, reflect the influence of identity and ideology. They provide insight into how educators thought about their students, colleagues, the American public, as well as the efforts and outcomes related to teaching Russian. These and other histories of the field, in combination with organizational reports and journal articles about teaching Russian illuminate ideologies in operation in Russian language instruction and its expansion during and after World War II. Critical race theory (CRT) illuminates legal and social aspects of “the fact that all educational spaces are unique and politically contested.”<sup>14</sup>

Educational ideologies have changed over time. However, it is still possible to acknowledge associated practices and beliefs in the past, recognizing their impacts, whether intentional or unintentional, so as to disrupt their ongoing harm in the present. This paper argues that the harmful impact of these ideologies on Russian language instruction today has led to a dearth of representation of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity among imagined American learners and Russian speech communities worldwide. Accordingly, Russian

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<sup>9</sup> Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Glenn Altschuler and Isaac Kramnick, “The Cold War at Cornell,” in *Cornell: A History, 1940-2015*, eds. Glenn Altschuler and Isaac Kramnick (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 75.

<sup>11</sup> David Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Zeus Leonardo, *Race, Whiteness, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Dianna Murphy and Hadis Ghaedi, “‘Who (Are)n’t Our Students?’” *The Gender and Ethnoracial Distribution of U.S. Bachelor’s Degrees in Russian Language and Literature over Twenty Years, from 1999-2000 to 2018-2019*, *Russian Language Journal* 71, no. 3 (2021): 17.

<sup>14</sup> Joe Kincheloe, “Critical Pedagogy in the Twenty-First Century: Evolution for Survival,” *Counterpoints* 422 (2012): 155.

language textbooks published in the US have been subject to detailed, much deserved criticisms over the last two decades.<sup>15</sup>

### Teaching Russian, 1945-1950

The wartime efforts to teach Russian in the 1940s experienced rapid development and implementation. By 1945, this growth led to predictions, though unfulfilled, that Russian would “become one of the major languages studied.”<sup>16</sup> Within five years of its founding, AATSEEL had significantly grown its membership, published a regular newsletter, and established a regional presence in several US states and in Canada.<sup>17</sup> In 1948, Vassar Russian professor Catherine Wolkonsky reported, “In December 1941, a mere 19 colleges and universities offered Russian; now the number is well over a hundred.”<sup>18</sup> In a 1945 report, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation confirmed, “Until ten years ago there were but few courses given in American universities in the Russian language, and no broad resources were developed for understanding the social and cultural life of a nation which in a single generation has become one of the most powerful forces in the world.”<sup>19</sup> He further described the challenges confronting Russian language expansion, “Even today our resources are pitifully meager. Only one university accepts Russian as a language with which undergraduates may satisfy the usual language requirements; and it is possible to thumb through the catalogues of courses in even large institutions without finding the words ‘Slavic’ or ‘Russian.’”<sup>20</sup> Between 1935 and 1945, the Rockefeller Foundation “appropriated approximately \$775,000” toward expanding language offerings, including Russian.<sup>21</sup>

In real time, instructors reported “scarcity . . . of the basic resources necessary for the development of Russian studies – scholars and teachers, research materials, and books and teaching aids” in 1946.<sup>22</sup> With regard to instructional materials for Russian, by 1951, Ornstein asserted that “the field is still in its infancy,” recommending that “members of our profession strive to perfect the best possible

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<sup>15</sup> Maria Shardakova and Aneta Pavlenko, “Identity Options in Russian Textbooks,” *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 3, no. 1 (2004): 25-46; Nizora Azimova and Bill Johnston, “Invisibility and Ownership of Language: Problems of Representation in Russian Language Textbooks,” *Modern Language Journal* 96, no. 3 (2012): 337-349; Rachel Stauffer, “Addressing the Representation of Russian Language Textbooks,” In *The Art of Teaching Russian*, eds. Evgeny Dengub, Irina Dubinina, and Jason Merrill (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> J. Cayce Morrison, “An Administrator Looks At Language Study,” *The Modern Language Journal* 29, no. 8 (1945): 685.

<sup>17</sup> “1946 год и положение русского языка в Америке,” *The Russian Language Journal* 1, no. 1 (1947): 14.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Wolkonsky, “Some Aspects of Teaching Russian,” *The Modern Language Journal* 32, no. 1 (1948): 24.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Fosdick, “Excerpts from the Review for 1944 of the Rockefeller Foundation,” *The Modern Language Journal* 29, no. 7 (1945): 631.

<sup>20</sup> Fosdick, “Excerpts from the Review for 1944,” 632.

<sup>21</sup> Fosdick, “Excerpts from the Review for 1944,” 632.

<sup>22</sup> Cyril Black, et. al, “An Appraisal of Russian Studies in the United States,” *The American Slavic and East European Review* 18, no. 3 (1959): 419.

means for its effective teaching.”<sup>23</sup> The dearth of resources and expertise was one result of the observably limited access to the study of Russian and other Slavic languages outside of elite or highly selective postsecondary institutions, and outside of the northeast.

