

# **The Current Situation in Slavic Studies in the UK**

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The national association for Slavic Studies in the UK is BASEES – the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies. It is an interdisciplinary association with some 600 members, who between them cover languages, literatures, history, sociology, economics, politics, geography and other disciplines as they relate to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. BASEES was created by the amalgamation of two former associations: NASEES (National Association for Soviet and East European Studies) and BUAS (British Universities' Association of Slavists). NASEES was an organization devoted to the social sciences, while BUAS was concerned with language, literature and the humanities. This amalgamation took place in 1988, so that the establishment of BASEES very nearly coincided with the collapse of the Communist system. Both NASEES and BUAS always regarded themselves as area studies associations – that is to say, associations concerned with the interdisciplinary study of an area of the globe which is defined not only geographically, but culturally, economically and politically. If for NASEES the principal defining characteristic of the area in question was political – the Communist system – then for BUAS it was largely linguistic and cultural – the world of the Slavonic languages. Both these aspects inform the activities of BASEES.

In the post-communist world that has appeared so quickly since BASEES was formed the definition of area studies has come into question. It was argued that once the Soviet control system collapsed there was no longer any need for the economics or politics of the former Soviet bloc to be studied in any different way from the economics or politics of Norway or Brazil: any competent specialist could make the appropriate judgements, without having to be familiar with the pre-existing system which had defined the area. In politics the developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe could more fruitfully be compared, it was thought, with developments in other parts of the world where similar large-scale change had taken place. There was a period when it seemed there was no longer any need for a specific area studies approach to issues in the social sciences. However, experience has shown that area studies does remain a valid and productive approach, as the continued health of BASEES bears witness.

One particular challenge to previous conceptions is, clearly, the expansion of the European Union and the entry of several former Soviet-bloc states into NATO. Yet the very fact that these countries were so recently part of the Soviet system is itself the principal source of tension, and such political developments cannot be studied without an awareness of the history of the region. In the annual conference of BASEES, which was held in Cambridge in April 2004, the words 'Expansion' and 'Transition' occurred in the titles of

several panels. Others were concerned with the recent Russian elections, both from the point of view of their likely impact on future policy, and on the vexed question of their international monitoring. Out of a total of some 60 panels, perhaps a fifth concentrated on one or another aspect of this process.

Increasingly, the BASEES annual conference is becoming an international event, attracting participants from many countries of Europe, North America and Australasia, although we have so far had little opportunity to welcome visitors from Japan. A glance at the conference programme of BASEES gives a useful overview of the topics in all disciplines that currently preoccupy researchers in the UK and further afield. Besides current social and political issues, several panels were devoted to historical questions, though it is noticeable that this year there was little on history prior to the twentieth century. Linguistics is consistently, if modestly, represented at the conference, and each of the eight sessions contained a panel concerned with questions of Slavonic linguistics. A large number of panels were devoted to cultural questions, and here it is particularly noticeable how the focus of research has changed in recent years. The traditional discipline of literary studies (литературоведение) is still extensively practised in Britain, but more and more of the work that is done on literature and other cultural areas is informed by an approach through 'cultural studies'. This can be illustrated by setting side-by-side two panels that took place in the first session. One was entitled 'Marina Tsvetaeva's Poetics', and included presentations on the musical structures in her verse and on her assimilation of various other writers, ancient and modern. The other bore the title 'Soviet Body, Dead or Alive', and consisted of analyses of the representation of the human body in recent film, and in Gulag literature.

Every five years or so, the British university system undergoes a Research Assessment Exercise, in which panels of specialists from all disciplines arrive at quality judgements about the research work produced. For the most part these panels are defined along the lines of the traditional academic disciplines, so that there is no single panel that makes judgements about the whole area of Slavonic and East European Studies. It is not therefore possible to use this process to reach a reliable conclusion about the health of interdisciplinary area studies as a whole. There is, however, a separate panel devoted to Russian and East European Languages, which has an overview of the work conducted in the languages, literatures and cultures of the Slavonic language area and the Finno-Ugrian and Balkan regions. In its report on the 2001 RAE, the panel recorded its concern about certain developments. In the first place, it noted an overall decline in the volume of work submitted, largely as a result of the closure of a number of departments. Secondly it commented on a disparity between the various subject areas. Even in Russian Studies, which is naturally the most extensively researched, it was noted that there was great concentration on twentieth-century topics, and that even the nineteenth century was represented by research on only a small number of particular writers. The panel expressed concern over the fact that earlier Russian culture, especially pre-Petrine culture, hardly figured at all in the research submitted.

When it turned to languages and cultures other than Russian, it was alarmed to see that a noticeable decline had taken place since 1996 (the previous RAE), and that research in the smaller Slavonic cultures and the non-Slavonic cultures of Eastern Europe is dangerously sparse.

Turning to the question of the age-distribution of researchers, the RAE panel noted that a large proportion was made up of people in the later stages of their careers who would be retiring within ten years or so. Comparing these numbers with the current numbers of research students, the panel expressed great concern that the UK universities were not producing a sufficient number of new researchers to fill the places of those who would leave. This is an issue of which the Arts and Humanities Research Board, which distributes research resources in the relevant subject areas, has taken note. A very positive development has occurred in the last few months, as the AHRB has set aside a number of postgraduate scholarships precisely for study of Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. In reaching this decision, it accepted an argument forcefully put forward by BASEES to the effect that even after the collapse of the Soviet Union the countries of the former Soviet bloc remain a coherently defined and distinctive area of study. It explained its purpose in making these scholarships available as, 'To ensure that there is a continued community of active researchers to replace those who are retiring'. Small as the absolute numbers are, this is an encouraging development that should help halt the decline in our area.

I would not do justice to the situation in the UK if I did not mention one final issue, which, although not exclusively relevant to Slavonic and East European Studies, has a great bearing upon the subject's health. This is the question of foreign language study in British schools. For several decades now the study of all foreign languages has been declining and the levels of achievement falling. This can be attributed in part to mistaken teaching methods that took root thirty or forty years ago on the basis of dubious theories of second language acquisition. It is also closely related to the fact that the study of basic grammar, even the grammar of English, has been accorded a lower and lower priority, so that students find the learning of foreign languages excessively difficult. And lastly, it is connected to the status of English (American English at least) as the world's principal lingua franca, which creates the false notion that native speakers of English have no need to learn foreign languages at all. As a consequence, university enrolments on foreign language courses have steadily declined for many years, and inevitably this has a disproportionately damaging effect on those languages that were never widely studied in the first place. The pool of people from whom the next generation of specialists in Slavonic Studies will be drawn is thus seriously depleted.

A swift solution to this problem is unlikely. The government has responded to the acknowledged crisis by creating a new kind of school which will concentrate on foreign language teaching, though other policy decisions to some extent pull in the opposite direction. It appears that the teaching of basic grammar is returning to the school curriculum, so that foreign languages may

no longer appear so inaccessible.

The ship may now be pointing in the right direction, but it will be many years before it builds up the necessary speed.