

# **The State and Future Tasks of Slavic Studies in Australia and Beyond during the Post-Communist Period: One Australian's Perspective**

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## **The Current Situation and Our Tasks (and Problems) in Promoting Further Slavic Studies in Australia**

At first glance, the collapse of communism and the USSR might appear to have been reflected in the collapse of communist and Slavic studies in Australia – a sort of metaphor. After all, the 1990s saw the retirement of many of Australia's leading Russianists and Slavists – including T.H. Rigby, Geoffrey Jukes, and Robert F. Miller – while other, younger scholars (such as Elizabeth Waters and David Christian) left Australia for various reasons. What was even more depressing was that the university that had built up the greatest concentration of Slavic researchers and resources, the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, did not replace these specialists once they retired or left.

But this initial impression is misleading. In September 2002, the Australasian Political Studies Association (APSA) held its annual conference. This was a special one, since it celebrated the 50th anniversary of the founding of the association. As part of this celebration, a number of sessions were dedicated to an assessment of particular streams within political science (broadly understood, to include its relations with history, economics, sociology, etc.) over the past 50 years. One of the five special streams was devoted to an analysis of Russian/Soviet and Communist studies in Australia. I was asked to convene this stream. Thanks to the outstanding generosity of the doyenne of Australian political science, Professor Joan Rydon, we had sufficient funding to fly a non-Australian to Canberra for the conference; my brief was to find someone who could comment from afar on the contribution that Australian scholars of the USSR and Eastern Europe – and the successor states to these communist entities – had made to communist and post-communist studies. I was very fortunate in being able to attract Professor Richard Sakwa, of the University of Kent at Canterbury, to address this difficult and onerous task. He produced a detailed and comprehensive overview that included reference to almost all of the scholars who have worked in the field over the past fifty years. This ranged from the original trailblazers, such as the late Lloyd Churchward and the current doyen of Russian studies in Australia, T.H. Rigby, through the current leaders in the field (e.g. Stephen Fortescue, Graeme Gill, and Stephen Wheatcroft), to the new generation (not all of whom are particularly young age-wise!), such as Emma Gilligan, Zoe Knox, Bobo Lo, David Lockwood, Roger Markwick, and Carol Strong.

While it is neither possible nor appropriate to attempt to summarise Prof. Sakwa's findings here, his paper – which has since been upgraded, and will be published later this year as a refereed Working Paper of the Contemporary Europe Research Centre (CERC, University of Melbourne)<sup>1</sup> – testified to the strong and influential tradition of communist and post-communist studies in Australia. While it was a delight to ruminate on the many achievements of our various world-class scholars, arguably the most satisfying part of the paper was the analysis of the work of so many more junior scholars in our field. Some of these have already made a major impact. For instance, Roger Markwick was awarded the prestigious Alec Nove prize in 2001 for his very well-received book *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia*<sup>2</sup>, while Zoe Knox came second in a recent shortlisting for a post in Russian politics at Cambridge University, and has recently accepted a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Rice University in Texas. Another young Australian scholar, Julie Elkner, was awarded a Bill Gates Scholarship to read for her PhD at Cambridge University (King's College). Many others are sure to make their mark over the next decade.

In short, Prof. Sakwa showed us not only that we had a past of which we could be proud, but also a present and a future.<sup>3</sup> Let me now address this issue less in terms of the achievements of individual scholars, and more by reference to institutional changes and developments since about 1990.

Although a number of Slavists retired in the 1990s, most have continued to conduct research and publish their findings. In the case of the ANU, T.H. Rigby and Robert Miller did so under the auspices of a new project that was established on transition states (the 'Transformation of Communist Systems Project'). The project brought specialists on Asian communist and post-communist states together with specialists on European and so-called Eurasian states. This collaboration between Asianists and Europeanists is one of the distinguishing and salient features of the Australian approach; just as Australian cuisine is now increasingly identified in terms of 'fusion' (a blending of different cuisines), so Australian Slavic studies has much closer intellectual and institutional ties to Asian communist and post-communist studies than is typical in most countries.

