Notes from the Director

We are a historically minded community and many of us routinely look so far back that it strains our sight. A hundred years ago, on August 8, the Allies had just broken through German lines at Amiens and launched offensives from which the German Army would not recover. Russia was in civil war, and the Habsburg lands were approaching open revolt. One of our colleagues, Robert J. Kerner, historian at Cal from 1928 to 1957, was a recent Harvard PhD, hard at work on a fact-finding committee, called the “Inquiry,” which advised President Woodrow Wilson on the postwar order. Kerner wrote dozens of reports because he knew more about East Central Europe than anyone on the 100+ team, and as a Chicago Czech, he had special affection for the oppressed nationalities of the Habsburg Empire.

How well did he serve the US? How well did he serve the Czech cause? How well did he serve peace? These are questions we consider as we at the Institute launch into fall events looking back to the creation of a new Europe a century ago: Poland, greater Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. Given all that has transpired since then, historians tend to ask whether the old Empire was really all that oppressive.

We began our consideration of centenary events last fall with a conference on the Russian Revolution organized by our graduate student affiliate Yana Skorobogatov (now Assistant Professor of History at Williams College), and in April we held our biennial outreach conference for local educators on Bourgeois, Democratic, Nationalist, Communist: Post-World War I Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe; with guest speakers from Rutgers University, University College Dublin, and West Virginia University.

Our regular talks from this past spring treated more recent events, which from a long-view perspective seem an illiberal counterrevolution. Grzegorz Ekiert of Harvard University’s Government department spoke on the “Puzzle of Political Transformations in East Central Europe,” and Paul Lendvai, journalist and former correspondent for the Financial Times explored Hungary’s Orbán Regime, asking how it challenges European unity. George Breslauer, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Cal, addressed the deterioration of US-Russian relations and how they might be improved. Political scientists Boris Barkanov (West Virginia University) and Łukasz Fyderek (Jagiellonian University) spoke respectively on Russian and EU foreign policy under the impact of recent shifts in global politics.

Visitors from Cluj, Chicago, and Poitiers gave fascinating presentations on youth culture in ex-Communist countries, nationalism in the modern Balkans, and the revival of Sorbian culture in the age of globalization, and in April we also welcomed Bosnian poet Faruk Šehić and literary translator Mirza Purić to explore questions of cultural production and myth-making in contemporary Bosnian literature.

In early March, our colleagues at Stanford University’s Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies hosted the 42nd annual Berkeley-Stanford Conference on Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, entitled Empires: Past and Present. I was joined in presenting papers by my history colleague Christine Philliou, Edward Tyerman of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, as well as PhD candidate Mark Kettler. Stay tuned for developments as ISEEES prepares to host the 43rd annual conference in spring 2019.

We continued our lively faculty/graduate student lunchtime seminar series with
former Institute-affiliated graduate students discussing their publications. Kathleen “Kelly” Smith (PhD, Political Science) of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown spoke about her book *Moscow 1956: The Silenced Spring* (Harvard University Press), and Conor O’Dwyer (PhD, Political Science) of the University of Florida, discussed his forthcoming *Coming Out of Communism: The Emergence of LGBT Activism in Eastern Europe* (NYU Press).

In the spring ISEEES was also pleased to host four young visiting scholars who represented a variety of fields and added to the academic richness that ISEEES attempts to foster at Berkeley and in the local community. At semester’s end we bade farewell to Lina Tsrimova of the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris, and to three Fulbright fellows: Ionela Ciolan of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, Alexandru Groza of the University of Bucharest, and Jan Szumski of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw.

In addition to our many events, ISEEES was busy this semester preparing its quadrennial application for the US Department of Education Title VI National Resource Center and Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships programs. This is an important source of funding for the Institute, which entails a demanding and time-consuming application process; and results of the competition are expected in late summer or early fall.

Owing, however, to the vicissitudes of federal funding and to yet more impending cuts in state funding for ISEEES operations, ISEEES is forced to rely more and more on our discretionary funds, much of which comes from gifts and endowments made by friends and colleagues such as yourselves. The loyal support of private donors supplements the funding we receive from other sources and enables us to maintain the superior programming and research and academic support you have come to expect. Giving opportunities can be found on page X of this newsletter and on our website at http://iseees.berkeley.edu/give. Although I realize that these are trying times for all of us, even a modest gift could make a difference.

With your sustained support, ISEEES will continue to offer informative and exceptional programming, including our visiting speakers series, the Berkeley-Stanford Conference in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, the Educator Outreach Conference, the Colin Miller Memorial Lecture, the Peter N. Kujachich Lecture in Serbian and Montenegrin Studies, our ISEEES Newsletter, graduate student working groups, and faculty-student seminars. We look forward to seeing you and reconnecting at one or more of these events throughout the course of next academic year.

Finally, we would like to invite you to two special upcoming events. Our annual fall reception will be held Thursday, September 6, from 4 to 6 p.m. at the Alumni House on the UC Berkeley campus; and on Monday, September 10, and Tuesday, September 11, in the Heyns Room of the UC Berkeley Faculty Club, ISEEES will be hosting a joint conference with the Central European University on the topic of “Borders, Borderlands, and Migration.” Speakers from both the CEU and Berkeley will be presenting at this two-day conference, and detailed program information is available on the ISEEES website.