In 1948, Stanford Russian professor Jack Posin reported that “interest in Russian civilization and the language skyrocketed . . . aided by government subsidies . . . colleges and universities . . . increased their staffs to meet the new demand.”<sup>24</sup> Among the efforts which Rockefeller funded was the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). The ASTP stimulated new pedagogical approaches that moved away from grammar-translation and toward audio-lingual methodology. The ASTP method demonstrated that it was possible to build proficiency in a language by increasing intensity over a shorter period of time, rather than lengthening more incremental study over several years. Posin, however, credits the intensive method to Harvard in the 1930s: “Contrary to widespread belief, this method did not originate during the war. It has been successfully used with Russian language since 1934 . . . The war merely popularized this method and gave it wider application.”<sup>25</sup>

Wartime emergency is the most commonly cited reason that public and student interest in Russian ascended in the 1940s. There is also evidence of other learner rationales. A 1946 survey of 656 undergraduate students taking Russian at two dozen postsecondary institutions reported the top three reasons cited for studying the language were “I believe that Russia has a great future” (64%, n = 418); “I’m interested in the culture” (62%, n = 404); and “I intend to go there some day” (57%, n = 377). The bottom three reasons were “I was born in Russia and want to speak the language” (1%, n = 7); “I am a singer and want to sing Russian songs” (2%, n = 10); and “I am a librarian and want to catalogue books in the language” (3%, n = 18). Some of the outlying individual responses were, “I plan to become a secret agent,” and “I am going into the export business.” 148 respondents replied “other reasons,” among which included working in “foreign or diplomatic service.”<sup>26</sup>

37% (n = 157) of the respondents’ reported majors (n = 424) were in the sciences, engineering, medicine, and math, while 63% (n = 267) of students reported majors in liberal arts fields, and 14% (n = 37) reported majors in Russian and other Slavic languages.<sup>27</sup> In response to a prompt about the language skills they wished most to develop in Russian, students expressed strong interest in speaking, reading, and understanding, and weak interest in writing and grammar. The change they most wanted in their classes was “more conversation.”<sup>28</sup> By the

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<sup>23</sup> Jacob Ornstein, “A Decade of Russian Teaching: Notes on Methodology and Textbooks,” *The Modern Language Journal* 35, no. 4 (April 1951): 279.

<sup>24</sup> Jack Posin, “Russian Studies in American Colleges,” *The Russian Review* 7, no. 2 (1948): 63.

<sup>25</sup> Posin, “Russian Studies in American Colleges,” 64.

<sup>26</sup> Agnes Jacques, “Why Students Study Russian,” *The Modern Language Journal* 31, no. 8 (1947): 529-530.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques, “Why Students Study Russian,” 528.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques, “Why Students Study Russian,” 531.

end of 1947, “140 colleges and universities offered some instruction in Russian in the academic year . . . 240 persons, either full or part-time, are engaged in teaching Russian language, literature, or both.”<sup>29</sup>

A generational transition also changed the field as several faculty in Slavic at Columbia, California, Chicago, Harvard, and other institutions all died at around the same time.<sup>30</sup> The deaths impacted Rockefeller Foundation efforts to encourage “a geographically diverse set of institutes” where Russian was studied, “as universities adopted different responses to a rash of deaths among scholars prominent in prewar Slavic Studies.”<sup>31</sup> An article in the very first issue of the *Russian Language Journal* in 1947 mourns the older generation as part of a “*prepodavatel'skaia sem'ja* (teacher family)” of Russian faculty in the US, noting that Harvard professor Samuel Cross, especially, would not be easy to replace.<sup>32</sup> Posin lamented the losses to the profession in 1948, “because of retirement and death, the ranks of trained and experienced scholars in the field have been narrowing rather than growing.”<sup>33</sup> The wave of deaths were part and parcel of a series of sea change events over this short period of time that etched Russian studies increasingly more deeply into academic, government, philanthropic, and public spheres. However, due to emergent McCarthyism, the incoming leaders of Russian language instruction encountered conditions that contributed to the disproportionate representation of dominant identities in Russian language textbooks today.

### **Identities Teaching Russian, 1945-1950**

The Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) at Cornell was designed, informed, and/or delivered by Ernest J. Simmons (Literature), Sergius Yakobson (Government), Bernard Pares (History), Corliss Lamont (Social Institutions), and Vladimir Kazakevich (Economics). During the McCarthy era, few US experts on the Soviet Union publicly advocated for racial equity, the working class, and global movements for social justice. However, those who did, - like Simmons and Lamont - were all investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). To illuminate influences on curricula as a result of this phenomenon between 1945 and 1950, I will describe the experiences of individuals involved with ASTP at Cornell who were targeted by HUAC, namely Corliss Lamont and Ernest Simmons, with briefer discussions of Harriet Moore and Bernard Pares. Sergius Yakobson was the husband of Russian specialist Helen Yakobson, and brother of Roman, whose stamp on the field is indelible, but has received sufficient attention elsewhere. Vladimir Kazakevich was the most likely communist sympathizer and returned to the Soviet Union shortly after his brief contribution to the ASTP, thus there is less about him worth discussing in this paper's context.