At about the same time, a brand new centre was opening up down in Melbourne. This was the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, which began operation in 1989, but was officially opened by the then Soviet Prime Minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov, in 1990. The driving force in the establishment of this centre was Stephen Wheatcroft; if I may be so immodest, I like to believe that I also played a not totally insignificant role in this myself. For various reasons (usually, pressure from the central university authorities), the Centre

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1 R. Sakwa, 'The Australian Contribution to Soviet, East European and Russian Studies', *CERC Working Papers*, No. 1, 2004.

2 R. Markwick, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography, 1956–1974*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

3 In the early-1990s, I myself argued to fellow Australians that our field had a very full agenda for the foreseeable future – see L. Holmes, 'Research on the Post-Communist World: An Overview and an Agenda', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 29/2, 1994, pp. 321–337.

had to change its name, and finished up as the Centre for Russian and Euro-Asian Studies.

This Centre ceased to exist in 1997. But it was immediately replaced by the Research Unit on Russian and Euro-Asian Studies within a new 'Contemporary Europe Research Centre' at the University of Melbourne. In this guise, Russia (as well as CEE and CIS) studies have been assured an institutional base in Australia, despite the overall demise of these subjects in Canberra. It should be noted here that Central Asian states are well cared for by the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (CAIS), which was previously (until January 1999) known as the Centre for Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies (CMECAS), at the ANU.

There are also several individual scholars working on various aspects of non-Russian Slavic Studies. They include, among many others, Martin Krygier and Adam Czarnota (Sydney, working on Poland), Jan Pakulski (Tasmania, also Poland), and Sasha Pavkovic (Sydney, working on the former Yugoslav successor states). If one may include non-Slavic but post-communist studies, then mention should be made of scholars working on Hungary (e.g. Robert Horvath, Melbourne) and other countries.

The fate of Russian and Slavic language and literature studies in Australia has been decidedly mixed in recent years. Two of the best known Russian departments or streams have been shut down (ANU and Monash),<sup>4</sup> which is extremely disappointing; this said, it should be noted that Monash continues to offer other Slavic languages, such as Ukrainian (under the enthusiastic and energetic Marko Pavlyshyn) and Polish. On the other hand, the University of Melbourne's department was closed in 1999, but re-opened phoenix-like three years later, with funding from a private bequest. It now looks safe for the foreseeable future. Even more encouraging is the fact that numbers have soared, and are now comparable to those at the height of the Gorbachev era. There is even talk of an additional half-lectureship in Russian at Melbourne in the near future. Other major concentrations include the University of Queensland (where numbers are also increasing), the University of New South Wales, and the University of Sydney.

While we cannot be sure about this, it is assumed by many that the principal reasons for the increased numbers in Russian (where this is happening) are twofold. One is the substantial increase in the number of Russian migrants to Australia in recent years; many of their children are now reaching university age, and are keen to develop their knowledge of their mother tongue and culture. The other factor relates to the relative stabilization of Russia under Putin. This has encouraged businesspeople to reassess Russian investment prospects, which in turn encourages younger people to consider the possibilities of a trade-related career using their knowledge of Russia and Russian.

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<sup>4</sup> Monash does still offer Russian Studies, but using exclusively English-language materials; reference is made below to a recent development at the ANU.

Finally, no overview would be complete without reference to the two Australasian organizations that represent scholars working in the Slavic field – the Australasian Association for Communist and Post-Communist Studies (AACPCS), and the Australian and New Zealand Slavists' Association (ANZSA). The former is the successor to the Australasian Association for the Study of Socialist Countries (AASSC), and continues its predecessor's tradition of organizing a conference approximately every 18 months. The most recent was held at the University of New South Wales (Sydney) in July 2003, and included streams on Post-Soviet Foreign Policy, and Post-Communist Policy and Politics. In line with the point made earlier about a 'fusion' of European and Asian research in Australia, the July 2003 AACPCS conference was linked to the biennial conference of the CSAA (Chinese Studies Association of Australia). Similarly, the next conference – scheduled to take place 4–5 February 2005 – is being hosted jointly by the Transformation of Communist Systems Project, the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, the Contemporary China Centre, and the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the ANU. One stream at that conference is specifically dedicated to a comparison of Asian communism and European post-communism. While ANZSA is not as large or active as it once was, it continues to operate. The two organizations (AACPCS and ANZSA) jointly produce a refereed journal, *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, currently edited by Robert Lagerberg.