In the meantime, be sure to check our website http://iseees.berkeley.edu/ for additional events and updates to the calendar.

John Connelly
ISEEES Director
Professor of History

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**Campus Visitors**

**Ionela Ciolan** is a Visiting Student Researcher Fulbright Scholar with ISEEES during the 2017-2018 academic year. She is currently a doctoral student in International Relations at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, Romania. While at Berkeley, she will be continuing her studies on European foreign policy in its Eastern vicinity.

**Alexandru Groza** is a Visiting Student Researcher Fulbright Scholar with ISEEES during the 2017-2018 academic year. He is currently a doctoral student in the Doctoral School of the Faculty of History at the University of Bucharest in Romania. While at Berkeley, he will pursue research on the external Romanian propaganda in the US during Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime.

**Jan Szumski** is a Visiting Fulbright Scholar with ISEEES during the 2017-2018 academic year. Dr. Szumski is an assistant professor in the L.& A. Birkemajer Institute for the History of Science at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, Poland. His research project is titled “The Soviet Historical Memory Policy versus History Disciplines in the Slavonic Countries of Eastern Bloc, 1945-1989.”

**Lina Tsrimova** is a Visiting Student Researcher with ISEEES during the Spring 2018 semester. She is a doctoral student in the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris. While at Berkeley, she will start writing her first article on the justification of violence during the first decades of the Caucasian Wars.
Presentism, Populism and the Holocaust Memory

Ula Madej-Krupitski
PhD Candidate, History, UC Berkeley

In today’s Poland the accounts of heroic ethnic Poles who saved Jews during the Holocaust are virtually omnipresent. On March 24, 2018, President Duda officially proclaimed a national holiday called ‘Day of Remembrance for Poles Who Saved Jews.’ In bookstores across the country several publications on the topic are widely available. Musician Darek Malajonek along with a number of renowned female singers, recorded an album entitled Panny Sprawiedliwe Wśród Narodów Świata (Righteous Among the Nations), and performed numerous concerts in support of this work, some of which were broadcast on national television. Twitter was even flooded with #PolishRighteous. Undertaken by institutions and individuals alike, these efforts are claimed to raise awareness. One such person who launched his own campaign in recognition of these Poles was Bartosz Blirişski, a Polish-born New York-based lawyer, who beginning in July 2018 embarked on a lone voyage across the Atlantic on a yacht with the names of a thousand Polish Righteous inscribed on it. Blirişski’s enterprise was publicly endorsed by President Duda, who gifted him a Polish flag, displayed on the yacht, and his journey gained significant media attention. Radio Kielce is releasing a forty-part weekly series featuring the righteous. The Łacńcut branch of national television is shooting a film intended for school use. Passengers on LOT airline flights from Tel Aviv to Rzeszów as of March 2018 are receiving a complimentary publication in English entitled The Risk of Survival, which spotlights the Righteous, in particular the Ulma family. On August 8th, 2018, the cornerstone for a new museum in the heart of Warsaw, on Hoża Street, was set. This institution will bear the name: Museum of the Rescuing of Jewish Children, dedicated to the memory of Catholic nun Matylda Getter and sponsored by the Archdiocese of Warsaw. This is not the only Church-led initiative on the topic. Father Tadeusz Rydzyk recently received 88 million złoty ($24M USD) from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage to build his museum entitled Memory and Identity. It will feature “Baptism of Poland AD 966, The Jagiellonian Dynasty, Polish Righteous, Katyn Massacre, Yalta Agreement and Pope John Paul II,” all intended to be a “lesson for mind and heart.” The preoccupation, or rather, obsession with ‘aiding the Jews’ seems so central to research conducted by historians at Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (The Institute for National Remembrance, IPN), that during a July 2018 conference that initially was organized to commemorate the Kielce pogrom, 13 of 18 presentations explicitly invoked the word ‘Righteous’ in their titles. One of the key talks bore the title, Help Granted to Jews during the Kielce Pogrom on July 4th, 1946.

In an unsuspecting village in Poland, the heart and focus of all these initiatives to propagate knowledge about Polish Righteous can be found. Markowa, located just 14 miles east of Rzeszów, is the site, and The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II, opened in March 2016, are the heroes. The question then becomes, who are the Ulmas and what happened in Markowa? Józef Ulma, a gardener and an amateur photographer, with his wife Wiktoria, were raising six children, and were, in the Spring of 1944, expecting their seventh. Fully aware of the risk—that aiding Jews who attempted to hide outside ghettos was punishable by death—the Ulmas nevertheless at some point prior to March 24, 1944, took in eight Jews under their roof: Saul Goldman and his four sons, as well as Golda Grüinfeld, and Lea Didner, along with her daughter. On March 24, 1944, after information was provided by General Government policeman Włodzimierz Leś from a nearby Łacńcut, a unit of German military police and General Government police arrived at the Ulma home. The house search revealed sheltered Jews. Dragged outside, all were then shot. The same fate was subsequently meted out to those who aided the Jews, including their children. Based on testimony from Yehuda Erlich and others, we know that news of the horrific events at the Ulma home spread across the village instantly. “As a result of that, among the Polish inhabitants who were sheltering Jews great panic arose. The very next day twenty-four Jewish bodies were found. They were murdered by the very same people who were helping them the previous twenty months.” In addition, several historians suggest that a few months earlier Leś had personal interactions with Jews who were hiding at the Ulma’s. Most likely, he had agreed to store some of their possessions. It is possible then, that his decision to notify the German authorities about their being sheltered was driven with financial gain in mind.