<sup>29</sup> Posin, “Russian Studies in American Colleges,” 64.

<sup>30</sup> Clarence Manning, *A History of Slavic Studies in the United States* (Milwaukee, WI: The Marquette University Press, 1957), 67-68.

<sup>31</sup> Engerman, “The Ironies of the Iron Curtain,” 469-470.

<sup>32</sup> “1946 год и положение русского языка,” 12.

<sup>33</sup> Posin, “Russian Studies in American Colleges,” 66.



These individuals' experiences are model experiences of how teaching about Russia and teachers of Russian were differently impacted by McCarthyism, given that historian Albert Parry described the Cornell program as "the prototype of Russian area studies programs in various American institutions" prior to 1950.<sup>34</sup> Simmons, who directed the ASTP and Russian language and culture intensive at Cornell University, thus directly contributed to the shape of modern curricula, funded by Cornell and Rockefeller.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, Simmons' and his ASTP colleagues' involvement contributed to contemporary Russocentrism in Slavic Studies as their "studies of Soviet culture meant, with rare exceptions, studies of Russian literature . . . limited almost exclusively to works in Russian. A few books and articles on Ukrainian culture appeared . . . Next to nothing appeared on literature in other Soviet languages."<sup>36</sup>

In 1944, Lamont published a book called *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, in which the introduction condemned racism, "I can think of nothing more unjust, more cruel, or more uncivilized than discrimination against individuals or groups because of their color, facial characteristics, or ethnic origin."<sup>37</sup> Lamont committed time, effort, and personal funds to resisting prejudice and McCarthyism while others removed themselves from the political fray. For example, Geroid Robinson, the head of Columbia's Russian Institute, and Clyde Kluckhohn, head of Harvard's Russian Research Center preferred "to stand removed from the political controversies that divided the American public."<sup>38</sup> Robinson had served the government during wartime in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and so was uniquely receptive to Washington's demands, and he recruited Hazard and Simmons to help staff the Institute.<sup>39</sup>

Along with two other Columbia faculty, Simmons "faced accusations of disloyalty. McCarthy condemned Ernest Simmons as 'a Communist' at the time he had led the wartime program at Cornell."<sup>40</sup> Likewise, in HUAC testimony from 1953 that discussed Simmons 1947 book, *USSR: A Concise Handbook*, McCarthy named historian Bernard Pares, Lamont, Simmons, and Harriet Moore as Stalinists.<sup>41</sup> In HUAC transcripts of a March 1947 hearing, a witness rebuked Cornell's Russian program asking, "Who was responsible for the employment of such notorious preCommunists as Corliss Lamont . . . Sergei Kaurnakoff [sic], military writer on the staff of the *Daily Worker*; Harriet Moore, director of the

<sup>34</sup> Albert Parry, *America Learns Russian: A History of the Teaching of the Russian Language in the United States* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1967), 113-114.

<sup>35</sup> Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 131.

<sup>37</sup> Corliss Lamont, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), vii-viii.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Byrnes, *A History of Russian and East European Studies in the United States* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 131.

<sup>39</sup> "Robinson to Head Russian Institute," *The New York Times*, November 6, 1945, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Senate. *Communist Infiltration in the Army: Hearing Before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, Eighty-Third Congress, First Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 40, September 28, 1953*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (1953), 86-87.



pro-Soviet American Russian Institute . . . Vladimir Kazakevich, lecturer and writer for Communist publications. All were engaged in some phase of training Army officers at Cornell University in Ithaca, N. Y.<sup>42</sup> Simmons, Lamont, Moore, and Pares were all targets of investigations by HUAC after its activities became more publicly legitimized due to Alger Hiss and his association with the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) in 1948.<sup>43</sup> Upon Bernard Pares' death in 1949, Harvard historian Michael Karpovich wrote,

As a young man, Sir Bernard lived and studied in Russia. He returned to Russia during the political crisis of 1905, and in the years that followed, he made several visits to the country to watch the growth of the recently born constitutional regime. In the First World War he was with the Russian Army as a semi-official British observer, and after 1917 he continued his travels in Russia, braving the dangers of the revolutionary turmoil so long as this was possible. The extent of his personal contacts in Russia was amazing. He knew Tsarist ministers and revolutionary leaders, businessmen and intellectuals, peasants and landed gentlemen.<sup>44</sup>

It goes without saying that the types of contacts and experiences Pares had in both world wars likely led to McCarthyist suspicion, and also, that Pares' connections to Soviet insiders was spectacularly different than that of Simmons, Lamont, or Moore.

