

A Future for Russian and East European Area Studies?

by Julian Cooper, Birmingham

More than ten years since the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe some of the countries of the region are members of NATO and the OECD; accession to the European Union is in prospect. In the former USSR, the successor nations, with the possible exception of Belarus, are consolidating their new identities and it is becoming increasingly difficult to consider them as constituting a distinct “area” for purposes of research or policy. As is increasingly acknowledged, this new reality poses serious questions for those engaged in teaching and research in the academic discipline formerly known as Soviet and East European studies (or Slavic studies). Indeed, there is now no agreement on what the discipline, if it still exists, should be called: the terms Russian and East European, Central and East European, Slavic and East European, post-Soviet, post-communist, and East European and Eurasian studies are all used. Symptomatic of this “fuzziness” of the discipline is the name the field’s principal worldwide body, changed from International Council for Soviet and East European Studies to International Council for Central and East European Studies, although under its umbrella are found specialists on Central Asia and other non-European regions.

This fuzziness arises from the fact that the “area” studied by the old Soviet and East European studies had boundaries defined not in terms of geography, a shared history, language or culture, but in terms of the dominance of a specific political system which no longer exists. As the communist system fades into the past, it becomes less and less tenable to treat the countries formerly under communist rule as a single “area” for purposes of research and teaching. Leaving to one side for the moment the question of the continuing validity and relevance of “area studies”, we are faced on the one hand with fragmentation, the consolidation of single country studies, e.g. Russian, Polish or Hungarian studies, or regional studies such as Baltic, Central Asian and Caucasian. On the other hand, as the new European institutional order consolidates, the study of many of the countries of the region is likely to be pursued within the now enlarged field of European Studies. This is the solution that has been adopted by my own institution: next year the Centre for Russian and East European Studies of Birmingham (which will retain its separate identity) will form part of a new European Research Institute, together with the Institute for German Studies and other units engaged in European-related social science research. Thus the “area” is changing, but what of “area studies” as such?

The continuing viability of area studies has been called into question by a number of developments, in particular the collapse of communism and globalisation. It is sometimes argued that the processes of post-communist

transformation, the “normalisation” of societies which previously were difficult to analyse using the standard theories and concepts of the social sciences, make traditional area studies, rooted in an understanding of history, culture and language, redundant. Now, it is sometimes maintained, area studies can be replaced by comparative studies or simply the basic disciplines of the social sciences, without the necessity of taking account of the specific cultural and historical features of each country or area. Language skills may still be relevant, but for some types of research, notably in economics, it is now often claimed that the data available in easily accessible languages are such that there is no need to learn the “difficult” languages of most of the former communist countries.

At first sight these arguments may appear to have some validity, but I would maintain that they are inadequately grounded. It is not helpful, in my view, to pose the issue in terms of a simple either/or, area studies or comparative studies. The relationship between these two disciplinary approaches is more complex and is preferably seen in terms of a dynamic inter-relationship. In my opinion the best area studies is that which is based firmly in the social sciences, informed by a keen appreciation of the comparative dimension. Such a comparative understanding is essential if we are to avoid what is perhaps the greatest danger of the traditional approach to area studies, a tendency to overstate the exceptional nature of the culture of the country or area being studied, and to invoke this too readily as an explanation for phenomena apparently specific to one or more of the formerly communist countries. For example, it is sometimes claimed that Russia’s hesitant steps towards a market economy can be explained by the fact that Russian culture is not conducive to such an economic order. A policy conclusion is sometimes drawn: standard Western policies should have been modified, or even not applied at all, if more account had been taken of Russian culture. In my view an approach informed more deeply by comparative experience, not only of other transforming economies, but of other regions, e.g. Latin America, or Africa, could point to other explanations of an institutional rather than a cultural character. (The new book by the Peruvian economist, Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital*, is highly instructive on this issue). On the other hand, the best work in comparative studies often draws on the achievements of area studies, which provide data, concepts and understanding essential for comparative analysis. For example, one of the most influential studies of recent years in political science, stimulating fruitful comparative analysis in terms of “social capital”, has been Robert Putnam’s, *Making Democracy Work*. But this seminal work arose from area studies of the highest quality, probing deeply into the history and culture of Italy.