How does The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews during the HolocaustMemory and Identity

Granted to Jews during the Kielce Pogrom on July 4th, 1946.

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Jews in World War II present this nuanced and difficult story of simultaneous genuine Polish bravery and wanton cruelty? Upon entering the modern looking building, designed by one of the most famed architecture firms in the country, Nizio Design International, the visitor first gazes upon a New Testament quote. This is from the parable about the good Samaritan and sets the tone of the museum, using this story about helping someone in need, despite pervasive indifference. The exhibit itself is divided into two parts: the historical context of aiding and the reconstruction of the Ulma family house. The former begins with a very brief description of the prewar years. This is followed by the outbreak of WWII and a reprint of Hans Frank’s announcement from October 1941, declaring that all Jews hiding outside ghettos, including those who assist them, are punishable by death. Significant attention is dedicated to a map of the Podkarpacie region, with numerous villages and small towns marked where “Poles Rescued Jews.”13 The impression that the Ulmas were just one example in a mass movement of aiding Jews is further strengthened by grand captions such as this: “Most often it was ordinary people who helped. Representatives of the Polish Underground State and the Catholic Church also helped.”14 Unfortunately, this premise does not have much in common with 1940s reality. Several scholars, especially Yehuda Bauer, Jan Grabowski, Barbara Engelking-Boni, Dariusz Libionka, Piotr Forecki and Jacek Leociak, have spoken out against such misrepresentations, stating that the Ulmas and other Righteous Poles—6,706 to be exact—constitute the exception rather than the rule concerning attitudes and actions toward Jews in occupied Poland. To articulate the point further, consider the previous cases examined so far, which is nine counties (powiat).15

Perhaps the most unsettling aspects of the Markowa Museum are further omissions, which subtly obscure important historical context. A good example involves film excerpts that follow the outbreak of the War. One can see the first museum director’s father and grandmother, who upon a New Testament quote. This is from the parable about the good Samaritan and sets the tone of the museum, using this story about helping someone in need, despite pervasive indifference. The exhibit itself is divided into two parts: the historical context of aiding and the reconstruction of the Ulma family house. The former begins with a very brief description of the prewar years. This is followed by the outbreak of WWII and a reprint of Hans Frank’s announcement from October 1941, declaring that all Jews hiding outside ghettos, including those who assist them, are punishable by death. Significant attention is dedicated to a map of the Podkarpacie region, with numerous villages and small towns marked where “Poles Rescued Jews.”13 The impression that the Ulmas were just one example in a mass movement of aiding Jews is further strengthened by grand captions such as this: “Most often it was ordinary people who helped. Representatives of the Polish Underground State and the Catholic Church also helped.”14 Unfortunately, this premise does not have much in common with 1940s reality. Several scholars, especially Yehuda Bauer, Jan Grabowski, Barbara Engelking-Boni, Dariusz Libionka, Piotr Forecki and Jacek Leociak, have spoken out against such misrepresentations, stating that the Ulmas and other Righteous Poles—6,706 to be exact—constitute the exception rather than the rule concerning attitudes and actions toward Jews in occupied Poland. To articulate the point further, consider the previous cases examined so far, which is nine counties (powiat).15 Is this an adequate number to support the assertion of Church aid? Further, what role did the Markowa priest and parish play in these events of the early 1940s. We can see the first museum director’s father and grandmother, who among others in Polacy i Żydzi w Markowej po wybuchu wojny [Poles and Jews in Markowa after the Outbreak of the War], recall the process of catching Jews who attempted to hide in the village unfolded.16 The interviewees with great detail describe how ‘they’, ‘men’, ‘a few’, ‘people’, came to houses, combed woods and creeks, to finally round Jews up and lock a group of them in a basement overnight. But the museum’s visitor might be confused with exactly who ‘they’ were, as the pronoun is never explicitly identified. Moreover, since the overall exhibit dedicates significant room to German perpetrators, an observer, especially one not well versed in history, can easily, but above all wrongly assume (or is even encouraged to do so by the museum’s guide), that Germans were solely responsible for these acts of cruelty and violence. Concerning the instance described in the aforementioned film, it was the Markovians, that is, ethnic Poles, who voluntarily searched for those Jews attempting to hide, and held them locked overnight until a German unit could be notified the next day.17 The clearly defined lines between perpetrators, victims, and bystanders proposed years ago by historian Raul Hilberg, and exploited here, does not necessarily hold true for Markowa.18 To borrow a term from Omer Bartov, the genocide that befell Jews in Markowa and elsewhere, especially in the countryside, often had an intimate dimension.19 That is, in villages like Markowa, at least some informers, murderers, and thieves frequently knew their Jewish co-residents from before the war. Naturally, this familiarity also played a role in acts of kindness, compassion, and