Lamont's engagements with HUAC escalated throughout the 1950s. In 1953, "When Senator Joseph R. McCarthy investigated him, Dr. Lamont replied vigorously. He said he was not a Communist, and intended not to answer and to enjoy his First Amendment freedoms."<sup>45</sup> Lamont's boldness was admonished with denial of his passport renewal in 1951.<sup>46</sup> Like many, but not all of his colleagues, Lamont was generationally wealthy, yielding fewer concerns about his livelihood. Still, for others teaching Russian, the professional jeopardy caused by suspicions of communism or the appearance of being political were preferably avoided. For a woman like Harriet Moore, HUAC scrutiny was riskier. All the same, according to her obituary, Moore throughout her life advocated for social equality: "She was very proud of her role in organizing a large and controversial civil rights fundraising event in Scarsdale, NY in the early 1960s, featuring . . . Pete Seeger, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. Harriet organized the concert to raise bail for the Freedom Riders, then jailed in Mississippi . . . in the face of vociferous opposition."<sup>47</sup> Simmons had a productive academic career, teaching Russian and writing mostly about Russian literature at Cornell, Harvard, and Columbia. Lamont continued teaching and pushing for progressive and working class interests and defending constitutional

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<sup>42</sup> *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*. 80th Congress, (March 27, 1947), 278.

<sup>43</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994), 69.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Karpovich, "Sir Bernard Pares," *The Russian Review* 8, no. 3 (1949): 183.

<sup>45</sup> Israel Shenker, "Still-Active Corliss Lamont," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1972, 22.

<sup>46</sup> John Gregory, "Obituary: Corliss Lamont," *The Independent*, May 11, 1995, <https://www.the-independent.com/news/people/obituary-corliss-lamont-1619163.html>

<sup>47</sup> "Harriet M. Gelfan Obituary," *Atamaniuk Funeral Home*, accessed January 16, 2025, <https://www.atamaniuk.com/obituaries/Harriet-M-Gelfan?obId=2112473>.

freedoms and civil rights, even self-publishing and distributing pamphlets and booklets on democratic principles for the public and supporting organizations that shared his values.

### **Ideologies in Teaching Russian, 1945-1950**

In the context of educational settings and pedagogical approaches reflected in recollections of the history of education about Russia in the US, there are strong undercurrents of discriminatory ideologies. The ideologies discussed and exemplified from writing by Russia specialists and general area studies collaborators appear to have been influenced by the privileged identity factors of predominantly white and male academics in elite and highly selective postsecondary institutions. Ideologies discussed here include deficit and meritocratic thinking, orientalism, and native-speakerism. Although these phenomena were not identified as such during the period at hand, the ideologies are observably reproduced in educational settings as described in the histories and stories supplied by scholars writing about teaching Russian. Broadly, reflections presumed that learners themselves accountable for their success or failure, owing to “genetic, cultural, or experiential differences.”<sup>48</sup> Deficit thinking is reflected in writing about teaching Russian as well as other world languages, which suggests it was a widespread ideology in the profession.

However, responses in the previously mentioned 1946 poll of undergraduates surveyed about studying Russian counters deficit thinking as it reports “a serious interest . . . a desire to master the language.”<sup>49</sup> In the late 1950s, authors Cyril Black and John Thompson traced the need for Russian studies as a way to confront “deficiencies in our knowledge of many areas of the world, and the lack of Americans who knew these areas well.”<sup>50</sup> American students’ lack of knowledge about the region through no fault of their own, given the past limitations on studying the region, was described as a “very hazy notion of Russia.”<sup>51</sup> Deficits were attributed to colleagues as well. For example, an area studies scholar suggested that foreign-born colleagues were less equipped for the classroom because their experiences as refugees meant they were “disturbed psychologically.”<sup>52</sup> The difficulty of the language itself was a deficit that led to gatekeeping, “purists among the deans and even a few strict professors rule that only superior students be admitted to Russian classes, or that a background of two or three years in Latin or Greek or French or German be required.”<sup>53</sup> Graduate students’ and post-docs’ language skills were criticized.<sup>54</sup> In a 1948 article, the

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<sup>48</sup> Sonia Nieto and Patricia Bode, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Education* (New York: Pearson, 2018), 12.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques, “Why Students Study Russian?” 533.

<sup>50</sup> Cyril Black and John Thompson, *American Teaching About Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 13.

<sup>51</sup> Wolkonsky, “Some Aspects of Teaching Russian,” 27.

<sup>52</sup> William Fenton, *Area Studies in American Universities* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1947), 13-14.

<sup>53</sup> Parry, *America Learns Russian*, 166.

<sup>54</sup> Parry, *America Learns Russian*, 179.

author invoked deficit thinking toward college students taking Russian: “There is a marked discrepancy between the intellectual maturity of the college student and his facility in the language, and this we have to face as a challenge.”<sup>55</sup> Even in a 1948 issue of the AATSEEL *Bulletin*, organization leadership described its own members as “the stepchildren of the modern language profession.”<sup>56</sup>

Akin to deficit thinking, meritocratic thinking as an ideology asserts that with enough resilience and hard work, anyone can work from the bottom up to reach any goal.<sup>57</sup> Meritocratic thinking is incompatible with reality, particularly in light of forms of meritless access to power and opportunity in use among elites, such as cronyism and nepotism. Likewise, meritocratic thinking requires evasiveness of matters of race, sex, and class, which, during the time at hand, impacted access and opportunity to levers of social uplift, such as education.