As for our future tasks in promoting Slavic studies, Australian universities are becoming increasingly privatized, as governments refuse to fund them adequately. Thus one of our tasks is to seek benefactors. Unfortunately, there is little tradition of this for education in Australia – unlike the situation in the USA, for example – and we are finding it an uphill struggle. One approach being increasingly discussed is to offer intensive, fee-paying courses for people interested in Russian and Slavic Studies, but with limited time and opportunity to study.

Second, we need to engage more in consciousness-raising. In particular, we need to make the Australian government far more aware of Russia's growing significance in the world. The present government has declared a greater interest in Europe and Russia than its predecessor; but this has not translated into enough at a practical level. It is up to us to keep its eye on the Russian ball! One very simple way is to involve more government officials on the boards of our centres, and to put relevant officials on our e-mail circulation lists.

### **The Tasks of Departments or Institutes Specializing in Slavic Affairs – and How to Promote Further Cooperation among Them on an International Level**

In my view, the tasks facing us are fourfold. First, we need to encourage greater interest in Russia, by being more active in raising its profile outside the academy. While not all of us want to be 'public intellectuals', we could certainly help ourselves by being more vocal about Russia in our media. This is a

resource of which we should make greater use. Equally, those of us who regularly network with politicians and state officials should use every possible opportunity to emphasise the importance of Russia.

Second, we should be stricter in requiring our students to make greater use of Russian language sources. Being realistic, this will not apply much at the undergraduate level. But it does apply at the postgraduate level. Requiring use of Russian sources even of students including Russia in a comparative study should help to boost numbers enrolled in Russian language courses, and will enhance the quality of our postgraduates.<sup>5</sup> A recent development at the ANU provides one possible model. While there is no longer a full program in Russian language, there is a new web-based reading course, run by Kevin Windle, designed to cater explicitly for researchers.

Third, we need to raise our awareness of each other and our diverse approaches. I envisage this across two dimensions. First, culturalists (broadly understood) in Russian studies should be encouraged to be more aware of the work of social scientists, and vice versa. I myself have learnt a great deal about Russia in the past couple of years from anthropologists (mainly by agreeing to review their books for journals). Both groups also have much to gain by increasing their familiarity with sophisticated statistical and formal techniques. Australian scholars have not in general been as enthusiastic to embrace such techniques as our peers in other countries; while these methods must never be fetishised, they can add new insights and dimensions to our other methodologies. This has been happening to some extent, again through a form of fusion – here meaning collaboration between specialists in various forms of statistical techniques (e.g. Ian McAllister and John Dryzek, both of the ANU) and Slavic area specialists; but there is unquestionably room for development. Second, we all need to become far more aware of what our peers in other countries are working on; this will help us to reduce duplication of research efforts, and, where appropriate, improve such efforts through greater cooperation.

This leads me to my final, closely related point – the need for greater cooperation. ICCEES certainly can and does play a crucial role in this sphere, albeit primarily at a multilateral level (through its Newsletter, quinquennial conferences, and encouragement of mergers between individual organisations within countries). But more needs to be done in the way of formal bilateral ties between Russia- and Slavic-oriented research centres. Of particular importance, I would argue, is the need to develop and formalize regional ties. For instance, there could be an Asia-Pacific grouping that included centres in Sapporo, Melbourne, Seoul, Beijing, and the Russian Far East. Indeed, we could reach across the Pacific to our North American colleagues – especially those on the West Coast. This could start in a low-key, low-cost way by formalizing exchanges of electronic newsletters and agreeing to act as ‘default’ bases for each other’s visitors.

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<sup>5</sup> To my knowledge, Australian postgraduates researching a thesis *exclusively* on Russia are always required to have a reading knowledge of the language.

Overall, there are at least as many reasons for seeing the Australian Slavic studies glass as half full as there are to see it as half empty. But one thing is clear: we have plenty of work ahead of us! This conference will help to clarify our tasks, and its organizers should be congratulated and thanked for bringing us together to discuss them.