HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Stephen F. Cohen

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with name of Stephen F. Cohen conducted by Interviewer Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux on April 5 and 6, 2017. This interview is part of the Harriman Institute Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

ATC | Session: 1

Interviewee: Stephen F. Cohen | Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux | Date: April 5, 2017

Q: This is Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux. I'm here with Professor Stephen F. [Frand] Cohen. Today is Wednesday, April 5, 2017 and this is for the Harriman Institute Oral History Project. We are recording this interview in New York on the upper west side. Professor Cohen, thank you again for joining us today, for the time.

Cohen: I'd say my pleasure, but first of all I'm not sure anyone wants to rummage through the past in these times. It's hard to think about the past today with all the weight of current events pressing down on us.

Q: Which we'll get to as well, I hope. But let's start well in the past. Let's start in the beginning. So you were just showing me some photographs of Kentucky where you grew up. So I know you were born there. Tell me a little bit about your childhood in Kentucky.

Cohen: Actually I was born in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Q: Oh, you were?

Cohen: Where my mother was from. My father was a fairly—I wouldn't say typical—but representative figure of what the Depression did to Jews in the Midwest. My father was a student

at University of Wisconsin. His father had come from the Russian empire, fleeing the pogroms in the early nineteenth century. The family settled in Cleveland. My father had no ties to Russia, didn't speak Russian, though my grandfather, a manual laborer, spoke many languages of that area. The Depression caused my father to leave the University of Wisconsin. To make a living he became a traveling salesman. He worked along the way for the Bendix washing machine company, as I recall. That took him throughout the Midwest. He met my mother in Indianapolis, and I was born.

Then a man in Terre Haute, Indiana—later famous for two things. It was the pornography capital where college fraternities, in my day, got their stag films, and Larry [J.] Bird, one of the great NBA [National Basketball Association] basketball players, came from French Lick, a sulphur water resort right outside Terre Haute. That's why Larry became known as The Hick from French Lick. My father met a man in Terre Haute who told him, "If you go down to Owensboro, Kentucky, I'm opening a store there. I know you want to settle down with your family. If you go there and run it, I'll give you half ownership in the store." So when I was about eight months old, my father took us to Kentucky, where I grew up. I lived there until—with one break of two years— I went off to college. And I didn't go very far. I went across the Ohio River to Indiana University, in Bloomington, which was called my "reach" college. I wasn't an outstanding academic applicant. I could have gone to the University of Kentucky, but I wanted to do better so I went to Indiana, which turned out to be wonderful for me.

Kentucky—which left the Civil War more southern than it entered the Civil War— had been a constant battle scene. The Rebs held the town and the Yankees would come across the river. For

a while it would be held by the federal government, and then by the Confederate government. It's probably worth noting—because this became a factor in my life—that the two presidents of the two governments during our Civil War, Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, were both from Kentucky originally, which kind of tells you something about the tormented history of Kentucky. Like Tennessee, it was thought to have been a border state, but as I said, after the Civil War, Owensboro, Kentucky was very Deep South. I grew up in a one hundred percent Jim Crow state. The segregation, or American apartheid, was absolutely complete. We didn't go to school with black folks, we didn't formally socialize with each other. Very few black folks, if any—though my father tried to help one—could get white-collar jobs. They worked in stock rooms and the rest. The [Ku Klux] Klan, though subdued by then, was visible. On the fourth of July they had their float. It was just a fact of life, the Klan. I think the last lynching—I checked this once—the last lynching, at least in that region, where they snatched a poor soul from the prison and lynched him, was just outside Owensboro the year before I was born.

So I had a Jim Crow childhood. Looking back, given my later intellectual interests, and to a certain extent my political activities, two personal formative experiences of my life were growing up in the Jim Crow south and beginning to understand how people change their minds, how change comes—which when I became a scholar I called reform and applied it to Soviet Russia to some extent, living off and on in Moscow in the [Leonid Ilyich] Brezhnev era from 1976 to 1982, when the Soviet authorities took away my entrance visa, living partly by fluke, among Soviet dissidents who were grappling in their own way with this problem of resistance and protest and morality and reform and what decent people do and don't do. In my kind of jumbled autobiographical memory my Soviet experiences were reminiscent of discussions that

were held as people became more enlightened and more protest-oriented in the Jim Crow South a decade or two earlier.

Otherwise, because when you're a child, as Corinthians says, you think and act as a child and then, if you're lucky, later you put away childish things. You're born into a society and you accept it. Segregation seemed completely normal to me. Though as you get older sometimes you have experiences that unnerve you. Mine involved briefly a young black woman that I took a hankering to and used to walk with her and that created some problems. But for me, because I was a basketball junkie, and I remain one today, I wanted to play basketball with the black kids. And sometimes you could if you went to the shanty town black neighborhoods and played outdoors, but you couldn't if you were playing organized basketball. Though eventually basketball helped to desegregate the South, certainly Kentucky, because white coaches wanted to win.

The result of that was when I finally came to New York in the 1960s I immediately headed two blocks, three blocks from where we sit today to the inner city to the big Frederick Douglass Project, and adjacent courts where outdoor games, pickup games, were always under way. I was a little uneasy when I came here in the '60s. Though I had had an easy rapport with black folks in Kentucky, I didn't know the culture of New York. I'd never been here. But I soon became integrated into the black basketball culture here. For all these years since the late '60s I've run or helped run or coach summer and year-round tournaments mainly for young kids—it began for young black boys. I mean young, like five to sixteen. I don't like the older teens because the

gangs come and they cause problems. But more and more also for girls, who didn't have enough of their own events. And so now I'd say what we do there is at least half girls.

My own daughter, my second daughter—who was a super basketball player until she blew out her ACL [anterior cruciate ligament] three times— learned the game out there and was on her way to becoming a Division I player before that happened. But I put my son, I put my second daughter, and now I've got my grandkid who's twelve over there. And that's all the integration I've been able to do there. Other whites rarely will play there, though we've tried to recruit them.

So growing up in Kentucky was— I mean looking back I understand everything, but I wouldn't have exchanged that childhood. Because when I came north I realized that I'd grown up in a kind of different country. For one thing it alerted me to the importance of the Russian provinces. Moscow is not Russia; New York is not the United States. Also I came with a set of experiences and attitudes that were different from the northeast corridor up here. I think there were others at Harriman. Loren [R.] Graham came out of that Indiana environment. But when I came to New York in the '60s—it was then the Russian Institute—it was really very much, so far as I encountered it, kind of a northeastern phenomenon, another world.

But Kentucky [pause]—and by the way I still go back occasionally. In Owensboro the economy there got depressed and the town decided to create an Owensboro Hall of Fame. The city's on a very fabulous bend in the Ohio River, spectacular view, so they've tried to turn Owensboro into a place where tourists come. The International Museum of Bluegrass Music is there, for example. When I left Princeton [University] and went to NYU [New York University] one of the

first people I met was a young woman who was a scholar of the history of bluegrass music. Not a southerner, but she was headed to Owensboro to do research. Suddenly I felt like I came from a really important place. So the tourist people of the town, who ran the tourist agency, and whom I got to know—one guy, Burley Phelps, in particular and I have become pals over the years. Lots of people in Kentucky have names like Burley, Betty Lou, Billy Bob. They created an Owensboro Hall of Fame. I've got the brochure up there. And it turned out to be quite amazing. You're probably too young to remember who Tom Ewell was, but he was a very famous actor who was in the movie with Marilyn Monroe, *The Seven Year Itch*, the famous one where her dress blows over her head. He was the bachelor downstairs. The people in the Hall of Fame include the owner of a famous barbecue place—let's see, the Moonlight, not the Shady Rest—horses that had won the Kentucky Derby, basketball players who had played in the NBA, me, and—are you ready?—[John Christopher] Johnny Depp [II]. Yes, the movie star.

Johnny Depp was born in Owensboro, Kentucky. His father, Johnny Depp the first—because Johnny Depp is actually Johnny Depp, junior—his father and I went to high school together. And when I went back for the fiftieth reunion Johnny Depp senior showed up and he looked exactly like his son. He's got that same beautiful face, but it's gone somewhat to flab and wear and tear. I think that when Johnny junior looks at his father he must say, "Oh, God, I don't want to look like that in twenty years." Each of us at the reunion was asked what our favorite thing to do in life was. Johnny Depp senior—who arrived by the way on a motorcycle. And in those days, when we were kids, we would roll up our T-shirt sleeves and put a pack of Pall Mall—I don't know why Pall Mall—in the—he showed up attired like that with a young woman on the back of his motorcycle. He wrote in the book that his favorite thing to do was to go to Hollywood, visit

Johnny, and hang out with really cool babes [laughter]. And I think we all thought he was—though he had not been voted the most likely to succeed, he was actually the success story of our class.

So Kentucky took me to Indiana University, and Indiana University took me to Russia.

Q: Before we get to Russia I was wondering if—you said your grandfather came to the U.S. after pogroms. You grew up in a Jewish family with roots in the Soviet Union.

Cohen: My grandfather was an orthodox Jew.

Q: Yes. With roots in the Soviet Union. Did that influence your childhood, that culture, at all?

Cohen: No, zero. And that's the amazing thing. People later, in Russia, when I became pretty well known there, said, "Why Russia?" And then they would always say, "You inherited this from your grandparents, right? You spoke Russian, they spoke Russian at home." No. Then they said, "You come from an American communist family, right?" [I'd] say no. And then they would say, "How did this happen?" In fact, this came to a head and I recounted in a book I wrote, *The Victims Return*, in 1989. I may be the only graduate of the Harriman Russian Institute, or any American academic institution of the sort, who ever was invited by the government to speak on Red Square on television to the nation, as [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev asked me to do 1989 on Mayday 1989. I didn't want to do it, but Russian friends, "You have to. You have to." They said,

"This is your *sud'ba*," your fate, your destiny. I said, "No, this was all accidental how I ended up here." They said, "No, no, no," because Russians think like, "this is your fate."

