American Philanthropy and Russian, Slavic, and Eurasian Studies in the United States, 1920–1940s

by Pavel Tribunskii

House of Russian Diaspora Abroad named after A. Solzhenitsyn/
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The unprecedented growth of Russian/Slavic/Eurasian area studies programs in North America during the Cold War was a direct consequence of massive government support, including from military and intelligence agencies, which turned these programs into some of the most influential and sustained areas of research activity in the English-speaking world. The boom in Russian/Eurasian area studies underscored the paucity and inadequacy of the previous scholarship, which was primarily represented by a small number of individual researchers, driven by their own idiosyncratic interests and agendas.\textsuperscript{1} If prior to the Second World War, the more systematic studies of the Eurasian space, produced in Germany, Austria-Hungary and France, enjoyed steady government support, the production of knowledge about Eurasia in the United States had to rely on funding from selected universities and private benefactors who came predominantly from the world of industry, finance, and commerce.\textsuperscript{2}

Shortly before and during the First World War, the acquisition of knowledge about Russia in the United States was inspired exclusively by the need to defeat Germany, as well as to ensure access to the lucrative Russian market. Relations with the Allies contributed to the “Russian boom” in the United States. However, when the Bolsheviks came to power and drove their opponents into exile, the American public and university communities’ interest in Russia plummeted. Russia was no longer a “glorious ally,” and its markets were off limits to American business. Yet, where politicians saw problems, philanthropic organizations saw opportunities to influence the development of higher education in America, as well as to cultivate a network of scholars with expertise in what came to be called “area studies.” Thus, the emergence of area studies cannot be properly understood without taking into account the activity of American philanthropic organizations.

Since the 1920s, a constellation of large grant-making institutions – including the Carnegie Corporation, the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the Friendship Fund, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Ford Foundation – intended to serve universities and research centers which began to support the very programs that later evolved
into Russian/Slavic/Eurasian studies, and more broadly, area studies in the United States.

The first fruits of involvement of philanthropic organizations in area studies in the 1920s were modest. They responded to requests from universities by granting (or not granting) assistance under certain conditions. This kind of passive participation in the development of higher education and regional expertise was characteristic for all philanthropic organizations in the 1920s and 1930s. Universities were happy to receive money for pension funds for professors, to finance the establishment of endowed chairs, or to purchase books, but they did not go beyond these purposes. Such were the limits of involvement of philanthropic organizations in funding the establishment of these research entities: the American-Russian Institute for the Study of the Russian Revolution at Stanford University, the Project for Scholarly Research of the Soviet Economy and Political Experiment at the University of Chicago, and the Page School Project for the Finding of Essential Facts as to the Russian Situation at Johns Hopkins University. The establishment of the American Institute in Prague, whose work was to be supported with funds from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial and was to serve as a training center for Department of State employees specializing in the study of the USSR and Slavic countries, never materialized.

As with many other initiatives, World War II changed the role of philanthropic organizations in higher education and science. These organizations began to shape the agenda more actively and to study critical areas of the American humanities to mold the educational and scientific space. The relationships between the wartime allies with the USSR and the war in Asia made Russian and Eurasian studies, which until then were on the margins, extremely important for American academia and the government.

University courses in the relevant languages offered during the academic year as well as summer sessions (in places like Cornell, Harvard, Columbia, UCLA, UC-Berkeley) flourished, thanks to financial support from philanthropic organizations. Some of these academic institutions developed courses on
Russian civilization, which included the study of the Russian language, history, geography, literature, economics, and political structures (for example, the Institute of Pacific Relations, Cornell University).

When World War II ended and the Cold War began, the need for scholarly and policy expertise in international affairs in the USA rose dramatically. The urgency to come up with the new expertise was understood by philanthropic organizations, which became active in launching foreign area studies programs in colleges and universities, as well as in distinguished research centers (the Russian Institute at Columbia University and the Russian Research Center at Harvard University). Moreover, philanthropic organizations managed to greatly bolster the sometimes-timid university initiatives focused on traditional academic tasks. These included expanding the courses on history, economics, and literature of Russia and the USSR, searching for funds to replenish the library, or more ambitious ones such as implementing a large-scale project to create expert centers on the problems of the USSR, its satellites in Eastern Europe and Asia, and the world communist movements.  

Employees of research centers were engaged not only in scholarly activities; they actively participated in the Cold War – they were involved to one degree or another in fulfilling the requests of government agencies in cooperation with the military, intelligence, and other organizations far from academia.  

As for philanthropic organizations, they were ready to help the government to fill expertise gaps in Russian/Slavic/Eurasian studies, but at the same time, these organizations tried to distance themselves from any intelligence or subversive activities. A story of the Eurasian Institute is a vivid example of such an approach. The only reference to this project is to be found in David Engerman’s book.  

