

Monterey Summer Symposium on Russia
July 2-July 18, 2023

Grant Report
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The 2023 Monterey Summer Symposium (MSS) on Russia combined historical and literary analysis of Russia, explorations of U.S. policy toward Russia and extensive forays into the history, geography and ethnography of the South Caucasus. In doing so, it opened a set of questions that are conventionally viewed through a different lens. The typical discussion about Russia tends to focus on Europe or to focus exclusively on U.S.-Russian relations. The MSS by no means ignored this discussion, but at the same time it reframed it. It introduced a local dimension by taking place in a part of the world intimately tied to contemporary Russia, to Soviet history and to imperial Russian history and by linking the complicated particularities of this world to the necessary abstractions of geopolitics (empire, international order, spheres of influence, inter-state conflict and the resolution to inter-state conflict). Over the course of sixteen days, an extraordinary range of voices joined together to compose the substance of the MSS. They included historians, sociologists, literary scholars, ethnographers, journalists, think tankers, government officials and “locals,” which is to say Armenians, Georgians and Russians who are living in Armenia and Georgia and who could relate their lives – through story and personal observation – to the big questions that were discussed and debated in the MSS. The MSS was not linear. It demonstrated no one truth about Russia or about the South Caucasus. It was kaleidoscopic. Precisely because of its locus in Georgia and Armenia, and at times in smaller worlds within the Georgian and Armenian worlds, it encouraged the MSS fellows to contemplate global politics and the ambitions of large countries (like Russia and the United States) in new ways. What conclusions the fellows drew will be unique to each fellow, and will take years to register in their scholarly, policy making, journalistic or teaching careers. The threshold they crossed in the summer of 2023 was the threshold of rethinking and of thinking anew, something that would have been far less accessible had the MSS been held in California, in Washington, DC, or in Moscow.

Yerevan
July 2-July 7

Upon arrival in Armenia, the MSS fellows delved into field research, connecting with Russian “relokanti” in Yerevan. They were given advice on how to do sociological field research with Arthur Atanesyan. The fellows explored questions related to language, to emigration and to politics, though only in some cases was the motivation to leave Russia explicitly political for the Russians interviewed. Not only did fellows gain insight into the interaction among Russians and Armenians over the past two years. They were able to assess the enormous consequences of the war in Ukraine through story and anecdote. Big events are big because they have myriad repercussions, something the MSS fellows could explore first-hand in their field work.

A thread connecting the academic presentations in Yerevan was the story of empire. From various angles, historians and sociologists explored the construction of empires, the political logic of empires, the challenges of running empires and the destruction or collapse of empires.

They could not have had better material for their excursions into the history, theory and cultural consequences of empire than the histories of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, where dozens of empires have left their legacies. Ronald Suny launched this part of the MSS with a lecture on the idea of empire – what an empire is and why, in particular, the South Caucasus were absorbed both into imperial Russia and into the Soviet Union. In a series of lectures, Georgi Derlugian related the Caucasus (as a whole) not just to the broad sweep of history, from antiquity to the present, but to pre-historical periods, to which the Caucasus are deeply connected. To this Alexander Iskandaryan added a mesh of finely wrought detail, proving that the Caucasus are not at all equivalent to the four nation states that currently define them (Russia, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan): the Caucasus are an unbelievably varied constellation of different ethnic and religious groups, a function of the mountains in part but also of the long history that describes the region. These lectures gave the fellows three angles of vision: the imperial, the national and the local.

MSS fellows had the chance to discuss contemporary Armenia with experts from the Caucasus Research Resource Center. One focus of this center is on corruption or “corrosive capital.” But much of the conversation also concerned the status of Russians in Yerevan and the high degree of acceptance Armenians have shown toward the Russians who have left Russia over the past two years. At the TUMO Center of Creative Technologies, they could see the sophistication of the IT sector in Armenia both as such and in its efforts to educate young people in technological innovation.

Richard Giragosian, a U.S. citizen who has moved to Armenia, covered U.S. policy toward the region, making the point that the United States does not see vital interests in the South Caucasus yet has links to the region through diaspora populations, through energy interests and through a desire for order. Giragosian outlined the importance of widening conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh to the United States, an issue that does not fit neatly into the grid of U.S.-Russian relations.