13 Markowa exhibit.
14 Ibid.
16 Documentary by Rafał Wieczyński. For more about Dr. Szpytma see: Twórca sukcesu muzeum Ulmów odchodzi do IPN (7/29/16 Gazeta Rzeszów) and for his role in the Poland-Israel crisis in February 2018 see: Polska delegacja leci do Izraela (2/28/18 Archiwum Gazety Wyborczej).
17 More on hunting for Jews in Markowa by the local residents can be found at Yad Vashem archive for example in testimony of Moshe Weltz M1E, t. 1369 quoted in Grabowski, Libionka, Bezdroża polityki historycznej; also Israel Gutman, Unequal Victims. Poles and Jews during World War Two (New York: 1986).
18 In fact, as Jan Grabowski, Barbara Engelking-Boni, along with the team of historians in the recent, valuable publication Dalej jest noc (Night without an End, 2018) demonstrated, that this condition of blurred lines, and changing roles was widespread across all locations of the General Government they examined so far, which is nine counties (powiat).
bravery. When Władysław Ulma was asked why his brother Józef decided to give shelter to the Goldmans, Didners, and Grünfeld, he promptly answered, “because they knew each other, prior the war.”

Furthermore, museum visitors will not learn about what happened in Markowa the day following the tragic events of March 24, 1944, at the Ulma house, when twenty-four Jewish bodies were discovered in the fields. The exclusion of this fact seems even more curious if we open one of the publications available for purchase at the museum, entitled Rodzina Ulmów. Przejmująca historia polskiej rodziny, która poświęciła życie, ratując Żydów [The Ulma Family. The Moving Story of a Polish Family, who Sacrificed their Lives while Saving Jews]. It was written by historians Jarosław Szarek and Mateusz Szpytma, the latter being the originator and first museum director and current deputy head at the IPN. In its introduction by Józef Michalik, ex-archbishop of Przemyśl, we read “Today many try to falsify history (…). It is worth mentioning that this murder, of the Ulmas, as well as others, did not shake the bravery and kindness of Markovians—though they had to be paralyzed by fear—they still exposed themselves [to danger] while hiding Jews.”

This factual distortion, as well as other instances of what seems like purposeful reticence, facilitates the radically overly-simplified Holocaust narrative that stems from the exhibit and its brochures in Polish, English and Hebrew, which state: “The murder of the Ulma family—an entire family that was killed together with the Jews they were hiding—has become a symbol of Polish sacrifice and martyrdom during the German occupation.” A strikingly similar view is shared by the current Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, who holds a bachelor’s degree in history. In September 2017, Morawiecki declared that the entire Polish nation should be collectively honored by Yad VaShem with a tree.

The aspiration to popularize this version of the Ulma story reaches far beyond Markowa and the Polish borders. The travelling version of the exhibit entitled Samaritans from Markowa has already been shown in Berlin, Chicago, Paris, Tel Aviv, Moscow, Kolkata, Brussels and Minsk. Moreover, as of June 2018, a replica of the exhibit is currently on display along a fence outside the Polish Consulate in Manhattan. But perhaps this is just the first step to a more decisive goal. Vice-minister of culture Jarosław Sellin, while on Radio Jedynka in February 2018, said: “[i]n New York, the city where the most Jews in the world live - which by the way is not Tel Aviv or Jerusalem - we are planning to build a branch of The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in a worthy place, the heart of Manhattan, so this story will be close to this community.”

This focus on the righteous is far from new. When on June 20, 1967, the daily Trybuna Ludu published Władysław Gomułka’s speech delivered the previous day, the emphasis on those risking their lives to save Jews during the war was substantial. From then on, their memory was frequently invoked in public discourse, and especially around March 1968 “employed in response to accusations of antisemitism coming from abroad.” Perhaps it is no coincidence that the Ulma story has been invoked so repeatedly since January 2018, when the so-called Holocaust Bill turmoil began. As Jacek Leociak eloquently puts it, “Holocaust Research is not just about describing the help, that ethnic Poles extended to Jews. Moreover, the Holocaust did not happen only so Poles could save the Jews (…). However quite a few people think that way. Currently this way of thinking is back in fashion.”

Despite everything, the bravery and courage of the Ulma family should not be diminished. In fact, I argue that Markowa’s Museum does not do them enough justice. Józef, Wiktoria, and

20 Video footage displayed as part of the exhibit.  
21 Jarosław Szarek, Mateusz Szpytma, Rodzina Ulmów. Przejmująca historia polskiej rodziny, która poświęciła życie, ratując Żydów (Rafael) 2014, 5.  

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their children did not only risk their lives while concealing their actions from the Germans, but equally, if not chiefly, from their fellow Markovians, some of whom, as elsewhere within the General Government, actively participated in violence, informing and the murder of Jewish co-residents. Within the context of small village life, noticing that your neighbor buys four times the amount of bread than usual does not take much effort. Yet what one does with that knowledge becomes another question. Sadly though, the blessed memory of the hidden Goldmans, Didners and Grünfeld, as well as the Ulmas, seems to be little more than a convenient political tool. Reconstructing their home, and retaining the perished children’s school notebooks might be a nice gesture, but explaining the Ulma story in its entirety would honor their memory in the way they truly deserve. Ultimately, resorting to the famed words of another righteous individual, Władysław Bartoszewski, “it’s worth being decent.”

