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Defunding Russian Studies May Be a Blessing

By Gilbert Doctorow

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The U.S. State Department's recent decision to defund Title VIII financial aid to students of Russian language and area studies, as well as related studies covering the broader area of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, has stirred up feelings in the otherwise slumbering community of U.S. Russia experts.

The Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies has issued a "Title VIII Alert" on its website. Laura Adams, a leading Harvard University administrator and academic adviser to the Master of Arts program in Russian studies has spoken out on the Russia-direct.org website in a lengthy article criticizing the cut of federal aid amounting to a mere $3.3 million in 2012, as poorly chosen savings given the major contribution of the program to maintaining U.S. expertise in what she considers to be an important part of the world.

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These defenders of Title VIII have pointed to famous alumni of the program including current U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Michael McFaul, and former Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice as arguments in favor of the effectiveness and value of grants.

Before the State Department decided to save a few dollars on Russian studies, the field had fallen victim to self-destruction. Or rather it died a second death. The first death came with the collapse of Soviet studies in the mid-1980s, a development which antedated the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

The death of Soviet studies was explained well by New York University professor Stephen Cohen in a 1985 book entitled "Rethinking the Soviet Experience." As Cohen remarked, the field had gone stale. It had answered to its own satisfaction everything one needed to know about the totalitarian communist state, which was assumed to be unchangeable and not subject to reform. With no open issues, Soviet studies could no longer attract high-quality students and was condemned to backbiting and recriminations among aging scholars.

In the 1990s, the field of Russian studies reconstituted itself following the breakup of the Soviet Union. There was a flush of excitement as Russia opened up and rushed headlong into frenzied catch-up with a destiny from which it was derailed in 1917. Everything seemed possible at the outset, and both seasoned professors and youthful aspirants taking their first steps in Russian language and studies went over to Moscow and beyond into the regions to participate in the change and possibly to make their fortunes.

The chaos of the 1990s ended in the 1998 crash after the government defaulted on its bonds. This was followed in the 2000s by a consolidation of state power and re-establishment of many Russian traditions in a unique blend with modern features of capitalist market economies. Russian national interests on the world stage also began to assert themselves, most notably in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq when Russia locked arms with France and Germany in open opposition to President George W. Bush.

Once again, the life of this vast and complex country is largely ignored, and our Russian experts are following only one issue: the passion play of human rights and pro-democracy figures. There are no debates about how to deal with Russia in our foreign policy journals. We know everything we need to know. Under these circumstances, the net contribution of the field to understanding where Russia is going today and where our interests meet or compete is close to nil.

Of course, this very narrow and stultifying focus on the progress or reversal of democracy is not exclusive to Russian studies on U.S. campuses today. A year ago, educators in the field of Latin American studies complained in Foreign Affairs magazine that future U.S. diplomats, journalists and bankers dealing with Brazil or Argentina, for example, graduate knowing very little because the syllabus is cluttered with courses on human rights.

At the same time, without any relation to Title VIII or other federal programs, major U.S. schools of international affairs — including the program at Columbia University, which was one of the founders of the area studies programs in the period immediately following World War II — have dropped language and history requirements to obtain the master's degree. The emphasis now is on numerical skills to meet the demands of job recruitment into transnational corporations, major banks and nongovernmental organizations.

It must be born in mind that the "factual knowledge" including languages that was once the core contribution of area studies programs fit into an approach to international relations, namely Realpolitik or the realist school, which is largely discredited in the U.S. today. It has been vanquished by Wilsonian idealism and universalist principles of economic, political and social development, which sit very well with the triumphalist world view that swept the U.S. when it "won" the Cold War in 1991.

We seem to be headed for the situation which prevailed in the 1920s when there were still no diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and no school of Russian studies worthy of the name existed. This is a situation in which George Kennan found himself when he was sent abroad to Germany to train for a career in the Soviet Union.

But given the venomous treatment of Russia by the present-day academia in the U.S., it may not be a bad thing if we lose a generation of Russian experts and the field starts over from ashes like the phoenix. May the malice of McFaul, Condy Rice and their many colleagues in our think tanks, universities and diplomatic corps be interred with their bones.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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