Fate had nothing to do with my grandfather. I didn't know him well. He lived in Cleveland. In those days the trip from Owensboro to Cleveland was a real trip. The excitement about Cleveland for me was I'd never seen television because we couldn't get any reception down in Owensboro—and Cleveland had television. It was like movies at home. My grandfather spoke English poorly. He spoke Yiddish, Russian, I think Lithuanian, maybe Ukrainian. He spoke several languages but my father spoke nothing but English. I mean there was no pass-on. My grandfather was very orthodox, and I had to be observant when we visited him, though we were only high holiday observant in Kentucky. There was a small synagogue in Owensboro, remarkably, that had actually, it said, been founded by the father of reform Judaism, Stephen [Samuel] Wise. The story is he came down the Ohio River, he saw the sun hitting on the banks of what was then called, not Owensboro, but Yellow Banks because the sun radiated off the embankment—"let there be a synagogue there." And a synagogue was built about the size of two of these rooms. There was no permanent rabbi. One came from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. The synagogue served maybe two hundred families, probably less, perhaps a hundred families, in a two hundred mile radius of Owensboro, as far away as Central City which, as you probably know, is where the Everly Brothers [Isaac Donald Everly and Phillip Everly] came from. They helped create rock and roll.

But I was the only—so far as I recall for most of those years— Jewish kid my age in town. There were a few younger and older. So I was bar mitzvahed there. I didn't want to do all the

preparation, but my father said that the rabbi was coming from Cincinnati on a raft and it was very dangerous on the Ohio River, and I owed it to him to be studious. I later learned he came on the train. The synagogue is still there. After nine-eleven [September 11, 2001 attacks] I found myself in Owensboro on the last day of Yom Kippur. I said to my wife, by then Katrina vanden Heuvel, "I wonder if the synagogue is atill there." Not only was it there, it was having services. There were hardly any people. The Jewish community had died off or drifted away.

But I didn't get Russia from my grandfather. He was an interesting man and I wish I'd gotten to know him. Unlike my father—it was one of these big families that people had in those days, I think partly because they assumed some kids would die. A lot of kids didn't survive. People had a lot of kids. Also they didn't have birth control. But still, there was an assumption if you had five kids, two of them wouldn't make it with all the disease, particularly in big cities. My father and his younger sister were the only ones born in this country. Their siblings were naturalized citizens.

But I got no sense of Russia whatsoever from my grandfather. He was a working class man. He lived to be eighty-five. He built barrels, literally, with his hands, wooden barrels for the beer breweries of Cleveland in a little shed workshop he had. He had a horse and a wagon. A big strong black guy worked with him for years, and they would build these barrels and would deliver them to the breweries, and that's how he made a living. So he was really *rabochiy klass*, a real worker. Be just seemed so remote from me—he was a remote figure because his English language wasn't good and I rarely saw him. I never knew my grandmother. She died early. And I didn't know the parents of my mother who had no ties to Russia—they came from Austria.

Hence, my middle name, Frand, my mother's maiden name, which probably they changed from Freud or Freund to Frand.

But no, there was no relationship or Russian influence from my family whatsoever. Zero. However, in the early '60s when I had taken up Russian studies at Indiana and I went to Moscow, my father suddenly told me for the first time that his father's brother lived in Moscow and I should go see him. The story was that, unlike my grandfather, his brother had been political. He came to America, and to the extent I could later trace his life, he was a Trotskyist. He told the family that he was some kind of a teacher at the University of Wisconsin. But when I looked into his records there, it turned out he was a maintenance worker.

But after the 1917 revolution, in February, he went back to Russia. The family was in touch with him until the '30s. I knew none of this. And I guess the family assumed he had died either in the Terror, as so many people with foreign connections, or Jews, or ties to the old Bolsheviks did, or he died in the war. But after [Nikita S.] Khrushchev's secret speech—which wasn't really secret—in '56, this man wrote to his American family. There was a member of my father's extended family who did the correspondence with Russia, and she resumed contact with him. The family opinion became, by the early '60s, that Stevie—me—who goes to Russia should go see him. I was delegated [laughter]. And when I said to my father, "Why didn't you tell me about him before?" he said, "We thought it was too dangerous."

This was the impact of McCarthyism and its legacy. In those days those of us who received federal funding for Russian studies had to sign a loyalty oath. And the loyalty oath was rather

expansive, who you knew and things like that. My father used to play golf with a local FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agent down in Kentucky, and he later told me the FBI agent said to him, "Marv, I've been asked to do a security check on Stevie. You know he's getting this federal money. Stevie ain't a communist, is he?" My father said, "No, Steve's not a communist." He said okay, and that was the only time it was ever raised. The guy had done the security check on the golf course.

But I did go see this—I guess he would have been my—what would he have been? My second—

Q: Great uncle?

Cohen: Great uncle, yes. He was dying. I found him. I went to his address and I found his stepdaughter, who later said that she wasn't his stepdaughter but his actual daughter. I got to know her later. She's now a fairly well known artist. Anyway, my great uncle was dying, fittingly enough, in what may still be called the Hospital of the Old Bolsheviks in Moscow. I think it's still there. He remembered enough English, and I was in second year Russian so I could babble a bit, and we communicated. He talked about his life. Best I could figure out, he had worked for a while in the financial department of the Comintern because he knew foreign currencies, having lived abroad. He wasn't an important political figure. I later looked at his labor book, which every Soviet citizen had—and I ascertained from his labor book that he had been arrested during the Terror and survived.

But when we finished the conversation of about two or three hours he said, "I understand what you're doing." He wasn't terribly lucid, but lucid enough. He said, "I understand that cousin Lee"—my father had a remote cousin named Lee White who came from Frankfurt, Kentucky, who worked in John Kennedy's White House. In fact, if you read Harry Golden's book, *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes*, the book is dedicated to Lee White, because Lee White was the official Oval Office representative of the Kennedys to what were then called the Negroes, the black community, in the south. This great uncle had learned that Lee White was in the White House and he didn't like it. He said, "When you go back you tell Lee, and I tell you, whatever you do, never get involved in politics." This was the lesson of his life. And then he died; I didn't see him again. But that was the only family tie I ever had to Russia. I got to Russia by a completely different non-family route.

Q: So then why Russian studies at Indiana? I'm still curious. Because of the time?

Cohen: I told you that I think it was a series of *sluchaynosti*, accidents, but my Russian friends—and we debated this when I had to decide whether or not to speak on Red Square to the nation on television—they gave me three minutes in 1989. I didn't want to do it, and they insisted I had to. "It's your fate."

So it's a fairly complicated but also simple story and it went like this. I went to IU, which I really liked. I mean I'm really a great believer in state universities. These were the upwardly mobile paths for millions of young Americans who couldn't afford college, because they were cheap, and they were good, and they had everything. I mean there were like forty thousand students at

IU. There were dozens of small Ivy League schools tucked into IU; you just had to go find them. I really believe in this system, though it's now being corrupted badly.

So I go to IU, and one of the things they had was a science requirement. You had to take one course in science. One thing I can't do, and I never wanted ever to do, is any kind of science. So being the artful dodger that I was, I was looking for a way around. By the way, ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]—you know what that is?—was mandatory in Kentucky. I don't know if you know this. In high schools it was mandatory. You had to take ROTC. It was also mandatory at state universities in those days. You had to take two years of ROTC. Some kids took the four years to get the commission as second lieutenants, because we all thought we were going to get drafted eventually. Better go into the Army as a second lieutenant than as a grunt.

I had spent three summers at Culver Military Academy, and I had taken two years of ROTC in Owensboro High School, so I talked my way out of ROTC at Indiana. I didn't have to waste my time marching around in a uniform. The only thing they asked me to do was show them that I could dissemble and reassemble an M1 rifle without amputating my thumb. Because the bolt fired back in a way that if you didn't get your thumb out of there you'd be like this [gestures]. I could, I did, and I didn't—it saved me. So I had extra time to take courses.

So I was looking for a dodge from the science requirement and somebody told me geography was considered a science. I said, "Yes, geography's kind of hard for me too." And they said, "But there's a course called Political Geography." I said, "Probably I could do that." So I take this course and it's taught by a man—and I think he may still be alive though he's around a

hundred—a British professor whose name was something like—and you can Google him—H. J. R. Pounds. He took notice of me in the class—I don't know why—and one day he called me up and he said, "I'm wondering, have you ever been anywhere?" I said, "Yes, I've been to Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Chicago." He said, "No, I mean abroad." I said no. He said, "You know, you should go to England. It would be good for you. I can arrange this at my own university, the University of Birmingham."

So I was in a sort of passive but adventurous stage of life. I was mainly interested in girls and basketball. I wanted to be a golf professional, but that was over. I wrote an article about how I didn't become a pro golfer for *The Nation*. So I go off to the University of Birmingham. This was '58, '59 and the university was a swirl of all these debates between the Labour Party and the Marxists and the Tories about nationalization, what was going on in Russia. So I start taking these courses, though not intellectually hooked on Russia.

It comes time eighteen months later to go home and I'd saved $300 to do what boys of my age dreamt of doing after reading Hemingway, go to Spain and watch the bulls run in Pamplona. I had $300 in pounds or whatever. And about four months before I had decided to buy a car in England because I like British cars. I'd had an MG in Kentucky and at IU. Can't buy parts for them here, but I wanted another. So I went down to the working class district, industrial district of Birmingham. Which by the way, is the first time I saw the devastation of World War II, because when I came to Birmingham—the Germans had bombed the city heavily—and fourteen, fifteen years later large parts of the city still hadn't been fully rebuilt. While walking around down there I see a sign saying, "Thirty days in the Soviet Union," for exactly the equivalent of

$300. So you know, thinking about this, thirty days in the Soviet Union for $300 or three days in Spain for $300.

I talked myself into going, and I get on a Soviet ship in London. It stopped for a day in all the Scandinavian ports and Finland—that's cool—and on to Leningrad. You go with this tour on to five Soviet cities. We went to Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Rostov, and one other. The only problem was it turned out to be a Fabian Society pensioners group where everybody was in their sixties [laughter]. I think I was just turning nineteen, maybe twenty. There's a picture of me right over there from that first visit, two pictures [refers to pictures]. So I carried the bags.

But the trip was astonishing. Though I wasn't educated yet, I was aware. And I had always had an interest in history. And what I saw, because Russians would come up to you—somebody who spoke English would come up to you—and crowd of two or three hundred people would form, and this Russian would ask you questions. Most of them never seen an American before. This is '59. Three years after Khrushchev's secret speech. They weren't political questions. They were like do you have your own apartment, do you have a car, what does a refrigerator cost? I really wasn't entirely sure, but I would answer and then they would pass the word back in Russian to the end and then another question would come up. This would go on two, three, four hours. Nobody wanted to leave. Later the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], which did a few good things, published a little pamphlet in Russian called *Questions and Answers for People Traveling to Russia*. They were the same questions, "What does a refrigerator cost?" I got the book and it was very helpful.