A visit to Matenadaran, an archive and place of display for Armenia’s most valuable books and texts, added insight into Soviet cultural politics in Armenia, since the monumental building was planned in the 1930s and built after the Second World War. It also illuminated Armenia’s remarkable intellectual history, which is on the one hand an articulation of Armenian culture in Armenian, going back to the centuries before the Middle Ages. This intellectual history was also a vehicle of transmission, preserving precious texts from classical antiquity and from early Christianity and enabling access to these texts in Europe and elsewhere. Visiting Matenadaran gave a sense of Armenia’s place on the map – vis a vis Europe, the Middle East and Russia – through exquisitely beautiful books and texts. Later visits to Haghpat and Sanahin monasteries filled out this portrait, shedding light on the educational role played by these medieval monasteries and bringing architecture and iconography into the picture.

Viacheslav Marozov contributed to the theorizing about empires, introducing the notion of “post-coloniality” to the ongoing conversation about this topic. He related this notion creatively to the situation of Russians in Armenia at the present moment. The U.S. Ambassador to Armenia gave an official take on U.S. policy toward Armenia and on U.S. interests in the region, and Eric Hacopian, another U.S. citizen who has moved to Armenia, talked through the intersection of

media and politics in Armenia, dwelling on the tense situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the urgency of which does not come through in Western media. Ruben Vardanyan put a personal touch on the plight of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh by speaking from the region, by describing the gathering challenge of keeping Armenians safe in Nagorno-Karabakh and by appealing to MSS fellows to think expansively about problem solving.

In several lectures, Hanna Notte detailed Russia's foreign policy toward the Middle East and toward the "global South." She analyzed the Russian diplomatic response to the war in Ukraine and its unfolding consequences, covering the newfound vulnerabilities and limitations the war has imposed on Russia and at the same time laying out the adaptability of Russian foreign policy, the resources and leverage Russia has amassed since the war and has been using both to prosecute the war and to advance its regional interests. Andrei Zorin took up Russia's relationship to Crimea, not through foreign policy as such, but through literature and the belletristic writing, once again touching on themes of empire, yet approaching this theme through the cultural imagination.

Ronald Suny led a visit to the Armenian Genocide Museum, helping to explain this terrible event in the history of Armenia and of Turkey. The museum itself chronicles the horrors Armenians endured during World War I, the enormous consequences the genocide had for Armenians in the diaspora and the role of the genocide in Armenian state building after World War I and down to the present day. Though atrocities are not foreign to the history of the South Caucasus, genocide is unique to Armenia and thus a distinguishing feature of its political culture.

Tsaghkadzor

July 7-13

Dominic Lieven took his bird's eye view (the eye of a big, active bird) in several lectures on the history of empires, focusing on the mechanics of legitimizing empires, which shed light on the mechanics of de-legitimizing empires. He did not look at the Soviet Union so much as at imperial Russia – at its immense power in the nineteenth century and at its increasing fragility in the twentieth. Yuri Slezkine brought these points across the Atlantic by having MSS fellows compare the Soviet Union as empire and the United States as empire. Anatol Lieven contrasted nationalism to liberalism and liberalism to nationalism, with an emphasis on European history, not ignoring the question of what an empire is, how it survives and how it cracks up.

Tom Graham gave a keynote address on the future of U.S.-Russian relations, in which he developed two arguments. One is a tendency toward misunderstanding and misinterpretation on both sides of the relationship, a collective inability to figure out how the other country will react and a shared ignorance of red lines and policy priorities. His second argument was that future cooperation will be possible, though it is hardly inevitable, and that because it would be of such great value to both countries, it is essential to begin now to speculate about structures of cooperation. Graham concluded his presentation with a discussion of such structures, and of how step by step they could figure in the diplomatic strategies of the United States and of its European allies.

Anatol Lieven criticized shortsightedness within the U.S. foreign-policy establishment – in conversation with Hanna Notte and Tom Graham. Robert Legvold identified the sources of tension and indeed of conflict in U.S.-Russian relations, working out from the Caucasus to a more global purview. He outlined the negative impact of such conflict, and without suggesting that it could be eliminated (altogether) he provided models of managing conflict, predicated on keen assessments of vital interests in Moscow and Washington alike and on a willingness to engage in constructive dialogue. Legvold's talk was a natural complement to Graham's earlier talk. Anatol Lieven, Graham, Notte and Andrey Kortunov weighed in on the inevitability of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, furnishing a set of different perspectives.