Meritocratic and deficit thinking are both observable in descriptions of the educational pedigrees of servicemen selected for the ASTP.<sup>58</sup> In fact, a “school’s national reputation has very little to do with actual quality . . . and more to do with its ability to confer social capital via networks of wealth and institutional power.”<sup>59</sup> Until post-Sputnik educational reforms, the study of Russian and other Slavic languages was practically located predominantly in the Ivy League.<sup>60</sup> The pedigrees of predominantly white, male scholars, philanthropists, and bureaucrats overseeing expansion of Russian language instruction reflect experiences of ease, access, and opportunity. Intermingled with the white, male, national security-oriented status quo, academics fulfilled in educational settings their role in performative anticommunism as “‘officers’ of the ruling class for the subordinate functions of social hegemony and political government.”<sup>61</sup>

Columbia sociologist C. Wright Mills viewed elite power circles as an exclusive *and* exclusionary social system of influence in the upper classes. He described the ways that systems of opportunity and power were then managed

<sup>55</sup> Wolkonsky, “Some Aspects of Teaching Russian,” 28.

<sup>56</sup> “The American Slavist Must Grow Up,” *Bulletin of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages* 5, no. 4 (1948): 77.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Gorski, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018); Katy Swalwell, *Educating Activist Allies: Social Justice Pedagogy with the Suburban and Urban Elite* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Katy Swalwell and Daniel Spikes, *Anti-Oppressive Education in “Elite” Schools: Promising Practices and Cautionary Tales from the Field* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2021).

<sup>58</sup> “Academic standards as they vary between undergraduate colleges with limited personnel resources and universities with distinguished faculty in the habit of operating on the graduate plane affect judgments of level achieved under ASTP; standards naturally vary from place to place and reflect the type of students normally attracted to that campus . . . The nature of the course and the diverse backgrounds of the students had not been previously encountered in the colleges and universities. . . the trainees exhibited in the mass a great range of scholastic background . . . their worldly experience and maturity varied widely” in Fenton, *Area Studies in American Universities*, 76-77.

<sup>59</sup> Swalwell and Spikes, *Anti-Oppressive Education in “Elite” Schools*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 7.

<sup>61</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince* (New York: International Publishers, 1957), 124.

and overseen by elites. In his characterizations, Mills alleges, “the power elite is composed of men of similar origin and education . . . careers . . . styles of life . . . social type . . . leading to the fact of their easy intermingling.”<sup>62</sup> Elites worked together to operate “the structure and the mechanics of those institutional hierarchies over which the political directorate, the corporate rich, and the high military now preside.”<sup>63</sup> Based on the phenomena described, Mills’ definition of elitism is applicable to individuals, institutions, and organizations involved in teaching Russian language and in the formation of Russian area studies during this period.

In writings on Russian language instruction, the language skill, trustworthiness, and potential for instructional success of émigrés are judged in ways that reflect identity-based forms of deficit and meritocratic thinking. Native-speakerism asserts that some identity factors are assumed to reflect greater cultural and linguistic authenticity than others. The concepts of *native speaker* and *non-native-speaker* are “professionally popularised categories, often with skin colour as a determining characteristic.”<sup>64</sup> An observable opposition exists between native and non-native speakers of Russian in the field: “‘nonnative’ teachers and those that do not fit the traditional image of a ‘native’ speaker, are still considered ‘deficit’, are underrepresented, and/or find themselves modeling their teaching after ‘native’ speaker teachers.”<sup>65</sup> In some ways, this view mirrors Imperial Russian and American forms of race- and class-based othering.

In 1946, Alfred Senn, writing about the first year of Russian language instruction recommended it “be taught only by people wholly familiar with the English language.”<sup>66</sup> In 1948, it was recommended that future scholars of Russian area studies, “come from the ranks of young American-born men and women. Russian ancestry *per se* qualifies a person for training for a professorship in Russian no more than does English or American ancestry alone qualify one for a similar career in English.”<sup>67</sup> Also in 1948, a Russian instructor wrote, “an oral drill class cannot be placed in charge of a teacher whose own pronunciation is short of the most perfect. Unfortunately, Brooklyn Russian can be as bad as Brooklyn English, and for the oral class only a well-educated native Russian will do.”<sup>68</sup> The same instructor insisted, “I should like to make an appeal to my fellow-Russians in the United States, who make up the great reservoir from

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<sup>62</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> Mills predicted that elites’ end goal was, “the development of a permanent war establishment by a privately incorporated economy inside a political vacuum.” See Mills, *The Power Elite*, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Adrian Holliday, “Native-speakerism: Taking the Concept Forward and Achieving Cultural Belief,” in *(En)-Countering Native-Speakerism: Global Perspectives*, eds. Anne Swan, Patricia Aboshiha, and Adrian Holliday, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 13.

<sup>65</sup> Amy Thompson and Emil Asanov, “‘Nonnative? Next!’ Native-speakerism in World Language Job Advertisements,” in *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* 14, no. 1 (2024): 57.