What I saw was a country awakening from twenty years of terror. Had nothing to do with communism or that. That was separate. But the people, including children who had grown up in an atmosphere of terror, real terror, mass terror, and for some reason—and this may have been wrong, but my mind kept flashing back to Jim Crow Kentucky, where the terror systematized against black people was not—I mean apart from lynchings, they didn't get snatched in the middle of the night and disappear—but it was a kind of low level terror that kept people from stepping out of line, whites and blacks. I don't mean to equate the two, but I saw something in this and I got really interested in Russia. When I returned to Bloomington, Indiana—I had not known this—the university had one of the best Russian studies programs in the country. I had not known this.

So I start taking courses. One being with the man who, I think, was the greatest Russianist of his generation, and possibility several generations, Robert C. Tucker. Bob had lived in Russia during the Terror, during and after World War II. He had his own history. He'd been there with the embassy; married a Russian woman; they wouldn't let her out of the country so he had to leave the embassy; he stayed. This was the late '40s, early '50s before Stalin died. Later he got the whole family out. Bob became an aide to Adlai [E.] Stevenson [II], and when Stevenson went to see Khrushchev he said, "My aide wants to talk to you," and Bob told Khrushchev about his in-laws, Khrushchev said, "Let them go." The father-in-law didn't like it here and went back. The mother-in-law lived here and died here. We all called her Mama. She was in Bloomington and in Princeton. But that began my Russian studies.

I had long talks with Tucker, who was my mentor in every way, and I said, "I don't know what to study in Russia. What should I study? What should be my dissertation?" He was leaving IU. He was going to Princeton. I was going to leave for a different reason. But I needed to think, what do I do? He said, "Ask yourself what interests you intellectually, or historically—" because Bob always thought historically "—apart from Russia, that has nothing to do with Russia?" I said, "Well, I was astonished to learn when I was younger, that the two presidents of the American Civil War, Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, came from my home state of Kentucky. So that makes me think that there was something in the history of Kentucky that involved alternative paths of development." Tucker went, "There's your subject. The great unexplored topic, very few of us work on it, alternatives in Soviet history." So it was only one step from there to [Nikolai I.] Bukharin. In fact the most recent scholarly book I've published has that in the title, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives*. I write in the preface of that book—I tell the story about that with Tucker about alternatives.

I mean this is making it too systematic and logical, but a series of accidents—again, Russians would say fate—took me first to Russia, then back to Indiana to Tucker, to the subject of alternatives which was my—masters topic, Bukharin at Indiana. The reason I came to what was then Columbia's Russian Institute, was this: I was now committed to getting a PhD. I cannot tell you now whether that was because I didn't want to be drafted and get sent to Vietnam, that I was trying to perpetuate my student deferments, or whether I had chosen a career already. But I thought still—it's the only thing that interests me, and why not, and I can get some money to go do it. But it never occurred to me to come to New York. I probably would have stayed at Indiana or gone to another regional university. Several Big Ten universities had Russian studies. Or I

might have gone further south. I was comfortable in the south. I lived in Florida for two years and I had no ties up here at all.

Then fate intervened again. The woman I had met at Indiana was the star of the Indiana University Opera School. It was a very famous opera school. Some say it was better than Juilliard. There's a history to this. In 1962 the Met [Metropolitan Opera] had an orchestra strike that they couldn't settle, and they had to let their contract singers go. When they settled the strike and they tried to reassemble all the singers, the big names came back to the Met from Europe or wherever they were, but the second tier who sang the roles of best friends, they couldn't get back all of them. So they went auditioning and they went to Indiana and they hired my soon-to-be wife. Her professional name was Lynn Blair. In fact, she appeared on the cover of *Opera News*, which was the Met's magazine, widely read in America—I think in '62—as the youngest leading featured role singer in the history of the Met.

So we were stuck on each other. Those were days when you couldn't easily just live together, especially since she came from Indianapolis. My father and mother were not happy about this. So if you were going to stay together you really had to consider getting married. That's why so many peopleofn my generation got married in their early twenties. I tell my daughter, younger daughter, who's twenty-five, given everything available to women including longevity and the ability safely to have children in your mid thirties, there is no hurry. Live your life, make your career, find the right guy or the right woman, wherever you're headed, but don't feel rushed to start creating a family. But that was not the choices we had, male or female, back then.

So Lynn and I decided to get married, and she was coming to New York and I had to come too. So I made application to Columbia [University] and secondary, as a backup, to Harvard [University] because it was the other Russia Studies major center close to New York. I was accepted at Columbia in what was then called the department of—still is, I guess—department of government. But I was headed for the Russian Institute, where I got my PhD. My time at Columbia ended after the unrest on campus in '68 I was considered a peripheral—I actually wasn't active, but my sympathies were clear. I was teaching as a teaching assistant, and I must have had half the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] leadership in my courses. I was teaching a course called Radical Thought. In fact, one or two of the students blew themselves up in Dustin Hoffman's townhouse down in Greenwich Village. They were Weathermen. I'm still in touch with a couple who survived. But it was clear Columbia wasn't going to keep me on as an assistant professor, which some of us thought would be our way to go. But Tucker was at Princeton and he needed a junior colleague, and though Princeton had a democratic system of hiring and the rest, thanks to Tucker I got the job at Princeton. I spent thirty years there as a professor.

Q: Before we get into your teaching—

Cohen: So is that accident or fate? I don't know.

Q: We'll let history decide.

Cohen: It makes sense to you though, how it happened, right?

Q: It does. I mean to me it was all to avoid a science requirement.

Cohen: And bear in mind though that had I been a better student—at that time I think there were forty-eight states in the union. Kentucky and Mississippi were ranked in educational quality down near the bottom, and I was really a mediocre student. That changed when I went to private school for two years in Florida. A woman teacher took charge of me and got me going. But I did apply to—I think I applied to Dartmouth, Colgate, places like that, but I wasn't accepted. But Indiana University was really important in my life and not just for these accidental reasons. These state universitites were really micro or macrocosms of democratic life and class in America. My early roommates was a born again Jesus freak from a farm in Indiana—and he was the second best pool player after me, and that's all we did, play pool at night. Where everybody else was going on, "Fuck this and fuck that," he would always say "freak," "Freak that shot." I'd say, "Neil, you're embarrassing me, say nothing." He said, "Freak it, freak it." Everybody else was going on, "Fuck this, fuck that" and he's going, "Freak it." I said, "This is really embarrassing, Neil." And the heir to the Douglas furniture fortune from Chicago, who had a Corvette, was also a roommate.

The people who went to public universities really were a cross section of America, with all the pluses and minuses of that, as opposed to those schools where I later taught, the Ivies, and where my kids went to school. I was full of disapproval of this whole system up here, private schools. My younger daughter went to Trinity, and off to Princeton, now she's at Columbia law school. Fortunately she has a soul and spends her summers down south trying to get black people off of

death row. But I really am glad that I was a product of the American public school system, elementary and college, as it then existed. Indiana University was really good. When it later gave me a—what did they give me? Something called distinguished alum award? They chose the right person, because I was really in debt to IU—I don't know if I was distinguished, but everything I later became I owe to Indiana.

Q: That's a tribute to them.

Cohen: When I came to Columbia's Russian Institute most of the people did not have—there were a few—but most of them had not come out of this sort of regional system of education and upbringing.

Q: So tell me about the Russian Institute when you arrived. Who was there, both professors and students, and what was it like?

Cohen: I stumbled, like an old Kentucky drunk after losing another football game, to every lucky place I ended up. Indiana, Columbia in the early '60s at the Russian Institute, Princeton, and above all when I went to live in Moscow. I mean I would like to say—and this is why when I advise students, I say "I can't advise you based on my life because it was all blind stumbling around." I came up here, I had no idea what to expect. I came here because of my wife primarily. We got married, in fact, the year I came here. We got married in Indianapolis, hopped in the car, threw the dog in the car, couldn't find a hotel that would take us and the dog, came up here. I didn't know what to expect. I mean I was really nervous. I'd never lived in a big city except

Birmingham, England. I'd never lived in the northeast. I didn't know anybody up here except my wife. I'd been accepted and I was told, "Go see these people when you get there." But it was okay.

Being a graduate student at Columbia, for me, was more like going to work. I didn't live far from campus. I lived at 96th Street, twenty blocks from Columbia. It was like a job. I'd go home at night, my wife and would have dinner and such and such, and I'd go next day to work, to classes. But still the university was a whole new world for me. I didn't fully understand at the time—but I began to—and looking back it was an utterly fabulous place to become an authentic scholar of Russia.

I say authentic, I mean not all those people who poured into the field during the Cold War to study the strategic threat, or to study nuclear weapons, or to study Soviet espionage—these clowns that the Senate trotted out last week who have been mothballed for years, people now saying the whole world's under threat from [Vladimir V.] Putin's Kremlin today. We heard this before. I mean it's complete bullshit, but media and politicians gobble it up.

But Columbia was a place with an extraordinary number of scholars who had extraordinarily diverse biographies, autobiographies, of their own. And as I've suggested to you, personal history, biography, autobiography, is everything. Where you come from and how you manage what fate deals you shapes—doesn't determine but shapes—by the way, [Karl] Marx never said that the mode of production <u>determines</u> social development. He said social development occurs

within the limitations and conditions set down by the mode of production—there was plenty of choice in Marx, but leave that aside.

For me—and I was a kid, really a kid—I'd had this strange experience in Russia when I was nineteen on the ship with the British pensionaires, and I'd become a good student at Indiana. For me, though I went into the government department, history was everything. That was Tucker's influence. You study history. Tucker took it a bit too far perhaps because he saw history recapitulating itself in Russia under Stalin. I didn't go that far, but I understood [that] anybody who doesn't embed him or herself in historical thinking is going to get Russia wrong, absolutely wrong. And of course most Americans in the business did get Russia wrong. But when I got to Columbia you had, for example—I'm going to make a mistake here—and this influenced me—three of the senior and founding members of the Russian Institute who had been abused by [Joseph R.] McCarthy. That was Phil [Philip E.] Mosely, I think, Ernest [J.] Simmons, and my own advisor, John [N.] Hazard.

John was interesting. He was a folksy guy. He called me Stevie. He knew I was a little bit, I wouldn't say nonconformist, but I was not programmed. A lot of people were programmed when they got there. He said, "Stevie, I still have a jumpy stomach from what happened to me." He always used these expressions, "jumpy stomach." What did he say? He didn't say mind your P's and Q's, but he had some folksy expression—and I said, "What did happen, John?" And what happened is interesting. John got called by McCarthy because John had been an official in Lend-Lease during the war. He had been the manager of sending a lot of the American equipment to the Soviet war effort, Studebakers, Jeeps, stuff like that, Spam, the food. To the extent that

weapons were compatible, ammunition, small arms. John was in charge of that and McCarthy called him a Soviet agent, giving all this stuff to the Russians.