Ula Madej-Krupitski is a PhD Candidate in History at UC Berkeley. She is 2018-2019 John L. Simpson Memorial Research Fellow at Institute of International Studies and an ISEEES Dissertation Fellow. The author would like to thank the UC Berkeley Center for Jewish Studies for the 2018 summer funding grant that allowed for this research.

30 Władysław Bartoszewski, Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej (Kraków: 1969).
Make a Gift to ISEEES!

The loyal support of private donors like you supplements the funding we receive from other sources and enables us to meet the standards of excellence required of us by the University of California, Berkeley as an organized research unit and by the U.S. Department of Education as a Title VI National Resource Center. Your support helps to expand and sustain a robust area-specific international education for our students, furthers research opportunities for faculty focusing on our region, and allows us to respond to new programming opportunities and to expand public outreach.

Our Federal and state funding have faced continued reductions, compelling us to draw more and more on our modest endowments to maintain the superior programming and research and academic support our student, faculty, and public constituents have come to expect. As a result, we have expanded opportunities for more targeted giving in order to encompass a variety of ISEEES programs. Contributions of any size are appreciated and contribute directly to ISEEES’s continued accomplishments. We would be very happy to discuss details of these funds or other giving opportunities. Jeff Pennington, executive director of ISEEES, can be reached at jpennington@berkeley.edu or (510) 643-6736.

GIVING OPPORTUNITIES

**ISEEES General Support Fund**
The ISEEES General Support Fund is an unrestricted fund that is used to: provide travel grants to affiliated graduate and undergraduate students for the purpose of presenting papers at academic conferences; provide research assistance to affiliated faculty members; convene conferences, open to the public, that examine current topics in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies; host an annual reception to foster community building among faculty, students, and the public; and augment the state and grant funds that provide minimal support for ISEEES operations.

**ISEEES Graduate Student Support Fund**
The ISEEES Graduate Student Support Fund is a new UCB Foundation endowment that was established by a generous gift from an anonymous donor. When fully funded, the ISEEES Graduate Student Support Fund will be used to support graduate students in the field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. The endowment was launched by the initial gift and matching funds from the Graduate Division. Additional gifts to the Fund are encouraged and gratefully accepted.

**Colin and Elsa Miller Endowment Fund**
The Annual Colin Miller Memorial Lecture honors the memory of a journalist and radio and TV producer who was devoted to the Center for Slavic and East European Studies (as ISEEES was called before the year 2000). The endowment funds an annual lecture given by a respected scholar in the field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

**Hungarian Studies Fund**
This fund promotes the teaching of the Hungarian language at UC Berkeley, provides research assistance to faculty and students studying Hungarian topics, and supports lectures, workshops, and conferences devoted to Hungarian studies.

**Fund for Romanian Studies**
This fund promotes the teaching of the Romanian language at UC Berkeley; supports lectures, workshops, and conferences devoted to Romanian topics; and provides research assistance to faculty and students pursuing Romanian studies.
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**Book Review**


**Edward W. Walker**
Research Fellow, ISEEES, UC Berkeley

Michael McFaul, President Obama’s “Russia hand” on the National Security Council from 2009 through 2011, and US Ambassador to Russia from January 2012 to early 2014, has written a compelling, readable, and self-reflective memoir of his long engagement with Russia. His special focus is the failure of the policy with which he is most closely associated – the so-called “Reset” in US-Russian relations from 2009-2011. As McFaul bluntly admits, that policy led not to engagement, cooperation, and even partnership, as he and his colleagues had hoped, but to today’s “hot peace.” “What went wrong?” he asks, and more particularly, “What had I gotten wrong?” (xi).

As a comparative political scientist at Stanford with an interest in empirics and public policy, a long list of academic and non-academic publications, and years of experience in Russia, McFaul has an excellent command of the facts. His record of making prescriptions with real-world consequences also accounts for his emphasis on contingency and uncertainty; indeed, much of the book is preoccupied with counterfactuals – the “what-might-have-been’s” had different choices been made in Moscow or Washington. And he uses contingent, probabilistic language intended to persuade, not “prove.”

I agree with much of what McFaul writes, but dissent from his explanation for the failure of the Reset, the core argument of the book.

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The post-Cold War relationship between Russia and the United States has had its ups and downs, but the overall trend has been negative since at least the mid-1990s. NATO expansion, Russia’s 1998 economic meltdown, Moscow’s wars in Chechnya, the 1999 US-led NATO military operation against Serbia, the 2003 Iraq War, the US decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty and its ballistic missile defense development and deployments, and the Bush administration’s efforts to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO all turned a cooperative relationship into an adversarial one. Then came Russia’s military intervention in Georgia in August 2008, which McFaul argues “changed everything” (76). As a result: “By the time the Bush administration ended, Americans and Russians were barely talking to each other” (75).

McFaul goes on to describe the origins of the “Reset” during Obama’s presidential campaign, highlighting in particular a “major working paper” that he helped write. (He had been advising Obama’s campaign team since early 2007.) He and his co-authors concluded that US interests would be served by a détente with Russia, but they also worried about the political fallout from appearing weak, especially after Russia’s invasion of Georgia. To square the circle, the Reset would be framed as serving particular American interests, not as an end in itself. As the working paper put it: “Improved relations with Russia should not be the goal of US policy, but a possible strategy for achieving American security and economic objectives in dealing with Russia” (79). The strategy, in short, was to seek cooperation on issues of mutual interest while downplaying areas of disagreement, including deeply rooted ones such as NATO expansion.