I would like to dwell on the history of the failed Eurasian Institute in my report as a little known and undervalued example of the limits of involvement by philanthropic organizations in the development of Russia area studies in the United States.  

The idea of creating the Eurasian Institute originated with George F. Kennan, who at the time was the head of the policy planning staff in the State
Department.\(^8\) His efforts to establish the institute should be considered in the context of the expansion of American covert operations and Kennan’s attempts to oversee them.\(^9\)

In 1947–1948, Kennan played an instrumental role in the creation of the policy of “containment.” According to Kennan, for a clear understanding of the structure of Soviet society and its weaknesses, the American authorities needed to acquire knowledge about them. In light of the closed nature of Soviet society, the rudimentary state of Russian/Slavic/Eurasian studies in the United States could be replenished by using the renowned former residents of the USSR and neighboring countries. The starting points for Kennan’s plan were to invite to the planned institute a number of outstanding refugee scholars from the Soviet Union, as well as those from the border regions and states, primarily in Asia.

Kennan instructed his assistants, J.P. Davis and E. Kirkpatrick, to formulate the main objectives of the new organization and seek funding for it from philanthropic organizations. They were quick to make contact with CIA officials, one of whom, Captain Samuel Frankel, initiated a meeting with J. Gardner, a staff member of the Carnegie Corporation (on November 21, 1947), whom he knew from his service in the Office of Strategic Services during the war years. Frankel bluntly stated that the institute was needed for intelligence operations.\(^10\) J. Gardner did not reject the idea from the start, especially since C. Kluckhohn, the future head of the Russian Research Center at Harvard University, found a rational grain in it.\(^11\) In the end, the creation of the Russian Research Center was funded by the Carnegie Corporation, and Gardner personally managed the direction of its activities.

On January 7, 1948, Carnegie Corporation President C. Dollard, J. Gardner, and J. Davies met in New York to discuss the proposal. Davies spoke about the creation of an ambitious Russian research center, which would draw heavily upon the services of exiled Russian scholars from Europe. According to Davies, Harvard scholars changed their mind, and suggested that the program should be set up in Washington, DC, under joint sponsorship of the Social Science Research Council and American Council of Learned Societies. Carnegie
Corporation officials decided to resume discussions with Davies shortly thereafter.\(^{12}\)

During his visit to New York, J. Davies looked for support from other granting agencies and foundations. On January 6, 1948, he had met with the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, Raymond B. Fosdick. During their conversation, Davies described a picture in which the government found itself cut off from increasingly larger sections of the world, while pointing out that there was a large number of scholars in Germany, who were intimately acquainted with the conditions in Russia and in surrounding countries. The State Department was interested in the possibility of bringing to the US a carefully selected group of such scholars and establishing a research institute. Davies proposed to select ten scholars for the first year, and gradually to increase their number to fifty. The idea to attach the institute to existing universities failed, for it was thought that the institute should be located near the best Slavic library in the United States, the Library of Congress. Davies did not have a clear estimate of expenses, but he was certain that part of the funding should come from philanthropic organizations.\(^{13}\)

Philip E. Mosely, who was among the founders and one of the senior fellows at the Russian Institute at Columbia University, acted as an expert for the two philanthropic organizations. He served as an adviser to the Rockefeller Foundation for the humanities and social sciences, and he was also connected to Carnegie Corporation through a grant application to fund projects at the Russian Institute. In general, Mosely saw a number of positive aspects in the creation of the proposed institution, but he was very skeptical about the kind of persons who would be recruited to work in it. Mosely felt that “it is completely a part of the armament of attack against Russia and that we, as objective students, can have nothing to do with it.”\(^{14}\)

Both philanthropic organizations welcomed the proposed institution, but wanted to make clear several points of concern. While employees of philanthropic organizations and learned societies were discussing the details of the future institute, the principles of its functioning, the composition of the
administrative board, the level of salaries, and other pertinent matters, intelligence officers and the State Department staff began to act. During May-June 1948, one well-known émigré historian and active anti-Bolshevik figure from Russia, Sergei Melgunov, prepared a list of potential employees for the proposed institute. Melgunov was supposed to be transported to the American Zone of Occupation in order to participate in interviews with the prospective candidates.15

In Iran and Turkey, American diplomats began searching for future employees for the institute.16 Not relying on philanthropic organizations, Major General W. Donovan, the former head of the OSS, who remained out of work, took up the search for funds to support this potentially useful institute for intelligence activities. It was claimed that by the end of May 1948, he was able to find funds for the institute.17 However, it later turned out that he had failed. In the beginning of October 1948, the State Department offered to provide Donovan with the names of West Coast philanthropists willing to fund the creation of the Eurasian Institute,18 but the general was unable to find the necessary support.