But John was saved because the head of Lend-Lease—and fact check this, I may get the name wrong—General Leslie [R.] Groves [Jr.], who subsequently worked at the Manhattan Project, the bomb, told John, "Don't sign any of these directives to transfer equipment to the Soviet Union. I will sign them because one day there may be trouble." How in the world did Groves know? It was one war effort then. How Groves knew that this could lead to political trouble in America eventually I don't know. I think there have been biographies of him. But John never signed anything. He did it, but when the order came to ship, Groves signed it.

So McCarthy didn't have this piece of paper he could wave at John and say, "Look what you were doing, you were giving the communists—" so John thought he had a close call, and it was really unnerving. Also John had lived in Moscow in the '30s on what was then—and I don't know if it exists— a Quaker fellowship for Americans to live in Russia. You had to write either a weekly or a monthly letter diary back to the Quakers. Or were they the Mormons? They were the Quakers. John's letters are at the Columbia University Library. Part of the history of the Russian Institute, somebody should read those letters—you know about them?

Q: Yes.

Cohen: Oh, you know about them.

So John actually studied with people who got shot. [Evgeny B.] Pashukanis was his advisor, the great legal Marcist—John had seen my man, Bukharin, lecturing. I mean John was living history. I think this was the '60s, John was in his sixties; he'd been to Russia in his thirties. I mean it all was testing for him, I mean it was close.

So there was that element at the Russian Institute, but there were also people like Alexander Erlich, the economist. I tapped into everybody for my Bukharin dissertation because biography goes to psychology, it goes to politics, goes to history, goes to economics, it goes to sex. You can't do biography like a cookie cutter. You've got to see the picture. So I turned to everybody. John was my advisor, but I went to Erlich. I mean think who Erlich was. His father had been shot by Stalin as a Bundist leader. I mean these were people—I think of Alex [Alexander] Dallin. Wonderful man. Wonderful man. His father David had been a Menshevik. There were other kinds of people there—[Zbigniew K.] Brzezinski was there by now.

Zbig later said I was his worst mistake because he helped me and Tom [Thomas P. Bernstein]—the China guy. He retired recently, the sinologist. Anyway Zbig picked me and Tom to be junior fellows of this university seminar on communism he created, so he gave me some money and status. And with what I was getting to be a TA or teaching assistant made it possible for me to earn a salary. Brzezinksi later said, I don't know if he was kidding or not, that it was the worst mistake he ever made. Half kidding, I think.

But there was Brzezinski who represented something completely different. There was a guy named Henry [L.] Roberts who taught history, who was not a formidable scholar but was the

most intellectual and decent and ecumenical man. I mean he was open to every point of view. There was Michael [T.] Florinsky, a Russian imperial historian who was there—a real character—who was teaching imperial history. So the place was full of this diverse group of senior scholars who agreed among themselves about almost nothing. Therefore if you were an attentive young aspiring scholar, you understood it was okay to be an outstanding scholar and not agree, that there may be a public consensus out there—Russia was evil and it all was because of communism, or because Russia was a shit culture—but when you were at Columbia in those days they were having these arguments. I didn't work with [Leopold H.] Haimson, but of course he trained a lot of graduate students, and he was at war with other American historians about how you explain all this. He was an honorary Menshevik himself. I mean that's what he was.

In the environment of Columbia there lived, blocks away, Boris [I.] Nicolaevsky, the great Menshevik historian. I met him. I went to his townhouse. His great archive is now at Stanford. But he had three archives and he sold his shit archive to Indiana. And the first job I had at Indiana, with a guy who would later become my great friend—probably the preeminent American historian of the Russian revolution—Alexander Rabinowitch, who's still at Indiana—we were giving a scholarship to archive Nicolaevsky's maybe eighth. But you came here—[Alexander Fyodorovich] Kerensky was still alive, I believe, and living on Fifth Avenue. I mean the bloody Russian revolution and all its friends and foes genetically were living on the upper west side of Manhattan, and many of them gravitating toward Columbia, if not as members of the faculty, to the seminars, the public events, to the library. You could see them working. When I worked on my biography of Bukharin—Columbia had a very good collection, but I had to use the public library. I hated it. I hate libraries where you can't do anything, chew gum or anything,

you know. But nonetheless, I'd look around and here were all these guys, these Russian émigrés. The Mensheviks, [Raphael R.] Abramovitch, were here. They flocked to Haimson. The last of their publications *Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik*, the *Socialist Courier*, which had been driven from Berlin by the Nazis to Paris to New York, was being published up here on the West Side with Seweryn Bialer helping them out.

I mean this kid from Kentucky stumbles into this. You know, not a dumb kid but who knew more about horses and basketball than he did about Russia. I had no real—somehow I missed the Cold War down in Kentucky [laughter]. We were not doing Cold War nuch down there. We were too busy victimizing blacks to worry about communists. And as a Jew in Kentucky I mean, you know, the Klan listed the nigger, the Pope of Rome, and the Jews as the enemies. But other than that, Cold War shmold-war.

So Columbia was wonderful. Wonderful. Turned a little sour in '68, but that turned out well; I stumbled on to Princeton. But it was what Russian studies should be. And I guess all studies, but because of the toxic role that Russia has played in American intellectual life—and God help us, it's happening again today. Don't think it's not happening. The loathing for [Donald J.] Trump and Putin together has utterly poisoned American political life and it's going to get worse. It's going to get worse. And I know people who are going to roll over, but this is my last stand. I am not rolling over for these people no matter what they call me. We can't—our students are already feeling the chill. But that's another story.

The Harriman Institute—and I didn't know much about Harvard which was the big rival, and I didn't know Berkeley—I'd never even been to California. I had no idea. It was like going to Russia. Columbia was perfect for me. Perfect for a kid. I mean I was twenty-two maybe. Still a kid, not quite a kid. But for somebody who just really had a lot of questions, and no answers, to come to a place where there was no one answer. Do you understand? And these were not people who had casual, undocumentable, unverifiable, uneducated opinion, but major scholars—among the major scholars in America. So it legitimized—though there was a risk of career and I saw it and witnessed it. It wasn't entirely the best way to rise in academic ranks, because there's a process and the process had been semi-corrupted by American politics and McCarthy. But I don't think there was any place in America that would have been better for a person such as me who, A, didn't really give a shit about their attitudes, and secondly, really didn't know a whole lot but who wanted to know a whole lot. Those were the two ingredients and it was perfect.

I kept a tie to what became Harriman. I freelanced when I was at Princeton. I taught this basic seminar colloquium at the graduate level. I needed money to put my kids through private school, but eventually the dean at Princeton said, "If you like teaching at Columbia so much tell them to hire you and let them pay your benefits, but I'm not paying your benefits while you run off. You have to stop." And I did, but I got to know people. I stayed tied to the Russian Institute—now the Harriman Institute—through my teaching. I knew a lot of students. I knew Marshall quite well. I didn't know [Robert H.] Legvold then too well, and I continued to live in New York.

But about those years—and remember, I entered all this with the mind and eyes, despite having been to Russia and being semi-worldly, of a young person who'd grown up in Kentucky. I mean

people who had gone to New York schools or Harvard and came to Columbia, for them it was perfectly normal. To me it wasn't a revelation, but it was bloody good luck. And John Hazard was an absolutely wonderful man, a nurturing man. I didn't have much interest in what he did, legal studies, though Bill [William] Taubman did, Soviet law and all that. By the way, that was a big subject at the Russian Institute. They taught it in law school there. John and somebody else taught courses in Soviet law, administrative law.

And then of course there were the events. Brzezinski and others, and the Russians too, were bringing in for seminars and as visiting short-term scholars, authors of the books I was reading. One of them became one of my greatest friends of all—people thought we were the odd couple—[George] Robert [Acworth] Conquest. Bob and I met at Columbia, and Bob was one of the great womanizers of all time and had five wives. But he was a great British poet, novelist, and Sovietologist. He wrote novels and poetry. When he died, I read the obituaries, and he was noted as one of the major British poets of the twentieth century.

This is interesting. He said, "When you come to London look me up." So my wife and I—I was researching Bukharin, I went to Russia and I went to Switzerland to interview somebody that knew Bukharin in the Comintern. And I said so we'll go to London. Bob took us out, and we bonded. In fact it was there in a conversation some time in the '60s that led to a book I would write twenty-five years later. He'd said to me, "So Bukharin, they haven't rehabilitated him, but they've set all the surviving widows and children free. Is Bukharin's widow still alive?" He said that to me and I knew and I said yes, she is. I'd never met her, but I knew the story. And then he said, "It's fascinating." He didn't use that word because he talked in a different way, but he said,

"Really interesting all the people who after ten to twenty years set free and tried to go home. I wonder if they were able to go home." That stuck in my mind.

When I went to live in Russia for several months a year in the late 1970s—I found myself living among survivors, because of Mrs. Bukharin—I was the hero in her circles. I had written a biography of Bukharin. It was published here in Russian by Ardis out in Michigan. Three thousand copies circulating in Russia by 1980. All the survivors wanted to talk to Steve, wanted to tell me their story. I met these people and I thought this story's got to be told. It was only about, I think—what?—eight years ago I published this little book, *The Victims Return*. But it all began, I guess, with that conversation with Bob Conquest in a park in London, late at night, as we were walking his bloody basset hound [laughter], who was the slowest walker. You know, bassets are lumbering dogs. The dog seemed to have to pee every—so we were out there a long time. But that too was a road followed from the Russian Institute at Columbia. So you see what I'm saying.

Q: Yes, these networks continue.

Cohen: They weren't even networks. What they were were opportunities that you could seize or not recognize and miss, or be lazy or not connect dots and realize "I've got to do this." So I can't say that everybody of my cohort there—some were considerably older than me. I was still fairly young. Some were people who had careers and families, and came to Columbia from other careers in the Army or business. And of course I had my own views. I taught at Princeton for thirty years, I then taught at NYU. I was educated at Indiana and Columbia. I had my own views

about what universities should and shouldn't be. But generally speaking that was the meaning of a real education, what was going on at the Russian Institute. Rarified because we were now an elite. How many people were getting paid to do a PhD in Russian studies at a moment when everybody wanted your opinion, right?