McFaul narrates the twists and turns of the Reset after Obama took office, arguing convincingly that it helped achieve many American foreign policy objectives. Payoffs included a new strategic arms control treaty (New START); increased sanctions on Iran; Russian acquiescence to an expanded Northern Distribution Network through Central Asia to support the US war effort in Afghanistan; US support for Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization; more efficient visa processing by both sides; increased trade and investment; cooperation to defuse a political crisis in Kyrgyzstan; and Russia’s abstention on a UN Security Council resolution authorizing a limited use of force by the United States and some of its allies in Libya.

Despite these successes, McFaul makes clear that the Obama White House did not expect the Reset to lead to another US-Russian “honeymoon.” Washington would work with the Russia it had, not the Russia it wanted. The relationship would be transactional – cooperate where cooperation was mutually beneficial. Meanwhile, the United States would continue to strengthen the NATO alliance, support democracy and state sovereignty throughout Europe and Eurasia, reduce Russia’s energy leverage in Europe, promote human rights and liberal democracy, and, tellingly, “reach out to the Russian people to promote our common values” (80).

Over the longer run, McFaul and his colleagues hoped that Russia’s objections to US policies – notably NATO expansion, NATO military activities near its borders, US missile defenses, and Washington’s promotion of liberal democracy, “colored revolutions,” and “regime change” in Eurasia and elsewhere, including Russia itself – would pass into history. Its political elite would realize that participation in a US-led “liberal international order” was a win-win outcome that served Russia’s interests better than confrontation, suspicion, and an imagined security threat from NATO. Meanwhile, points of disagreement were “manageable hiccups, bumps in the road of cooperation” (415).

McFaul placed special hopes on Russia’s “modernization” prospects during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012). Medvedev, he argues convincingly, was committed to the success of the Reset, as well as to measured liberalization and democratization. And he emphasizes the personal rapport between Medvedev and Obama, arguing that Medvedev “wanted Obama’s respect” (420) and “wanted Obama to believe that he too was a progressive – a new, young, post-Cold War leader.” (421)

In McFaul’s telling, the key driver for the failure of the
Reset was Vladimir Putin and his return to the presidency in 2012. Putin’s decision to serve a third term, coupled with the mass demonstrations that broke out after electoral fraud in the December 2011 parliamentary elections, meant that “Putin needed the United States again as an enemy” (416). He explains:

To be elected a third time as president of Russia in 2012, [Putin] needed a new argument. In the face of growing social mobilization and protest, he revived an old Soviet-era argument as his new source of legitimacy – defense of the motherland against the evil West, and especially the imperial, conniving, threatening United States. Putin, his aides, and his media outlets accused the leaders of Russian demonstrations of being American agents, traitors from the so-called fifth column. We were no longer partners, but revolutionary fomenters, usurpers, enemies of the nation. (418)

The implication is that had Putin retired from the scene in 2011, there would have been no mass demonstrations by the opposition at the end of the year, no crackdown at home, no “pivot” away from the West, and no end to the Reset. US and Western policies may have contributed to the pivot, but “only at the margins.”

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I have two main objections. First, I disagree, at least in part, with McFaul’s explanation for why Putin pivoted after 2011, and second, I think he underplays the explanatory weight of US and Western policy in alienating the Russian political elite in general and Putin in particular.

As noted, McFaul’s explanation for Putin’s pivot after 2011 emphasizes perceived self-interest. In the face of the mass demonstrations of late 2011, Putin concluded he had to save his presidency by playing the nationalism card. And that meant playing up fears of an external enemy, the United States, even as he cracked down on dissent at home to prevent a “colored revolution.”

There is, however, a different interpretation of Putin’s actions that I think is rather closer to the truth. I suspect that Putin’s decision to return to the presidency, as well as his 2012 policy pivot, were the product of his understanding of Russia’s – and not simply his own – interests. In my view, Putin, and indeed most of the Russian political elite, genuinely believe that the United States, and the West broadly, pose a threat to Russian political stability and security. They are convinced that Western democracy promotion, and the West’s public embrace of “universal values,” are hypocritical smokescreens masking US ambitions to remain the world’s sole superpower and geopolitical hegemon. They also are convinced that the changes advocated by Western democracy promoters would produce chaos at home and weakness abroad, not prosperity and strength. And they understand the tolerance entailed in liberalism as incompatible with traditional Russian values and Russian “civilization.”

McFaul is aware of this Russian worldview, and indeed one of the many strengths of the book is his fair-minded summarizing of it (as well as the views of his critics of the Reset at home). Nonetheless, his explanation for the failure of the Reset attaches no obvious weight to Russian belief. Instead, the argument is that Putin pivoted toward illiberalism, authoritarianism, and confrontation with the West simply to preserve his own power.