<sup>66</sup> Alfred Senn, “College Russian: Objectives and Methods,” *The American Slavic and East European Review* 5, no. ½ (1946): 182.

<sup>67</sup> Posin, “Russian Studies in American Colleges,” 66.

<sup>68</sup> Wolkonsky, “Some Aspects of Teaching Russian,” 26.

which most of the teachers of Russian are drawn, to study English and to master it thoroughly. This is very important.”<sup>69</sup> David Engerman notes a “division between those whom language teachers called ‘native experts’ and American scholars.”<sup>70</sup> Throughout Russian history, multilingual non-ethnic-Slavs and non-Christians, even those who spoke Russian as a primary language were minoritized as “non-native,” largely due to racialized forms of categorization created for colonization and conquest.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the characterization of Russian as a language for national security adds a layer of adversariality, “even as speakers of these ‘critical languages’ are serving to further the agenda of the State (a controversial matter in its own right) . . . they continue to be viewed with suspicion.”<sup>72</sup>

### Critical Race Analysis

The ideologies described above are characteristic of US educational settings and curricula, which reinforce systemic, legal, and societally-constructed hierarchies of race, sex, and class. In fact, schools and communities became more racially segregated after *Brown v. Board of Education*, owing to a lack of white interest convergence, and not only in the southern states.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, until 1954, which includes the period at hand, white supremacy operated as unmarked, whereas white interest convergence<sup>74</sup> with racial equality was marked and socially stigmatized. Anticommunism was unmarked and concomitant with whiteness.

This arrangement created social conditions in which some academics yielded to performative solidarity with unmarked white supremacy and anticommunism, which I am convinced contributed directly to evasiveness of matters of race, sex, and class in Russian language textbooks. White academics, public officials, and philanthropic organizations declared a need for national security education initiatives providing wider access to education to reify whites’ “legal legitimization of expectations of power and control . . . while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination.”<sup>75</sup> Relatedly, scholars have asserted white interest convergence as concomitant with any possible progress owing to race conscious

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<sup>69</sup> Wolkonsky, “Some Aspects of Teaching Russian,” 29.

<sup>70</sup> David Engerman, “The Ironies of the Iron Curtain,” 475.

<sup>71</sup> Alexandra Vukovich, “The Ethnic Process,” in *Is Byzantine Studies a Colonialist Discipline?: Toward a Critical Historiography*, eds. Benjamin Anderson and Mirela Ivanova (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2023); Kati Parpei and Bulat Rakhimzianov, eds., *Images of Otherness in Russia: 1547-1917* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2023).

<sup>72</sup> Timothy Reagan, “The Language of Pushkin, The Language of Putin: Teaching Russian in the United States,” *American Journal of Education and Practice* 7, no. 2 (2023): 10.

<sup>73</sup> Lani Guinier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (2004): 93.

<sup>74</sup> Derrick Bell, Jr., “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93 (1980): 518.

<sup>75</sup> Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1715.

reforms.<sup>76</sup> Crucially, however, author Kimberlé Crenshaw observes, “the societal adoption of racial equality rhetoric does not itself entail a commitment to end racial inequality.”<sup>77</sup> Given that few of those who teach Russian commented on matters of race (or sex or class for that matter), I have yet to find explicit white interest convergence, though so far it is clear that Lamont and Moore were outliers in their outspokenness.

Writing in 1988, Crenshaw was commenting on affirmative action during the Reagan era, and this topic continues to have relevance today. A 2023 Supreme Court decision disempowered antidiscrimination law in favor of non-race-conscious college admissions, about which Justice Jackson dissented, “today, the majority . . . announces ‘colorblindness for all’ by legal fiat. But deeming race irrelevant in law does not make it so in life.”<sup>78</sup> Although color-evasiveness appears merit-based, that is the result of meritocratic thinking.<sup>79</sup> Such a stance fails to recognize the legal, social, educational, and economic disenfranchisement of women, migrants, Indigenous communities, formerly enslaved African Americans, people experiencing poverty, and people with disabilities. *Brown v. Board* challenged Jim Crow segregation and set the stage for race-conscious antidiscrimination law. Soviet propaganda routinely chastised American racism, so those teaching about Russia were presumably aware of such matters, whether or not they publicly problematized them.

Beginning in February 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy and HUAC escalated anticommunist investigations and surveillance. The wartime urgency that led to unique growth in study of Russia and the Soviet Union was exchanged for anticommunist paranoia. The political landscape meant that instruction in Russian was compelled to submit to an anticommunist status quo, concomitantly maintaining white supremacy, or teaching Russian in ways that would appear apolitical. It is interesting that multiculturalism had a strong presence in volumes which predate 1950, pointing to the importance some scholars ascribed to identity even then. Multiculturalism was more widely discussed until anticommunism led, for example, to the retraction of Simmons’ book for use in military training, just a few years after he was recruited to run the ASTP Russian Intensive at Cornell. Lamont’s generational wealth shielded him from significant disruptions to his livelihood when targeted by HUAC in 1946, though his troubles escalated in the 1950s. In the 1960s, Lamont sued the Postmaster General for violating the first amendment by reporting to the government individuals receiving materials

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<sup>76</sup> Derrick Bell, Jr., “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93 (1980); Guinier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy.”