Similarly, comparative “transitology”, as developed by such researcher as Schmitter and Karl, draws on a very firm foundation in area studies. So, area studies are enriched by developments in the social sciences (and humanities); in turn the latter are enriched by the findings of area studies.

There is some irony in the fact that globalisation is at times invoked as a challenge to area studies. If it were really the case that globalisation is leading to a homogenisation of nations and regions of the world in terms of a single dominant economic, political and cultural order, with an inexorable erosion of the powers of nation states, then the argument that the need for area studies is declining would indeed have some weight. But the reality of globalisation is surely more complex and contradictory: yes, there are international processes at work of increasingly “global” scope, but these very processes are promoting local, “area”, responses, at times running counter to them, or modifying them in significant respects. In short, homogenising global forces may foster local heterogeneity. This phenomenon is likely to remain a significant factor providing substantial opportunities for area studies, especially area studies of a methodologically informed character, drawing on the latest developments in the social sciences and humanities, including comparative and interdisciplinary approaches. Some of the research now underway at Birmingham is concerned precisely with these issues, e.g. a study being undertaken jointly with Russian sociologists of the changing perceptions of the West among Russian youth, research which indicates that while the “global” is consumed it does not displace the “Russian”; if anything, the later is reinforced, perceived widely as being superior. This type of qualitative social research requires linguistic skills of the highest level and also a cultural self-awareness borne of long-term and committed collaborative cross-cultural research.

On linguistic skills, to return to an earlier point, the interpretation of data, including statistics, in translation can present major problems in the absence of a sound knowledge of a country, its traditions and culture.

But in considering the relationship between area studies and the social sciences, including comparative research, account should also be taken of developments within the social sciences themselves. In some disciplines there has been a growing awareness of the importance of institutional, historical and cultural factors. The rise of the neo-institutional school in economics provides a striking example, exemplified by the challenge to the “Washington consensus” on economic transformation which arose during the 1990s, even from within international agencies themselves, e.g. in the writings of Joseph Stiglitz, the former chief economist of the World Bank. The debate on the reasons for the differential performance in post-communist transition between the Central-East European economies and the non-Baltic former USSR economies is instructive in this respect. It is now generally acknowledged that part of the explanation lies in “area” specific features,

some of which are still imperfectly understood and provide a challenge for specialists in area studies.

For area studies, especially studies concerned with Russia and the other countries of the new Europe and Asia, there is another powerful argument in favour of their continuing relevance – the needs of policy makers and other practitioners. Those concerned with policy in relation to the former communist nations require highly informed expertise of a kind that can generally be found only within the area studies community, in which should be counted both academic specialists and analysts working within national governments and international organisations. In this respect, a welcome feature of the British scene in recent years has been the increasingly close contact and dialogue between University-based specialists on Russia and Eastern Europe and their counterparts in Whitehall. But the requirements of the policy community change with time, challenging area studies specialists to keep at the forefront of their discipline, constantly updating the research agenda and improving training, especially at the postgraduate level.

In conclusion, I am convinced that an area studies that is open to change, aware of, and informed by, the latest developments in the social sciences and humanities (and studies of other areas), working whenever possible in close association with colleagues native to the area under investigation, has an extremely promising future. But an area studies nostalgic for the certainties of the past and suspicious of new developments in closely related disciplines does not deserve to survive.

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Korrektur

In der letzten Ausgabe des Berliner Osteuropa Infos (BOI 14) wurde der Titel eines Beitrags von Herrn Roman Kryvonos fälschlicherweise mit „Deutsch-ukrainische Beziehungen vor dem Machtwechsel in Deutschland 1989“ wiedergegeben.

Der richtige Titel des Beitrags muss jedoch lauten:
**„Deutsch-ukrainische Beziehungen vor dem
 Machtwechsel in Deutschland 1998“.**

Für diesen Fehler bitten wir um Entschuldigung.

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