We cannot be certain about what motivates Putin, let alone the Russian political elite, but it would be a mistake for Western policy makers to accept McFaul’s explanation for the 2012 Putin pivot. The core of Putin’s political project is of course regime stability, and after his return to the presidency that meant keeping himself in office. But there is a difference between leaders who believe they are serving the state from those who serve only themselves. One takes personal political risks on behalf of the state; the other does not.

Moreover, explaining the pivot as a product of Putin’s self-interest risks misleading Western policy-makers into assuming that Russia’s challenge to the West comes from Putin and Putin alone, not from Russia’s political elite broadly (and less clearly from the Russian public). Were Putin to pass from the scene, it is very unlikely that we would see a return to the policies of the Medvedev era, let alone rapid liberalization, democratization, and partnership with the West. Russian decision-makers see the world, and Russian interests, very differently, and that they will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

My second objection is that McFaul underweights the role of Western policy in producing the “hot peace.” He argues that “American foreign policy decisions, both real and perceived, cannot be cited as the source of our current conflict with Russia for one major reason – the successful cooperation between Russia and the United States during the Reset, from 2009 to 2011” (414). He goes on to claim that US policies pursued during the Reset to which Moscow objected – the Magnitsky Act, US missile defense deployments in Europe and elsewhere, the “mission creep” of the US-led intervention in Libya, and US criticism of Russia’s “antidemocratic behavior” (415) – were not determinative, and were instead the “bumps in the road of cooperation” noted above.

Again, there is another possibility that is consistent with the facts and probably closer to the truth. This is not the place to rehash debates over NATO expansion and US unilateralism since the end of the Cold War. Suffice it to say that the Russian political elite, including those few who are still relatively well-disposed toward liberal democracy, have cause to believe that while the United States insists that other states comply with the rules of the “liberal international order,” it acts as if it, and it alone, has the right to violate those rules. Most are likewise unconvinced by Western arguments about NATO expansion, US military exercises near Russia’s borders, and US force posture. For them, these are not benign efforts to promote stability and democracy in Central Europe or ensure American security. Rather, they are directed at containing Russia, subverting Russian interests, and projecting American power. And they are a threat to Russian national security.

For these and other reasons, by the time the Obama White House launched the Reset, not just Putin but most of the Russian political elite were deeply suspicious of Western intentions. Support in Moscow for the Reset was accordingly very thin, as McFaul himself suggests. He may have hoped that Russia would follow the path advocated by Medvedev, but he was well aware that Putin was the power behind the throne. And while Putin was willing, up to a point, to let Medvedev preside over the Reset, he was also very skeptical that it served Russian interests. McFaul writes, “[H]ardliners in Moscow – the siloviki as they are called in Russia – were not very present in most of our meetings with
Medvedev. As we would later learn, they were watching carefully their new young president as he embraced our new young president, and they are doing so not with enthusiasm but anxiety” (204).

If so, it is very possible that US and Western actions during the Reset had a tipping effect on the Reset’s failure, analogous to the tipping effect that Russian meddling may have had on the US presidential elections in 2016. That is, US and Western actions from 2009 to 2011 may have been necessary though not sufficient conditions for today’s “hot peace.”

McFaul’s narrative lends support to this interpretation. He characterizes, for example, the Arab Spring and the civil war in Libya as marking “the beginning of the end of the Reset.” Putin and the bulk of Russia’s political elite were convinced that Western democracy promotion helped account for the revolutionary upheavals that shook the Arab world beginning in 2011. And they felt vindicated when their warnings about the consequences of political destabilization and colored revolutions were followed by disastrous civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and the failure of “democratic breakthroughs” most everywhere else.

The most important precipitant of the Reset’s failure, however, was probably the US-led military intervention in Libya in 2011. As McFaul makes clear, Medvedev took a considerable political risk when he decided that Russia would abstain from a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force to prevent a bloody assault by Qaddafi’s forces on opposition-controlled Benghazi. Since Soviet times, Moscow had objected to the use of force against sovereign states for humanitarian purposes. McFaul recalls that some of his White House colleagues felt Russia’s abstention “marked a major turning point in the evolution of national security norms and institutions” (224). But Putin publicly criticized the intervention, and, by implication, Medvedev for ordering Russia’s UNSCR abstention, referring to the operation as “a crusade” (225). Medvedev responded, also in public, that it is “inadmissible to say anything that could lead to a clash of civilizations, talk of ‘crusades,’ and so on” (225). McFaul recalls that he found this “public sparring” shocking, and that he “worried that Putin’s comments signaled an end to his patience with Medvedev” (226).

The Putin-Medvedev exchange took place shortly after the Security Council’s use of force authorization. The political costs to Medvedev would increase dramatically after the intervention went well beyond the letter of the Security Council’s mandate. A sustained air campaign led not to stabilization but to a prolonged civil war, regime change, and the death of Qaddafi at the hands of a mob. This despite the fact that Obama had assured Medvedev that the United States would not use Security Council authorization to bring about regime change. McFaul does not explain how this “mission creep” happened or how he felt about it, but he does make clear that Medvedev felt betrayed by Obama. When Medvedev met Obama on the sidelines of a G-20 summit that May, McFaul writes that he had “never seen him [Medvedev] so upset.” And he speculates, in something of an understatement, that Medvedev “may have felt that his special relationship with Obama was not longer an asset but a liability” (227).