Andrei Zorin and Irina Zorina explicated Russian cultural history in relation to Georgia and Armenia and to the Caucasus more generally. Slezkine took up this exact theme in relation to Pushkin's famous poem about the Caucasus and also to the Caucasus in Soviet film, bringing close reading and careful textual analysis to these matters, a bird's eye view (the eye of a small, observant bird).

In two lectures, Kortunov situated Russian foreign policy within various dilemmas of European security. One part of his analysis was historical, the steps that led to the 2022 war. He offered fine-grained analysis of Russia, of Europe and of the United States. Another part of Kortunov's analysis went beyond Russia, Europe and the United States and embraced a global perspective, accentuating two separate claims about globalization – that it has not been fundamentally impeded either by the COVID pandemic or by the war in Ukraine; and that it is likely to shift from a globalization of “freedoms” to a globalization of “social justice,” as so many countries wrestle with the burdens of climate change and as new technologies alter people's ethical purview.

To set the MSS fellows and experts on the way to Georgia, Suny lectured on the making of the Georgian nation, dismissing the idea that there is an essential “Georgianness,” running from the distant past to the present and fleshing out the argument that Georgia was not erased by the Soviet Union so much as it was created first by Mensheviks and then in some ways unwillingly by the Soviet Union itself, which provided the education and industrial development that are prerequisites for modern nationhood. In this project, the Soviet Union was “too successful.” Long before the 1980s, it had planted the seeds of its demise in 1991.

Tbilisi

July 13-18

Three experts from the Civil Council on Defense and Security worked through the effects of the war in Ukraine on Georgia. They provided a critical take on the policies of the Georgian government, which they regarded as negatively intertwined with Russia, leading to a tense arrangement whereby Moscow pushes Tbilisi not to invest in the Georgian military and to become more dependent on Russia, while the population of Georgia is fiercely against Russian actions in Ukraine and wishes to see a more European orientation for Georgia. In all of this Europe and the United States are rather distant. These experts clarified the polarization of Georgian society since the political fall of Mikhail Saakashvili, a polarization that is tethered to the war in Ukraine and the question of what policies toward Russia the Georgian government

should endorse. Polarization was a topic addressed at a think tank that deals with polling. Its research has shown that the current government's political positions have a social basis rooted in the older generation and in the Georgian Orthodox Church. On the other side of the political divide are younger Georgians, for whom Europe (and what they associate with it) is the gold standard.

Zurab Abashidze, a distinguished Georgian diplomat, gave a run-down of Georgian foreign policy at odds with that of the Civil Council on Defense and Security. He contended that Georgia needed to balance a "Euro-Atlantic" orientation with working relations with Russia. He vigorously denied that the current government is pro-Russian. He emphasized the regional issues and nuances that hem in Georgian foreign policy.

Legvold's concluding lecture traced the two Cold Wars that seem to be crystallizing at the moment, one between the United States and Russia and one between the United States and China. Having reviewed the history of the Cold War, he delineated the unsustainability of two such Cold Wars in the future – unsustainability in terms of cost and unsustainability in terms of nuclear risk. As with his earlier lectures and in tandem with Graham and Kartunov, Legvold was tacitly asking the MSS fellows to think differently about U.S. strategy, about international order and about the mix of conflict and conciliation that obtains at the present moment. He characterized himself as a Cassandra and dared the MSS fellows, as they go forward with their work, to prove him wrong.