<sup>77</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Race, reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in antidiscrimination law,” *Harvard Law Review* 101, no. 7 (1988): 1346.

<sup>78</sup> *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023).

<sup>79</sup> The term *color-evasiveness* is used here instead of *color-blindness*. See Subini Annamma, Darrell Jackson, and Deb Morrison, “Conceptualizing Color-Evasiveness: Using a Dis/ability Critical Race Theory to Expand a Color-Blind Racial Ideology in Education and Society,” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 20, no. 2 (2017): 147-162.



about Communism or from Communists by mail. The case went to the Supreme Court and unanimously in Lamont's favor.<sup>80</sup> But Lamont truly was an outlier. Others involved with the field were subject to top-down pressure to conform or at least perform. McCarthy's objections to Lamont's, Simmons', and others' scholarship appear to have been at least partially derived from what was perceived as allegiance to Soviet multiculturalism, rather than American white supremacy.

### Implications

Race consciousness, not color-evasiveness, should be a goal of teaching about the Russian-speaking world in the US today. Russocentrism and whitewashing were logical, but harmful outcomes of the collision of anticommunism and segregationism characterizing the years after World War II. There was a shift in the development of the field between the ASTP years and Sputnik, the first satellite in space, launched by the Soviets in 1957, causing new uncertainties about American exceptionalism. Disproportionately, the identities and ideologies of elite academics, nineteenth century industrialists, and government officials leading up to and after 1945, made it possible to be evasive of matters of multiculturalism, since whiteness and maleness were widely accepted defaults among intermingling elites. After *Brown* there was not an influx of funding to teach historically disenfranchised students Russian, but there was after Sputnik, because education for scientific competition and national security were white interests, and thus prioritized.

Programs in Russian and Slavic in the northeast continued to benefit disproportionately from the field's expansion, even after post-Sputnik federal grants became available to publicly-funded institutions for international education. Slavist Leon Twarog reflected in 1961 that wartime efforts were less impactful than post-Sputnik reforms.<sup>81</sup> Scarcity was still a feature of the field, since Twarog noted a "shortage of qualified people."<sup>82</sup> Deficit thinking still abounded a decade after Sputnik, when Parry observed, "from the 2 per cent of American scientists with the ability to read Russian . . . the number rose only to 6 per cent in 1965. A severe shortage of American specialists with a proper knowledge of scientific, technical, and engineering Russian was reported in August, 1965."<sup>83</sup> In fact, according to a federal scientist in the US Commerce Department, it was "almost impossible to obtain good Russian translators for specific scientific disciplines."<sup>84</sup>

The poor outcomes of federally-funded initiatives did not end them, but in fact aided power elites to collaborate advantageously in ways that further secured access to taxpayer funds. Of course, they had the advantage of private money too, since "philanthropic foundations fostered this environment as they applied funds to meet their own intellectual and political goals."<sup>85</sup> It is worth noting, however,

<sup>80</sup> *Lamont v. Postmaster General*, 3381 U.S. 301 (1965).

<sup>81</sup> Leon Twarog, "A Program of Slavic Studies: A Guide for the College Student," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 5, no. 3 (1961): 208.

<sup>82</sup> Twarog, "A Program of Slavic Studies," 209.

<sup>83</sup> Parry, *America Learns Russian*, 148.

<sup>84</sup> Parry, *America Learns Russian*, 149.

<sup>85</sup> Engerman, "Knowing Allies and Enemies," 181.



that philanthropy was the primary form of private funding that benefited the field at the time. In 1948 it was reported that “Russian studies to date benefited very little from private gifts to universities. The fact is that in the entire country there is not one endowed chair of Russian studies.”<sup>86</sup>

Forms of sex-based exclusion are observable around the same time. For example, in 1954, a group of Slavists from Columbia, Harvard, Yale, MIT, Berkeley and Chicago held a meeting at the “Men’s Faculty Club at Columbia University.”<sup>87</sup> Women were then teaching in elite programs but clearly excluded from planning initiatives in the expansion of the field. In fact, in 1952 Bryn Mawr College Russian professor Frances de Graaf became AATSEEL’s first woman president.<sup>88</sup> Catherine Wolkonsky began teaching Russian at Vassar, which would have positioned her as having congruent experience and status to those meeting at the Men’s Faculty Club.<sup>89</sup> Observable exclusion of discussion of the careers of women is a feature of histories of the field, including Engerman, who did not investigate women academics because they received fewer PhDs than men.<sup>90</sup> However, Engerman’s claim is inadequately supported. The citation for his assertion relies on data only from the US National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Other primary sources, including histories of the field, reveal that quite a few women teaching Russian in the US during this time earned their degrees abroad. In fact, Marianna Poltoratzsky, who taught Russian at the Army Language School, Middlebury, Georgetown, Vassar, and Norwich earned *two* PhDs abroad before emigrating to the US, one in Russia in Slavic and Romance languages and one in Austria in linguistics.<sup>91</sup> White male historians have trivialized, dismissed, and/or minimized women’s wartime contributions to teaching Russian, which reflects patriarchal ideologies in historical research that are not based in actual evidence. The field must devote attention to the lives, experiences, and contributions of women teaching Russian in wartime and beyond. Pioneering women – Lila Pargment, Elena Mogilat, Catherine Wolkonsky, Frances de Graaff, Fan Parker, Ludmilla Turkevich, and many others - found pathways to earn advanced degrees, despite *de facto* and *de jure* barriers to educational access. Post-Sputnik reforms made the study of Russian more widely accessible to all students, including women, in public institutions, as opposed to only in institutions abroad or private women’s colleges,

