

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## The Director's Forum

The Director's Forum, a vehicle designed to foster dialogue on practical and substantive matters within the Harriman community, was inaugurated on March 15, 1992, by Robert Legvold, Director of The Harriman Institute. In convening the meeting, Professor Legvold remarked that it was time to talk about what the developments of the past six months meant for the field formerly known as Soviet studies. "As an organization we were running very hard to stay half a step behind events..., and then, like Gorbachev, in August we were all swept out to sea."

The Harriman Institute, like every other major center of Soviet studies in the U.S., is undergoing a process of redefining its focus and objectives. The deliberations to assess the changes in the field began last fall. This first Director's Forum addressed the fundamental issues involved in defining the Institute's "choice of vocation."

### Crisis—Choice—Change

Drawing on the crisis-choice-change model from political science, Professor Legvold stated that the crisis in the field was known and that he would direct his remarks to the categories of choice and change. The Harriman Institute was faced with the choice: (1) to study comprehensively the region of the former Soviet Union, now in many pieces, or (2) "to shrink with the subject and become once again The Russian Institute."

The Harriman Institute has chosen the first course, and will continue to study the entire region, from Central Asia to the Baltics, including Russia and Ukraine, and to do so in a balanced and comprehensive way. In Legvold's words: "Russia will remain the centerpiece, because it should and also for the practical reason that that is where our strengths are. But we mean to be a center that studies and trains people to understand what is happening in most of the other critical parts of the former Soviet Union." There is no plan to merge with other centers, although The Harriman Institute does intend to seek "far

more elaborate and explicit forms of cooperation with other centers" at Columbia and elsewhere.

### The Imperial and Soviet Legacies

As Legvold pointed out, we cannot view August 21, 1991 as the point to begin the study of post-Soviet societies. The decision to cover the region comprehensively entails study of the legacy and heritage of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, which has profound intellectual, organizational, and material implications for the Institute.

In Legvold's opinion, the field is faced with "the single most interesting social science problem" in the world and one that will continue to be of prime importance. The intellectual challenges that face scholars of the former Soviet Union are enormously invigorating and exciting. Due to the *sui generis* character of the field, Soviet studies has been "the only area study in the world that has had the arrogance to study a single country." The changes wrought by the collapse of the Soviet Union will inevitably foster comparativism in the field and promote cooperation across disciplines.

The situation in the former Soviet Union, in Legvold's view, allows scholars the opportunity to collect empirical data not previously available, for example, on the origins of the market or of democratic institutions. Consequently, the field will now attract more non-Soviet experts from outside. This, too, will promote a comparative approach and inhibit parochialism.

Although The Harriman Institute has chosen to pursue comprehensive coverage of all parts of the former Soviet Union, it does not have the resources to do this in an evenhanded fashion. The shorthand formula of a "Soviet" system, often resorted to in the past, is no longer operable. In addition, the events of recent years revealed major weaknesses in our training, one of which was that "we didn't know Russia. We knew the Soviet Union, but not enough about Russia." The present marks a watershed in the Institute's intellectual objectives and the



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vocation of the Institute. The Institute, therefore, is now faced with the task of developing curriculum and training opportunities to prepare its students in an ever more complex situation.

The collapse of the Soviet Union as a potential security threat and superpower is reflected in the waning interest on the part of the media and government. This, of course, will affect both opportunities and financing. Given the perennial cycle of boom and bust in terms of foundation and other financial support, The Harriman Institute would probably be facing a narrowing financial base even without the changes in the field and the general crisis experienced by universities throughout the country.

Legvold proposed two avenues to broaden the curriculum base at the Institute. The first is to seek consortia and cooperative arrangements with other institutions. Second, Legvold believes that the Institute should increase cooperative training and research opportunities in the former republics of the Soviet Union. In the past, on-site study and training has largely been limited to language instruction and dissertation field research. Mobilizing the scholarly and intellectual potential in the new states will mutually benefit the Institute's students and faculty and the cooperating institutions and scholars in the former Soviet Union.

## **An Airport under Reconstruction**

Legvold chose to describe metaphorically the current state of The Harriman Institute by comparing it to an

airport under reconstruction—"it functions, but not quite the way you want. Things are disrupted in the process." Changes are already underway in the Institute's courses and seminars. Individual faculty members and departments are currently wrestling with incorporating the new order in their respective disciplines. New courses will be introduced and others will be refocused. For example, there will likely be a new course devoted to the Soviet legacy, while the seminar on U.S.-Soviet relations will study problems of nationalism and international relations. Requirements for Harriman students will be reexamined, including primary language fluency.

Finally, Professor Legvold announced that the Institute's Steering Committee intends to initiate a broad research program that will coordinate scholarship and projects. Traditionally, little effort was made to define research objectives and opportunities. This new program, the details of which will be forthcoming by semester's end, will utilize the resources of Columbia faculty and students, as well as colleagues at other institutions in the former Soviet Union and the West.

The demise of the Soviet Union rendered The Harriman an institute without a country. Speculation and discussion regarding the name change has been ongoing since December. Professor Legvold announced that the Institute would now officially be known as The Harriman Institute, that is, by its popular appellation.

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