McFaul continues:

In retrospect, US-Russian cooperation on Libya may have been both the height of cooperation in the Reset era, as well as the beginning of the end of the Reset. Years later, in defending his annexation of Crimea, Putin said as much, arguing, ‘You know, it’s not that it [the Reset] has ended over Crimea. I think it ended even earlier, right after the events in Libya.’ US military intervention in Libya, which helped topple Gadhafi [sic], also inadvertently might have helped remove Medvedev from power in Russia (227).

I agree with McFaul’s assessment, and with Putin’s. I suspect it was the Arab Spring, and Libya in particular, that led Putin to lose confidence in Medvedev and his foreign policy, indeed to the extent that he no longer felt Medvedev should serve as president. Instead, Putin would return to the presidency to save Russia from the West. The result was the so-called “castling maneuver” whereby Putin again became president with control of foreign and security policy, while a much weakened and doubtless much less pro-Western Medvedev became prime minister.

If so, then the Reset failed before the Putin-Medvedev castling and before the mass demonstrations of late 2011 and 2012. The key precipitant was not the oppositional mobilization of late 2011 and 2012. Rather, it was the Arab Spring and Libya, which served as final nails in the coffin of Putin’s willingness to tolerate Medvedev’s efforts to seek cooperation with the West. And I suspect that Russia’s mass oppositional demonstrations later that year only reinforced his conviction that the West was simply incapable of refraining from destabilizing non-democratic regimes, and that Russia, sooner or later, would be in its crosshairs. That in turn suggests why Putin would then authorize a concerted Russian assault on Western democracy, a risky project that goes well beyond demonizing the United States and its allies at home. For Putin, Russia is simply doing to the West what the West has been doing to Russia. And he intends to win the “meddling war.”

In writing this, I should make clear that I do not share Putin’s understanding of Western motivations, even if I believe many Russian grievances and criticisms are credible and understandable. Even less do I agree with Putin’s understanding of Russian interests or his policies at home and abroad. Rather, the point is to get Putin, and Russian decision-making, right. And that, in my view, means not turning them into straw men. It also means a frank and clear-headed assessment of how US and Western policies have contributed to today’s “hot peace.”
Faculty and Student News


Laura Jakli (PhD candidate, Political Science) was on an EU VOX-Pol research fellowship as a visiting researcher at University College London, Department of Security and Crime Science (Jan 2018-August 2018). She begins a predoctoral fellowship at Stanford for the 2018-2019 academic year in September, at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. She also had a co-authored article (with Melissa Carlson and Katerina Linos) published in International Studies Quarterly entitled “Rumors and Refugees: How Government Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management.”

Joseph Kellner (PhD, History, 2018) was hired as a visiting lecturer in European history in the History Department.

Pawel Koscielny (PhD candidate, History) won the Berkeley-Viadrina Fellowship from the Institute of European Studies and the Bendix Fellowship from the Institute of International Studies for Academic Year 2018-2019. On March 22 he gave a public talk called “Cultural Tactics of Polish Populism” at the World Affairs Council Marin Chapter.

Hilary Lynd (PhD candidate, History) spent the summer doing fieldwork in Russia and South Africa supported by a Rocca Fellowship, a Simpson Fellowship, and a Beindix Fellowship.

Ula Madej-Krupitski (PhD candidate, History) has been the 2017-2018 Fellow in Polish Jewish Studies at YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York. Over the summer she presented her work during two conferences – in May at “Parallel Societies” in Multi-ethnic and Multi-identitarian Societies - Living Together, Living Apart in German, Europe and Israel, held at Haifa University, and in June she delivered a talk at Poland-Israel Workshop for Early Career Scholars of the History and Culture of Polish Jews, organized by the Historical Society of Israel and Bar Ilan University.

Yuri Slezkine (History) was teaching at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich and the Sciences Po in Paris, talking about his new book, and checking the spelling of the Dutch translation.


FLAS Fellowship Awards

Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships enable US citizens and permanent residents to acquire a high level of competency in modern foreign languages. FLAS funding for Russian and East European languages comes to UC Berkeley through a Title VI grant from the US Department of Education to ISEEES. Applications are accepted through the Graduate Fellowship Office.

Marcos Cisneros, Department of Rhetoric, received funding to study Kyrgyz in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Jennifer Flaherty, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, received funding to study Russian in Moscow.

Cade Hermeling, Russian major, received funding to study Russian in St. Petersburg.

Kylen Gensurowsky, Slavic and Legal Studies major, received funding to study Russian at Middlebury in Vermont.

Ryan Gourley, Department of Music – Ethnomusicology, received funding to study Russian in St. Petersburg.

Zachary Hicks, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, received funding to study Russian in Moscow.

Justin Knight, Linguistics major, received funding to study Russian in St. Petersburg.

Andrew Kuznetsov, Comparative Literature major, received funding to study Yiddish at the Uriel Weinreich Program in New York City.

David Parker, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, received funding to study Bosnian in Sarajevo.

Kathryn Pribble, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, received funding to study Russian in St. Petersburg.

Maria Whittle, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, received funding to study Kyrgyz in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Lida Wu, Department of Film and Media, received funding to study Russian in Moscow.
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The Slavic Department offers courses in Armenian, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Russian. The German Department offers Yiddish.