Slezkine's final lecture was on diasporas within the Soviet Union, Armenians, Germans, Jews (among others) and not least Georgians. This drew attention to the figure of Joseph Stalin, who studied and came of age in Tbilisi. At the Writers' House in Tbilisi, Hans Gutbrod narrated the harrowing story of Stalin-era persecution in Tbilisi and effects of the city's literary elites. Suny provided additional depth on the subject of Stalin and Stalinism, as he speculated about Stalin's rise to power and about the prevalence of violence throughout much of Stalin's adult life. The Museum of Stalin did not resolve the riddle of who Stalin was or what his political career signified. Instead, in its perfectly preserved Soviet form it narrated Stalin's life as he would have wanted it narrated, the son of Gori who fostered a world-transforming revolution, industrialized the Soviet Union and led it to victory in World War II. This museum, the most visited museum in Georgia, encapsulated almost all of the MSS's themes – the local, ethnic texture of the South Caucasus, the transition from imperial Russia to the Soviet Union and the empire-building and empire-destroying entailed in this transition and, finally, the almost imponderable traces this vast history has left on the post-Soviet Georgian Republic. Stuck in the past as it is, the museum itself is one of these traces.

The MSS came to an end in a remote location. This was in several hours spent in the Pankisi Valley, a place known to Americans and Europeans for sponsoring Islamist terrorism. This is of course a reduction and a caricature. In the Pankisi Valley, MSS fellows met with the women's council, went to a center for judo education, visited a local museum and spoke with teachers and students at a center for the study of the English language. The residents of this valley are Georgian citizens. They are pious Muslims, some of whom emigrated from Chechnya during the wars there. (In fact, the mountains of Chechnya are visible from the valley.) They may not be well integrated into Georgia, but neither are they isolated within Georgia. Many of them are

Russian speakers, and an attachment to the Soviet past was referenced by at least one woman in the women's council, when she stated that she liked to celebrate the new year (in the Soviet style). No obvious geopolitical narrative can be imposed on this community, and that was a lesson the MSS fellows will have to take from their day in the Pankisi Valley and from their two weeks in Armenia and Georgia. The obvious political narratives have their pedigree in the great capital cities of the world; they are certainly the stuff of empires. They lose their salience in an area as rich in human diversity and in historical experience as the South Caucasus. When the obvious geopolitical narratives break down or reveal themselves to be inadequate, then other narratives – less sweeping, less obvious and more nuanced – must be intuited and then created. That is a task the 2023 MSS fellows may take a long time to complete. It began, however, on July 2, 2023 and continued for an intense fifteen days after that.

ASEEES 2023 Travel Funding Grant Narrative

Three participants of the 2023 Monterey Summer Symposium (MSSR) on Russia are receiving travel funding to attend this year's Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) Annual Convention in Philadelphia, PA from November 30-December 3. Each will take advantage of the numerous opportunities at the convention to share their research and insights from the symposium, continue their professional development, and build further capacity for MSSR.

While all of their experiences during the symposium are relevant to the convention, representative examples include: discussions on sociological research on Russians in Armenia with the Caucasus Research Resource Center; insights about Russians in both Armenia and Georgia based on personal experiences and discussions with local experts; question and answer sessions with diplomats and government representatives, including U.S. Ambassador to Armenia Kristina Kvien and Georgian Prime Minister's Special Representative in Relations with Russia Zurab Abashidze; discussions with the Women's Council in Pankisi Valley in Georgia; and a thematic dinner during the symposium that was dedicated to the ASEEES convention theme of decolonization, with Ronald Suny and Yuri Slezkine as speakers.

In addition to sharing research and insights from MSSR, the participants will have the chance to further pursue their individual professional development at the conference. Adam Lenton plans to speak with potential publishers about his book project, the trajectory of which was heavily influenced by the summer symposium. Rebecca Johnston will explore opportunities to collaborate with other scholars on a transnational digital project that is part of her current postdoctoral fellowship. Friedrich Asschenfelt will present his dissertation research in a paper titled "'Grain for Oil: The Rise of Meat Consumption and the Soviet Union's Changing Role in the World Economy.'" Each will also be able to continue fruitful discussions with symposium experts who will be present at the conference, including Ronald Suny, Dominic Lieven, and Egor Lazarev.

Finally, ASEEES will be an ideal opportunity for the participants to represent Middlebury College and MSSR and build capacity for the symposium. They will do so through both discussions about their research and insights as discussed above and in more specific conversations about the opportunities that MSSR provides. Hearing about the symposium through these types of one-on-one professional interactions will give potential applicants, experts, and prominent members of our field in general a personalized and lasting impression of MSSR as a preeminent institution for academic and professional development.