But this constellation—and I don't know exactly how Columbia gathered these people; a lot of it was probably willy-nilly—but the happenstance of this array of scholars, and personalities, and autobiographies was just perfect for me. I don't know how many people of my cohort felt that way. Not many of them went on to—not that I'm eminent— eminent scholarly careers. Some went into politics or other things. But boy, I really was lucky.

Q: What an intellectual community at the time.

Cohen: And by the way, they were all very political. It's not as though they were wearing chastity belts or something. They were political, but most of them would say, "My political interpretation of this is this. But you may reach a different conclusion, so let's explore this issue." There was that, whether they used those words or not, and that was an attitude that I took to Princeton for thirty years. We were known as the Princeton School of Russian Studies, Bob Tucker and I, [Richard E.] Pipes, [Adam B.] Ulam, and that crowd up at Harvard, as the Harvard school. The *New York Times* would come and get an opinion from me or Bob, then they'd get one from Pipes and Ulam. The *Times* no longer seeks conflicting views.

In fact—this is not well known but you might want to note it. In November 1989— I had met with President [George H. W.] Bush before privately; he'd sought my views—I got a call from the White House from Condi [Condoleezza] Rice saying, "We want you to come to Camp David next week and we're going to stage a debate between you and Dick Pipes for the president's entire team," Secretary of State, head of CIA, everybody, the vice president, "about Gorbachev and what we should do. Is this a trick by Gorbachev or should we seize this as an opportunity to end the Cold War?" I mean this was ridiculous. [Ronald W.] Reagan already thought he'd ended the Cold War, and when he left office in January 1989 he said so: "we ended the Cold War." But there was this so-called long pause by the Bush administration.

I had talked to Bush privately, with others—Bill Hyland and somebody else took me along—about this. But Bush decided on a Camp David debate—because his administration was really split on this. Was Gorbachev an opportunity or a dangerous hoax? In 1989 they're still debating this. So I went to Camp David. They obviously invited us because of this idea that there was the Princeton school and the Harvard school. Pipes was probably the leading American "hard-line" scholar of Russia. He'd been head of the B team, he'd been on Reagan's national security council. He was really connected to the conservative movement in America. I, I guess, had the reputation of being sort of the left liberal position.

Though, opinions about American politics actually don't always track with opinions about Russia. For example, I'm being assailed today by the so-called liberal progressive community for saying, A, there's absolutely no evidence that Putin did this or that. And can we get some evidence before we go crazy? And B, that what Trump is calling for the détente, is absolutely

imperative. However much we hate Trump we've got to support this détente policy if he does it. I'm being "pro-Putin," "pro-Trump," they say. I mean, there's no real tracking. It's superficial.

But this event at Camp David was fascinating. Pipes and I each were given fifteen minutes, then we were interrogated by all these guys. I felt like Zelig. I'd seen these people only on TV—except for the President. I had a discussion with [James Danforth] Quayle about golf and putting because he had the yips. When he learned I'd gone to IU on a partial golf scholarship he was fascinated and started telling me his putting problems, and did I have any thoughts? It was an astonishing day,

That was the potential at that time of institutionalized Russian studies. You understand what I'm saying? Because by the time I'd been at Princeton for twenty years. Tucker and I had created an alternative center of Russian studies to the other northeastern ones, which were Harvard and Columbia. But we were a mini-center. We did a little operation, but we believed it was of the highest quality, higher than other, but it was pretty good. They've since destroyed it.

Q: That's one of the things that we've been exploring in this project is the ties between government and academia, and this whole issue of influence and impact of academia on the policy world. So that's a great example.

Cohen: But that was different. That's not the same as having ties to intelligence agencies. Because a lot of people—not a lot. A number of people of my generation and others, partly because of the guy who ran it—this should be deleted probably, but I'll say it. But Bob Byrnes

out at Indiana who was running the original IREX [International Research and Exchanges] program—I mean he was deeply embedded with the agency. By the way, when I went to Princeton the agency, in the old Cambridge/Oxford manner, was recruiting young intellectuals out of the history department. Joseph [R.] Strayer was well known—a member of the history department—for having seminars where he brought in the intellectuals of the agency to meet his promising graduate students. There's nothing wrong with it. Nothing at all. I've sent students to the agency. Who were these students? They were excellent young scholars, who could have gotten PhDs, but wanted either not to do that or wanted to do government service. I was happy to send excellent students there to do scholarship in the agency, so that the fools in the agency were not alone, uncontested.

Now, of course their intel probably never got up past the national estimate. There was a scandal about this under Reagan when they learned that [William J.] Casey was suppressing intelligence. One of my students testified at Congress—and I'll gender-blind he or she—but someone who subsequently quit the agency. So this was not a bad thing. These people weren't spies, they weren't assassins, they were scholars who found—and by the way, were paid well, didn't have to teach, a lot of them were not made to teach, and had classified information that I didn't have. So good for them. Good for the agency being smart enough to come to Princeton and ask me.

But there were also bad elements of that. A number of us were leaned on by the FBI and the CIA. It was one thing when they came and asked me for a security check on one of my students. Then I did an honest one—like a letter I would do for a university or anybody's who going to hire them. But I didn't like some of the things that went on, and I drew a red line between me

and this kind of association—I never had the view that some of my left colleagues had, "I'll never talk to anybody from the FBI or the agency." I said, "Why not? If they don't talk to you they're going to talk to really bad people. I mean be honest, you've got nothing to hide." But they did overstep, some of those agency people.

The typical thing would go like this. When you came back—and it plagued me when I was living in Russia for long periods of time in the late '70s and '80s. I'd come back and I'd get a call saying, "Hey, how you doing? How was your trip to Russia?" "Great." "Can you come down and debrief us or can we come up to New York?" And I said, "Guys, you know so much more than I know. I absolutely don't know anything you don't know. It would be a waste of both our times." I was never rude, but I wasn't going to do it. Because once you go for an official debriefing you're a file and it doesn't end.

Had I learned something detrimental to the national security of the United States in a serious way, like they were building a suitcase nuclear bomb that they were bringing in through Kennedy Airport, I would have rung them up right away. I didn't have any information like that. I knew people—and that's what they really wanted. They wanted names of Russians I knew in the establishment who were "dissidents," and they wanted to quiz me about the actual dissidents I knew—because it was known I knew a wide range of dissidents—about their attitudes. One of these people, a CIA guy, shows up at the Moscow apartment of a very important Russian woman dissident with whom I was exceptionally close—I'll just leave it like that—and gives this woman his fucking card, on which was written CIA, in Russian.

What was he trying to do, get her locked up? She thought I sent him and sent me a coded message, basically, "What the fuck?" I said it wasn't me, but we knew who it was and that she—I told her to be more careful with other Americans. I said, "We know who it is, but just ignore it, don't have any dealings—" she was smarter than I was; she knew how to handle it. But these guys could be a little reckless, go around to people's homes. Especially if you knew a person like her was being watched. Why endanger her? So you could write back boasting to the home office, "I had meeting with so and so." For your own career, that's all it was.

So that aspect—I know this David Engerman wrote a book. He interviewed me for hours and nothing I said to him really had an impact. The book was okay. I didn't read it very carefully. Sometimes when I know a lot about a subject, I figure maybe I should read a book I don't know anything about. I glanced through it. It was okay. I can't remember it well enough to challenge this or that. I think the general picture he gave was correct. But that has been a problem. I think people should do what they want. I don't judge. You want to be a professor and have a contract with the CIA at the same time. It's legal, it's not a sin, it's your business. I personally never felt that I could operate in Russia the way I operate doing that, so I never did. But I don't judge others who did; I really don't.

And of course any student who came to me during my many years—I mean thirty years at Princeton and another thirteen or fourteen at NYU; that's a lifetime—who said to me, "What do you think about a job in Washington with my Russian knowledge?" And I'd said, "There's the state department, a career in the civil service, that's great." I said, "And Washington is also the media. They always need Russia experts some place in the media. Many of the departments,

commerce, transportation, agriculture, have Russia departments. What are you interested in?" They said, "I want to be a researcher in intelligence, something like that, what do you think about it?" I said, "The state department has its own intelligence service but you've got to be in the state department to get in there." So it would come down to the CIA—

And by the way, the CIA often has a stall at the ASEEES annual national convention. Did you know that?

Q: I didn't know.

Cohen: I regretted—they weren't there the last time in Washington, but they used to have the coolest lapel pins and ballpoint pens. All said CIA on them with some Russian. I used to collect as many as I could. But they were there to hand out brochures, and if you were interested, to sit and talk to prospects about a career in the CIA. It's a perfectly legitimate career. I mean, some of them are politically corrupt—and we see today what they're doing, these games with leaking—but these are not the actual Russianists. These are the people who are up there [gestures]. So I don't have a problem with it, but keeping distance was important partly because the Russians know a lot. And who wants to get in trouble over there?

Q: Good point. Also I think we think of the time of the '60s and '70s at Harriman as kind of like the golden age of policy and—

Cohen: Can you hold that thought?

Q: Sure.

[END OF SESSION]

ATC | Session: 2

Interviewee: Stephen F. Cohen | Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux | Date: April 5, 2017

Q: This is Caitlin Bertin Mahieux.

Cohen: Still Caitlin.

Q: We're in session two with Professor Stephen Cohen and today is still also Wednesday, April fifth.

Cohen: So two things occurred to me as we took our break. One was that in those days—I don't even remember when the new building was built—but the old Russian Institute was housed in those brownstones on 118th and in that area on the west side of Amsterdam. That really was nice—a lot of the regional institutes were there, I think. It added something to the ethos of the place. It had this kind of old urban intelligentsia atmosphere. It wasn't sort of sterilely Scandinavian and academic [laughter]. That was part of it, I think. The other thing was that when I began to work on the '20s, which was a period of library holdings well represented at the New York Public Library.

[INTERRUPTION]

Cohen: So the collections. I don't want to say I was surprised, but I was happy that Columbia—the general library, they hadn't moved the Russian stuff. I think they've now moved it into their own building, but it was all in Butler. They really had a lot of stuff. And a lot of it you could check out, unlike at the public library. Even periodicals you could check out for like a week. So it was a very good place to do my kind of research—because I needed a lot of primary Soviet publications because Bukharin had been so prolific. He'd written everywhere. There really was very little archive work available to me. That came later. I've spent the last twenty years filling cartons with archive material for the expanded edition of Bukharin I'll probably never write.

I had toyed with the idea of going to Hoover [Institution] and to Harvard to look at their library collections. In fact, at one point I was able to get into the Lenin Library, and in a kind of devious way get some journals that I needed that were not circulating.