During the summer and autumn of 1948, the staff of philanthropic organizations developed several memoranda regarding the organization of the Eurasian Institute, accompanying them with arguments for and against the participation of their foundations in financing it. However, the philanthropic organizations’ officers learned about the involvement of W. Donovan in the creation of the institute only in early October, during a conversation between Davies and the new president of the Rockefeller Foundation, C.I. Barnard. Answering a surprise question of Barnard about the reasons of involving Donovan in the creation of the institute, Davies responded by saying that “his interest was only partly an outgrowth of his intelligence activities.”19

The president’s message about the conversation with Davies on October 7, 1948 was sent to all officers at the Rockefeller Foundation. During the ensuing discussion, the concern was raised for the first time that if the institute would engage in intelligence activities, the foundation would not find it possible to support it.20
To clarify the goals of the Eurasian Institute, Mosely held meetings with Davies and Donovan. He prepared an extended memorandum with arguments for and against the foundation's participation in establishing the institute. Mosely concluded that the nature of the work and the size of funds needed were beyond the Rockefeller Foundation's ability to provide significant support. Mosely's opinion was shared by the foundation officers.²¹

On December 28, 1948, Rockefeller Foundation President Barnard sent to W. Donovan a letter in which he made clear that the foundation could support some projects, but not the establishment of the Eurasian Institute.²² On December 12, 1948, C.I. Barnard informed the president of the Carnegie Corporation of turning down the proposal for the creation of the Eurasian Institute.²³ At that point, Carnegie Corporation officers stopped all discussions about the institute without, however, generating a written refusal. In January 1950, G. Kennan, who had retired from the State Department, proposed to the president of the Carnegie Corporation to discuss a plan of establishing an Institute of Slavic Studies. C. Dollard told him directly that he would not discuss the plan proposed by Davies and Kirkpatrick. When Kennan conceded, Dollard expressed his readiness to discuss a new proposal that would have nothing to do with the previous one.²⁴ It is hardly surprising that Kennan ended up not applying to the Carnegie Corporation with a plan to create an Institute of Slavic Studies.

However, the idea of utilizing the knowledge of refugee scholars from Russia, the Soviet Union and the satellite countries did not die. In the early 1950s, American organizations set up two similar research centers. Using CIA funds, the American Committee for Freedom for the Peoples of the USSR created the Munich Institute for the Study of the USSR, which functioned until 1972.²⁵ The second undertaking was organized by the East European Fund in 1951 – the Research Program on the USSR, under P.E. Mosely’s leadership, was attached to Columbia University. It functioned until 1955.²⁶

It can be argued that the aspiration of philanthropic organizations to protect the national interest and meet the need for the training of experts and the
development of critical branches of knowledge in the 1940s had its limits. Subversive activities and intelligence were unacceptable to charitable organizations and the story of the failed attempt to create the Eurasian Institute offers a telling example.

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7 D.C. Engerman, Know Your Enemy, p. 40.
8 J.H. Willits, March 2, 1948, Inter-Office Correspondence, Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Foundation records, General Correspondence, RG 2 (FA759), United States, Series 1948/200, Box 407, folder 2744: Eurasia Research Institute (proposed) (hereafter – RAC, RFR, Box 407, folder 2744).
12 JG, CD, and John Davies, Policy and Planning Committee, State Department, January 7, 1948, Ibid.
13 R.B. Fosdick, January 6, 1948, Inter-Office Correspondence, RAC, RFR, Box 407, folder 2744.
15 J.T. Caffery – Secretary of State, June 14, June 23, 1948, National Archives and Records Administration. RG 59. General Records of the Department of State. Decimal File, 1945–49. Box 4135, folder “800.43 Eurasian Institute/7-2748“ (hereafter – NARA, RG 59, Box 4135, folder “800.43 Eurasian Institute/7-2748”).
16 J.C. Wiley – Secretary of State, July 27, 1948; Department of State – J.C. Wiley, August 5, August 9, 1948, Ibid.
17 JG and Evron Kirkpatrick, Office of Intelligence Research, May 24, 25, 1948, RBML, CCNY, Box III.A 140, folder “Eurasian Institute, 1947–1948.”
18 A.R. Lovett – American Embassy, Athens, October 12, 1948, NARA, RG 59, Box 4135, folder “800.43 Eurasian Institute/7-2748”.
19 C.I. Barnard, October 8, 1948, Inter-Office Correspondence, RAC, RFR, Box 407, folder 2744.
20 Ibid.
21 P.E. Mosely, Establishment of Eurasian Research Institute, November 24, 1948; J.H. Willits, November 26, 1948, Inter-Office Correspondence, RAC, RFR, Box 407, folder 2744.
23 Blue Sheet – CD an Chester Barnard, December 12, 1948, RBML, CCNY, Box III.A 140, folder “Eurasian Institute, 1947–1948”.
24 Blue Sheet – CD and George Kennan, January 10, 1950, Ibid.