Increased access to study of Russian in public institutions due to federal funding was similarly believed to create a level playing field for students at public postsecondary institutions. By 1961, an equivalent distribution was

<sup>86</sup> Posin, “Russian Studies in American Colleges,” 68.

<sup>87</sup> Chauncy Harris, “Russian, Slavic, and Soviet Studies in the United States: Some Memories and Notes,” *Russian History* 24, no. 4, (1997): 448.

<sup>88</sup> J. Thomas Shaw, “AATSEEL: The First 50 Years,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 35, AATSEEL Golden Jubilee Issue (1991): 53.

<sup>89</sup> “Catherine Wolkonsky,” Vassar Encyclopedia, accessed January 30, 2025, <https://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/faculty/prominent-faculty/catherine-wolkonsky/>.

<sup>90</sup> David Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 10.

<sup>91</sup> N.V. Pervushin, “M.A. Poltoratzsky: A Tribute,” *Russian Language Journal* 22, no. 83 (1968): 4.

reported among degree programs in private postsecondary institutions (42%,  $n = 22$ ) and public institutions (38%,  $n = 20$ ), which constituted such a change.<sup>92</sup> Simultaneously, the regional distribution of degree programs by the same time remained disproportionately northeastern. Although this may not seem like a barrier to access, particularly in light of the influence of meritocratic thinking on the field, it is also true that there were fewer programs in poorer, southern states and institutions. Consequently, there was far more disparate access to study of Russian for southerners, including Black students after desegregation. No Russian programs were instituted in Black colleges or universities, even though Tuskegee and Hampton were well supported by Carnegie and other philanthropists, they funded the preservation of Blackness as a subject race to reify white wealth and dominance.<sup>93</sup> More research is needed to understand how anti-Blackness operated as a phenomenon in decisions about geography and institutions where Russian was to be taught, as well as in the design, organization, and instruction of area studies programs and centers.

Harmful ideologies about teaching Russian continue to be observable in the field's practices and most popular textbooks. A 2020 Carnegie study on the field's Master's programs cites deficit and meritocratic thinking from faculty describing a "lack of qualified undergraduates for advanced MA studies" claiming "the level of regional expertise and language skills developed at the undergraduate level has decreased in recent years."<sup>94</sup> It is worth mentioning to these program directors that the language requirements for the programs as reported in the survey are unlikely to yield applicants with more advanced proficiency, given that only two or three years of language study are required.<sup>95</sup> The implicit nature of the hidden expectation of exceeding the requirement is a feature of white supremacy, coloniality, and dominant culture in educational settings that reflects deficit and meritocratic thinking.

There is still more work to be done toward identifying and locating geneses of harmful ideologies like deficit thinking, orientalism, meritocratic thinking, nativism, and native-speakerism in the field as these phenomena persist in educational settings where Russian is taught today. We must work in community to disrupt inequities that thrive in contexts of Russian language instruction. Likewise, antiracist, antisexist, and critically conscious content and pedagogies should be more widely applied so as to both, enroll and retain culturally-, linguistically-, and socioeconomically-diverse learners, and to more accurately represent the multiculturalism and multilingualism of the Russian-speaking world today. It is fitting to end with the words of Averell Harriman, millionaire benefactor of Columbia's Harriman Institute, who said in 1954, "Some of the

<sup>92</sup> Twarog, "A Program of Slavic Studies," 235-236.

<sup>93</sup> Maribel Morey, *White Philanthropy: Carnegie Corporation's AN AMERICAN DILEMMA and the Making of a White World Order* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 136.

<sup>94</sup> Andrew Kuchins and Jesse Mitchell, "The State of M.A. Russia/Eurasia Programs in the United States," accessed January 30, 2025, <https://ceres.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/02/CarnegieReport.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Kuchins and Mitchell, "The State of M.A. Russia/Eurasia Programs," 6.

greatest mistakes of judgment have been made by experts in a single field who do not see or know the wider problems.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Catherine Nepomnyashchy, “After the Fall,” *Sixty Years of The Harriman Institute at Columbia University*, accessed January 30, 2025, <https://harriman.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/60-Anniversary-Harriman-pdf.pdf>.

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