Q: In the Soviet Union?

Cohen: Yes, I did, through a bogus topic.

Q: I was going to say, how do you research a forbidden subject?

Cohen: What you do is—they can't clear the Lenin Library of runs of all the journals that Bukharin published in because so many still kosher figures also published there, including Lenin himself. There was a guy named [Leonid B.] Krasin, so I told them I was researching Krasin who

was in good odor at that time. I called down runs of lots of journals and it took forever to get them, but I was there a long time.

But between Columbia and the New York Public Library I could do almost all my basic research here in New York. The only problem was that a lot of the newspapers—Bukharin edited both *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, and I had to go through them—had been transferred to really lousy—it was either a microfiche or microfilm by then, which just burnt your eyes out. But nevertheless you could do the work here and that was a big bonus. I don't know if any university, other than possibly Hoover—which is not a university but it's at Stanford—had such, for me, a rich library collection, which I should mention, for scholarly reasons.

Now, we're not talking archive; we're talking the published record, but still. I mean it's very interesting that about two years ago I was contacted by a Russian library—no, by the Bukharin family archive at the Moscow archives. Bukharin when he lived in New York briefly, before the revolution, wrote for a publication here in New York called *Novy Mir*, and they didn't have it in Russia, anywhere in Russia, anywhere. Can you imagine? Well, it was an émigré journal published in New York so you could see—and maybe it was destroyed in the Soviet Union, if they had it, during the Terror when they destroyed quite a bit. So I researched it. It turned out it was at the Library of Congress. Jim [James H.] Billington—who had been my colleague at Princeton, fellow historian there, before he became head of the Library of Congress. He was gotten rid of a few months ago. I wrote to Jim and said, "Would you do this?" And he said, "Absolutely." So he sent all of *Novy Mir* to me—copies of it—and I took it to Russia or sent it on. But Columbia was really good in those days.

Q: That's great.

Cohen: I didn't know any of this when I came here following my wife to the Metropolitan Opera.

Q: So let's talk about Bukharin. This is your masters dissertation, your PhD dissertation and—

Cohen: My first book. It wasn't actually my first book. Tucker and I edited a volume on the great purge trial, but it was just an edited job. But my first book was Bukharin, a biography of him.

Q: And Tucker kind of helping you find your interest in alternative—

Cohen: Right.

Q: And then this place here at Harriman at the Russian Institute where there was no one answer. It kind of seems like all of this—

Cohen: Remember, Alex Erlich had written a very important book called *The Soviet Industrialization Debate*, of the '20s. Half the book was about Bukharin, and half the book was about Bukharin's intellectual and political opponent, [Yevgeni A.] Preobrazhensky, because they presented two different models of how the Soviet Union should, in the '20s, industrialize itself. But the subject of the '20s was alive at Columbia in those days because history was alive.

Remember, I came into the field—and this was one of your questions—at the moment when academic disciplines generally—economics, sociology and political science in particular, but also regional studies—were being challenged from within by social sciences. That everybody now had to be more social-sciencey. Even though they said it wasn't at the expense of history, it was. I can document this. But I was the kind of—not to inflate my importance—but biographically I was kind of a last gasp. That is, I was able to come to Columbia, write a doctoral dissertation in the department of government—which did not call itself political science. Still doesn't, I think. I'm not sure if they changed their name—write what was not only a history dissertation but biography—which even some history departments don't permit anymore, biography—and then go and get a junior appointment and eventually tenure at Princeton in the politics department, which hadn't changed its name to political science, but was gradually rejecting historical approaches.

That was made clear to me when I did get tenure, by the preeminent social scientist in our department, the guy who wanted an end to this history stuff—and he was a nice guy—but he was committed that, "You're the last, Steve. From now on people like you should be in the history department. This is not professional." This was sweeping the field and it was—well, you know the story. It was transforming what graduate students, and to a certain extent undergraduates, were told was important, and what they should study, and the way the requirements for the PhD program were rewritten.

Tucker and I did Russian studies at Princeton against this growing trend. We created our program against this trend. We didn't say people couldn't take these courses, but they were not

part of our core courses. So quantitative analysis was not in our core course. The comparative courses that we encouraged were not vacuous comparatives between Latin America and Russia, but Tucker's concept of comparisons within Russian history. Reform under Alexander the Second, reform under Khrushchev, reform under Gorbachev, beautiful. Study that; it's about Russia.

I was lucky at Princeton too. It was a very European, diverse, fractious department. For me it was a second university just going to faculty meetings—I was a junior professor—and listening to these guys, who had brought all this European history to bear to tenure positions at Princeton, arguing among themselves about everything. It was great. Just great. But that was passing. I don't know if you'd call it the homogenization, but it's clearly impacted regional studies in a very big way, I do not think for the better. But I understand that other people have a different opinion. If we could coexist it would be okay, but the problem is the rat. [rational] choice, the social science people are monopolists.

In my department at Princeton—this was Politics, not Russian studies—so they would say, "We've got to hire a rat. choice guy; we've got to go with it." And then they said, "He's lonely, he needs a colleague." Then, "They've got to have graduate students, we've got to get them some graduate students." And within ten years eighty percent of a department—which had been really kind of generally European style, historical, sociological, economics—was now a very different department. It became time, after thirty years, for me to leave. That's not the main reason I left, but I wasn't going to miss it when I did.

The ‘60s were the turning point years of that intellectual trend. That’s in general in American academic life. It wasn’t just Russian studies. And they’re still going on about it now.

Q: This is one of our questions on this project, the whole area versus functional studies issue. Actually Jack [L.] Snyder told us that you told him something about how disciplinary stuff is nonsense and area studies is like the ticket.

Cohen: I told Jack Snyder that?

Q: That’s what he said, yes.

Cohen: I used to play basketball with Jack.

Q: Oh, really?

Cohen: I could say anything on a basketball court.

Q: This seems to have stuck out in his mind.

Cohen: That I had told him—because he was younger, you mean, and I had said this to him as advice?

Q: I think you were actually on a panel and he was talking about his richness, rigors, and relevance article and you were—

Cohen: It's possible. I'm a bit of a provocateur. I always feel if you push people then it gets interesting, right? You can always retreat a little bit and say, "I see your point, actually."

Q: But it is a question about how do we know how deep and far to go before we get too insular?

Cohen: Obviously, I'm speaking from the bias of autobiography, and also from the great influence that Tucker had on me, who by the way could be very social-sciencey. He wrote books on leadership, which was one of his fields, and comparative analysis that relied heavily on psychological models. He was often very social-sciencey. But when it came to Russia, for him, you know history or you know nothing. You begin there.

History for Tucker, who was very learned—I'm not—could mean the history of the culture and the literature too. My feeling today is that if I were still in a position to influence events—when I went to NYU I didn't care. They had a tiny little department—they wanted me for their own reasons. I had decided the New Jersey Turnpike was— my daughter Nika now in the first grade or something. My odds on the New Jersey Turnpike were running out because I was making one round trip a week, spending two nights, three days in Princeton, and had for years. And the turnpike had gotten wicked with all these trucks flying around.

[INTERRUPTION]

NYU had recruited me for a long time. I had been open to an offer from Columbia for years. I'd had discussions, but nothing ever came of it. Princeton was wonderful, except for the round trip. But NYU was kind of perfect by 1998. I had a young daughter in New York. And because I didn't want to teach graduate students any longer. Not to be rude, but we used to say graduate students are like herpes; they're forever. I mean you get them through, you get them a job, you get them tenure, they get married, they get divorced, they need a new job. I got former graduate students the age of my older children still calling me, "Listen, what are we going to do?" I liked undergraduate teaching. I was good at it. I had classes at Princeton three, four hundred enrollnebts. I was voted best, most popular course, even on the vicious student ratings, and they published as a yearly pamphlet, my course was one of the top. They had some unkind things to say about some of my habits, but about the course they said, "You can't go through Princeton without taking this course." I cared less by then about graduate students, or at least graduate seminars.

So NYU offered me something appealing. First of all, they actually had a Russian studies department. I'd never been in one. So I didn't have to go to those interminable meetings about quantitative analysis. Secondly, they wanted me enough to take me half time. I didn't need the money, so half time was fine because I still needed to go to Russia frequently. The '90s and the rest, including the opening of Soviet-era archives.

Then I got involved in a presidential campaign when a friend of mine ran for the presidency. I went to the dean and said, "I feel I've got to help him," and he said, "I favor him too, go ahead.

What do you want to teach?" I said, "Cut me one course down." I was supposed to teach two a semester. He said fine. Then he came to me afterward and said, "You know that course you used to teach at Princeton with four hundred students? We need that here." I said, "I signed up for doing no more than that." I didn't want to do that again. I don't want ten teaching assistants. It's really work supervising them. He said, "I'll tell you what. Teach that course and you can teach one course a year." So I did. What I did was I move that gigantic Princeton course to NYU. Only the fire marshal, who said I couldn't have more than four hundred in the room, limited the enrolment.

I was always primarily an undergraduate teacher. We didn't have that many graduate students at Princeton. We were highly selective. We weren't giving ten fellowships a year. We had two or three. We had a lot of good ones. Quite a few whose dissertations were done with me, both in history and politics, at Princeton. But for undergraduates this business of social science was not an issue. It wasn't a professional issue. So I taught at NYU a course called simply Russia Since 1917. People called it "Russia According to Cohen." And that was true in this sense. Whatever I thought was interesting and important—and I did bring up social science issues occasionally to frame issues. I would say, "The social scientists tell us this, so in your next short paper read this history and tell me if this works for you." Something like that. I wasn't denigrating social sciences or boycotting it, but for me it wasn't something that I needed to promote. That remains the case today for a couple of reasons.

First of all, most people—and let's leave aside undergraduates—at the graduate level do not get their PhD from the area studies programs. They get them from the university through their

academic departments. We can't control what the departments teach. If they've gone crazy on rational choice, it's not for the Russianists to go into that department and try to convert them. But what we should do is teach in our Russian centers and our courses what we think is important, not for the sanctity of this or that discipline or getting published in this or that journal, but what we think is important. We can do this because they need us too. We're tenured faculty in departments. We're teaching what they call "comparative." That's how they have relegated Russian studies, along with Latin America and all the rest. That can't be stopped either, but we can control—they can't tell us— how to teach our courses.

This is where I think we've yielded way too much in becoming trendy, accommodating, thinking that this is needed intellectually—when it isn't because students can get it in their own department or they can educate themselves the way I did and my students did. I'd tell them, "Listen, don't depend on me for your education or on this Russian studies program. The economics department, the sociology department, are terrific, go take a couple of courses over there. You might learn something or find something useful." Be a bandit; raid everything intellectually. That's the way to use a university. But for that, some kind of institutional consensus would have to emerge.

Russian studies is becoming trendy again because of Trump and Putin. It's very bad, but an opportunity to reconceive what we're doing is now upon us. I no longer play a university role in that anymore so I mostly just observe it, and I'm not optimistic. But I do think—and it is probably true of any area studies, but certainly one with such a long civilizational history—that if you don't understand many aspects of the civilizational history that is Russia, whether it's a

thousand years or the Romanov period, four hundred years, there is so much, no matter what you're studying you are not going to understand.

Now, you may need the instrument of social science, like a computer, to research for data. If you're doing something like—I don't know—how many people used emergency rooms for drug overdoses in Russia, comparing under the Soviet regime and post-Soviet regime, if the database exists of course you use your computer. But how you conceptualize this, and the comparative historical connections you're making, requires deep knowledge of the past or you'll get it wrong. And of course you need the language and you need—there's some dispute how much culture and literature you need to read. Like I never was a poetry reader and all my Russian friends say, "You'll never understand Russia; it's hopeless. You're never going to be a good Russia expert if you don't know Russian poetry." And I said, "Sue me." But you know, that's a matter of individual taste.

It interests me—and I'm going to write about this. This is a little bit different. But we've got all of these people of authority, including heads of Russian studies centers. I could name names in town who say this repeatedly, "We were surprised when Putin took Crimea. We were surprised when Putin went into Syria." To which I say, "How the fuck could you be surprised if you were studying Russia?" First of all, Russia reacts this way when, as Putin put it, "We're driven into a corner." So you've got a pattern of leadership reaction here. Secondly, they were bloody well discussing the options in the newspapers. Did you ever read any newspapers? Because they were discussing it. I mean [Yury M.] Luzhkov tried to run a presidential campaign in 1999 on bringing back Crimea. He was the mayor of Moscow. You knew it was in the political bloodstream. How

could you have been so surprised given the overthrow of the Ukrainian president in February 2014?

It doesn't mean—and this comes to those of us who do contemporary affairs—that it's our job to predict. That's not it. I used to love the ponies, and one thing I learned at the tracks in Florida and in Kentucky is that you can rarely predict, still less about politics. But what you do know, on being educated, is what are the alternatives or possibilities in policy making. Nobody appears to have ever told the President of the United States, or a bunch of people up at the Harriman Institute, or the editors of any of our mainstream newspapers or TV channels that if we continue longstanding political moves on Ukraine it was possible that Crimea would end up back in Russia. They were bloody well discussing it. If you knew the history of Crimea and you knew the historical prism through which the Kremlin was watching these events, that didn't mean the Kremlin was going to do it, but that it was possible. And had these fools known that it was possible that Russia would take back Crimea then maybe they wouldn't have done what they did in 2013 and 2014 in Kiev. If they had been told, "Look, you think this is NATO expansion cool. It may not be so cool. Let us think of the possibilities, the alternative outcomes." None of that thinking evidently was done.

We have a German intelligence report done later that said that this possibility of Russia taking Crimea was never discussed in high Western circles. And German intelligence is much better than ours in this regard. They actually know stuff. But they didn't talk about it either. What's going on here? I mean, what's going on here? This is a failure to understand the need for historical knowledge, even if you're doing CIA-like stuff, or you're a policy advisor, or a

national security advisor. You've got to bring in your Russianists and say, "Look, Larry or Mary, so we're pushing Ukraine to sign this partnership agreement which is clearly back-dooring them into NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]—" that's clearly what that was. It's in the protocols, it's written there "—what might be the consequences?" And then Larry or Mary would say, "[Viktor F.] Yanukovych may face protests, blah, blah, blah. If there's turmoil in Kiev the Russians are going to start thinking about the safety of Crimea. It's not just the naval base at Sevastopol. It's their Alamo. "It's sacred to them, they may take it. And by the way, eighty-five percent in Crimea, the Russians had done secret polls, wanted to be affiliated with Russia. So I don't know how you feel about this, boss, Mr. President, but this could happen." But all our authorities, including intel chiefs, say they were surprised.

They didn't know either, they said, that Putin might send his Air Force to Syria in September 2015, even after he came to the United Nations earlier and said, "Join us or we'll do it by ourself. I want to do it with you." That was his speech. He said it. He didn't say, "We'll send our planes," but he said, "We are not going to tolerate the spread of the Islamic State in Syria. We consider it a threat to our national security. We want to do this with you." He spoke directly to President [Barack H.] Obama. Putin said, either join us or we'll do it by ourself. And now everyone here says they were so surprised.

Now the—what they call it?—the meme out there is that Putin is an unpredictable and therefore dangerous leader. I think he's the most predictable Russian leader in generations. For one thing he says almost everything he's thinking about policy, and for another, he's highly rational. I

mean it's not complicated, but people are caught up in this demonizing of Putin and the system and their wicked ways that are aberrant and not ours.

That's why you ground analysis in history. That was always Tucker's view. Tucker was interesting. He hated Stalin. Hated Stalin for what he had done to his wife's family, for what he had done to Tucker's Russia. But he refused ever to treat Stalin as unhuman, as a monster. He didn't like this. He said, "No, Stalin has to be understood, in his own way, as a thinking human being. And Stalin thinks of himself in terms of Russian history." We later learned when we saw Stalin's library that he was a voracious reader of Russian history. He annotated many pages. So if you don't understand the history that Stalin himself read, and assimilated for his own concept of leadership, you don't understand Stalin. Tucker turned out to be absolutely right. That's why his two volumes—he never wrote the third—are still the best thing that western scholarship has on Stalin. And Tucker didn't have all the recent archive stuff.

But this all becomes a case not for predicting, but for understanding the possibilities, alternative outcomes. And the possibilities of a political society come from the past. As a Russian told me once, Russia can't jump out of its historical past any more than you and I can jump out of our skin. It doesn't mean things are predetermined. It doesn't mean things recapitulate. Tucker went too far for me there. But it means that if you want to understand the possibilities—and it's been said by poets the past is prologue, all that stuff—but it's true, and it's a way of thinking.

By the way, there are many ways to do this. I am persuaded by the idea of comparisons within Russian history. One of my best doctoral dissertations, a guy named Lars Lih, one of the best

people out there today, though he's an independent scholar—he lives up in Montréal with his wife who's a musicologist. He left the university, taught at one of the women's schools—Wesleyan—for a while, but he wasn't a teacher. He did for his dissertation and first book a study of grain collection crises under the Tsar, the provisional government, and the Soviets, looking for recurring patterns of how the government reacts to such crises, which have repeatedly been an existential problem for Russia. Not only is that fascinating and interesting and makes for something very readable, but it's important because you're asking yourself, how does Russian government react over time, even centuries?

You could take this approach with many different subjects. But it's not practiced because it conflicts with what history departments think they should be doing, because political science departments don't want this historical crap in there, and because you don't have enough senior professors who are real Russianists saying, "If you want to be a comparativist that's great, but Russia gives you this vast laboratory, historical laboratory. Choose something you like, some topic. I mean it could be anything. It can be veterinary medicine or any topic, war, for example. How does Russia react over time— are there patterns? Are there discontinuities?" By the way, when I came into the field, the big study was still whether the revolution of 1917 had been historical continuity or discontinuity. Two seminal collections—they were both collections of essays, which grew out of conferences, and I'm sure a lot of Columbia people participated, Erlich, Dallin and the others—one was edited by Cy [Cyril E.] Black—my colleague at Princeton, senior man when I came. Good CIA man too. *The Transformation of Russia*. In other words, was the revolution actually a transformative event or did it simply accelerate trends that were already in the nineteenth century that then recur? And the other volume, which may have

been edited by Simmons, I'm not sure, called *Continuity and Change in Russian History*, which was the same question. That was really good stuff. I liked it.

But the field stopped doing that except for the odd graduate student, who was either exceedingly clever or fell into the hands of Bob Tucker. By the way, the country where this is practiced and has long been is France— one of my fields, because Columbia required three political societies in the government department. I did Russia, England—because I had lived there—and France. But the study of French history has been structured by this whole question of continuity and change before and after the French revolution. It continues to be—because when you get five French republics, and you're a political scientist—I mean what's going on here in this history?

To me that is not only essential, it's the way for students who don't want to do tightly focused monographic research but want some kind of broader comparative—which loosely is considered to be social-sciencey, comparative—to go. Because look at the job market today. I don't follow it the way I used to, but whenever I have students in the market, and I still have a few who need help, and I ask them how the job is defined—and this is true increasingly I guess in the history departments but especially in political science—it's not for a Russian expert. It's for somebody who can teach comparative politics, and usually they say also American studies, which, by the way, is itself area studies— though not considered as such, of course.

Indeed, American universities are largely structurally American studies. Overwhelmingly the faculty and the courses that are offered in history and politics are about America. So for us to go on about regional studies being not good when our universities are based on American regional

studies is parochialism. Maybe it's necessary, but that's the intellectual reality. So you get these ads that say—for tenure track junior professorship applications—comparative politics, may be any regions. Sometimes it'll say strong preference for Latin America or Russia, but frequently Russia is just another comparative place. So to be in political science today's students have to prepare to compete in that market.

In history it's not entirely like that yet, but some people say that this newer comparative history is going there. So I say, push back. Say, "Yes, do comparative history, but within a civilization." That's an alternative way to do it. But these folks don't think about that up there, so far as I know.

Q: This is really interesting actually.

Cohen: It's called old people bitching. It was always better in the past [laughter]. Actually it was.

Q: There are many people we've interviewed who—

Cohen: Feel that way?

Q: —talk about the golden age, yes.

Cohen: No, I don't do that, I am just very empathetic— I've got kids of various generations, none of them doing what I do. My youngest daughter seems to have strong intellectual

proclivities, though she's in law school. You know, every generation has to live its life. I'm not going to fight it and tell the young no, you're doing the wrong thing. But what I try to do is say, "Have a look at this and consider there might be something in you for it." But not that it's a right or wrong approach. But you do have an obligation if you're running educational institutions, like the Harriman, to think these things through.

Q: I read your article on Sovietology as a vocation, written in the mid- '80s.

Cohen: Old now, published in '85, right, in my book *Rethinking the Soviet Experience*?

Q: Yes.

Cohen: What's that, thirty years ago?

Q: A little over. Exactly. It makes me wonder what you think it would take to revive a golden era of Soviet studies.

Cohen: See, I won't use "golden era." It's like saying to a guy that's been married five times, "Which wife was best?" I mean who knows? All are best at the time [laughter], right? "If it hadn't been great I wouldn't have gotten married five times," such a person would say, I guess.

There was no golden era. What created Russian studies as a formidable academic profession in the United States was not historical tradition. Nor did we have a large contingent population of

Russians living here and wanting to give money and have their kids educated, though you're getting that today in Israel. It's very interesting. Have a look at what is happening in Israel. Israel is growing closer and closer to Russia, and it's being reflected in the universities, I think.

Everybody knows this story. It was the onset of the Cold War that created American Russian studies. The people who had come out of the war and the OSS [Office of Strategic Services] and other places and knew shit—stuff, as Obama calls it—who helped get this going with the wisdom of the Ford Foundation and others. People gave them money; you know the history. So that was a plus. Let's not be children; it was a plus. There probably wouldn't have been these half a dozen or more very good centers of Russian studies at major universities from Harvard and Columbia to Indiana, to Berkeley, to Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin and smaller Russian studies around.

I was invited to be the keynote speaker both at the founding of and the twentieth anniversary of the Russian studies program at Fairfield University in Connecticut. It's a Jesuit college. Jesuits love me; I don't know why. They love me, I think, because now that I've been declared heretic number one in America, they have some heresy in their past. "Let's get Cohen up here." Four hundred people turned out including a bunch of Ukrainian stalkers. So they wanted to call security and I said, "Don't call security. They're not armed; they're not going to do anything. They just want to talk. We'll give them the mic for a few minutes," and we did. But you know, these little university replicas of Russian studies got created and frequently the people who created them were products of Columbia and the other major centers. They wanted their own center and the university did, too.

In that sense the Cold War impact was a plus. But you know as well as I do, and it's a truism, that there were also negative consequences for academic life. It wasn't just McCarthyism and the chill. But afterward people had to get jobs and the market was dictating a kind of, "this is important because we have to know the Soviet threat." So a lot of courses about communism, and experts, were not necessarily about Russia but communism—like Condi Rice. I don't want to slur her, but I believe that she was never really a Russian expert. I'm not sure she actually spoke Russian, functionally at least. What she did was a dissertation on weapons transfers, I think, between Czechoslovakia and—I'm not sure about this. But there were a lot of students who came to do this sort of study. They didn't come to me, but they were able in universities to do masters theses and even PhDs on these subjects.

Would I say that we should never do that? I think that's too rigid a position, but I think we should be as exacting with that kind of Cold War study as we are on studies of the rule of Nicholas the First or Alexander the Second or Brezhnev. I mean the traditional breadth and rigor of scholarly studies should apply to that stuff, and not just give it a pass, "Oh well, strategic studies, it isn't really informed by Russian studies generally, but what the heck, it's part of our business." That I think we could do without.

[INTERRUPTION]

Cohen: I'm not religious about this, but I'm cautionary. If we could start again today—in a way maybe we could because this may be a moment—I felt this after the end of the Soviet Union.

Tucker used to say, "We've always studied Russia. That's what we've studied. We didn't call the program we built at Princeton Soviet studies. We called it Russian studies. The Soviet era was an era in the history of Russia. We carry on." That was absolutely it. We carry on. Nothing's been canceled. People wrote all those articles like, we're now obsolete, we have no relevance anymore, that's because they weren't really Russia scholars. They were scholars of the Cold War, and they wrongly thought the Cold War was over. I warned them when the Soviet Union ended we're going to have another Cold War if Washington kept this up, and now we've got one even worse than the preceding one.

So maybe there's an opportunity today to the extent—money is being cut back. You know that my wife created these Cohen-Tucker fellowships. You know about that and the ugliness that attended our offer. That was all a recapitulation of this resurgent McCarthyism and the rest. Should never be in our field. And I'm told that Trump's cuts are going to cut even more money coming to the universities. I've spoken to two Senators who are on the education committees, because despite my outcast role Senators and Congress-people do speak to me, partly because of my wife, whom they all like. About these issues I warn them don't do this.

We're going to have to—not we, I'm not part of it anymore—but people who are going to think about the future of Russian studies cannot count on a great new flow of funds just because we have a new Cold War. Because the funds were unlimited back then. Tucker used to say about my Princeton courses, which grew and grew and grew, "Every time the Soviet Union invades another country you get another hundred students." And it was sort of true. But to rethink intellectually what it means to study Russia, look at the past, what was good, what was not so

good, and try to get it as best you can. So it might be an opportunity. But we were so flush with money back then that people didn't have to make these kinds of decisions, which were often funding decisions rather than intellectual decisions, and the market was about Cold War. So even if it's about Cold War again today it's a chance to learn the lessons of the past and think things through.

Harriman of course is in the premier position. They're getting money, they've still got the name, they've got the possibility. They've got big problems, but that's not for me to comment on. I don't feel comfortable doing so. [Alexander A.] Cooley knows what I think and I'm a pain in the ass to him because I'm on this absolutely do-nothing so-called National Advisory Council. I've told him I think I'm aggravating everybody on it and it's time for me to step down. He says, "No, we want to hear your views." And two people on the committee, to my surprise, actually do more or less side with me. I was surprised. Unlikely people, but they too are uneasy about what's going on at Harriman. Cooley, I think, wants to do the right thing. He's a good man, very good man. But I'm not sure about his possibilities.

Q: What's the right thing?

Cohen: So I guess I've told Alex this in memos, and I don't have any relations with the other major force up there, Kim [Kimberly] Marten. I don't have relations with her. But Cooley has been a good guy in the sense that he's actually, to his great discomfort, solicited my point of view. I've sent him some very damning emails about some of the events he puts on up there. So I

make him uneasy, but he seems to be a democratic, very intelligent man, honorable, and very scholarly though his field is a little secondary to Russia itself, but nonetheless.

I think the first thing you do is stop doing certain things. I'm thinking primarily of Harriman's public events, which are their profile, which they advertise not only to Columbia but the community. They're running a lot of NGO [non-governmental organization] stuff up there and it's time to stop. A university is not an NGO. They're running human rights events, and gender events, and most of it is advocacy. They can present it as academic, but I mean, "We all have to help lesbians in Russia," and we've got to help this and that group or cause. My general view about this is no, this just isn't our mission—black America didn't call on Russia to come and get them civil liberties. When I came to New York gays still had a horrible time, even in New York. My wife was at the Metropolitan Opera Company. They were all in the closet. I mean there were a lot of them at the Met, but this was a battle fought and won by Americans in America, not with any Russian help. The Russians will have to sort this out themselves.

But because we are a missionary nation, or at least our elites are, this has crept into academic life. Apart from the Jewish immigration issue it really was not an issue during Soviet times, maybe because nobody ever thought the Soviet Union could do anything right about gays or anybody else. I don't know. But mainly think, because it wasn't an agenda item here. Nobody was helping gays in this country either. I mean Obama rattles on, but he was against gay marriage until about three years ago, and Mrs. [Hillary R.] Clinton too. But I'd like to see this stuff replaced by intellectual topics that could have a contemporary political edge. I would like to see at least two or three sides, not one, represented at every event. Harriman is doing a lot of one

hand clapping, kind of advocacy events. I feel, whether by design or inadvertence, that a lot of people easily within their reach they do not invite to speak.

I don't need any speaking invitations, but it is interesting that not once have I been invited to be a participant in one of these events—even though they've done three or four, including one on the history of détente recently, about which I've written a lot about, actually have been a participant and an advisor in détente episodes, and they went and got other people—maybe they were great. But bear in mind that, A, the Harriman knows me, B, I do have a scholarly reputation, three, I live ten blocks away, four, they don't have to pay me any travel or expense money so I'm cheap. Also I represent a minority point of view today, but it is a minority point of view, not a solitary point of view. There are eminent scholars who agree with me, and just don't have a big mouth, or a magazine to write for, or access to network television—though TV has now excluded me except for Fox which is kind of funny.

I've now become welcome on the Tucker [M.] Carlson show. It's all very ironic, but the reason Fox has opened up to me is it can't make up its mind about Trump. It's split as to whether they're for or against Trump, so they don't have a party line, unlike MSNBC and CNN. So when you don't have a party you get a little pluralism. That's a lesson for Harriman and all the others. They have an attitudinal line and it's too much shaped by what's going on both in Russia and in country. Harriman, and not only Harriman, needs to be more detached, more academic, so to speak.

I'll tell you off the record— ok, I won't be off the record. I'm deeply worried about the influence of the former ethnic republics of the Soviet Union, now independent, with deep historical resentments against Russia. You know what I'm talking about. I'm thinking first and foremost of Ukrainians where, both at Harvard and Columbia, Ukrainian studies have really commingled with Russian studies. This has happened inside the professional association, the ASEEES. In fact, I said I think it's time for balkanization. Ukrainians should have their own association. Baltic scholars should have theirs, and so on. We could have a federated relationship and maybe we can share funding, and maybe they can be administered centrally, but they should have their own national. Because when I go up to a national convention and half the panels are about Ukraine—if Ukraine is really independent and sovereign from Russia why are they piggybacking on Russian studies in America? Fine, they should have their own scholarship and their own things. But I think that a lot of poisonous attitudes are creeping into the field and it's making it hard for people who don't want to get involved in this. I know some students who are very uncomfortable about speaking their minds because they don't want to be called a Putin apologist or a betrayer of Ukraine or something. So this is a problem, but it can be managed and be thoughtfully addressed, if it is recognized and acknowledged.

I think that the public events of Harriman—and this is because Harriman is a special place—are missing an opportunity by not bringing the scholarly history and reputation of the place to bear on public affairs. If I were running Harriman today and I could dictate— they're doing way too many—it's getting a little bit like anybody who comes to town, come on paver. They should do a lot, but they should be more selective and aim for a bigger impact. I would do two things. I would have something generally called "Rethinking Major Historical Issues," essentially in light

of what we now know, the archive revolution and the rest. This would be very scholarly and I would take big issues, the biggest issues, that sound a little primitive but like, "Why did the Reds win the civil war?" I'd even go back to the old Alec Nove [Alexander Novakovsky] discussion that swept the field for a decade, "Was Stalin really necessary?" I would have one, "Was the Brezhnev period really an era of stagnation?" I would have one, "Was perestroika really doomed?" These have become shibboleths, orthodoxies, in the field that need to be reopened.

And I'm not keen on bringing Russians into our debates because they're grown up now, let them have their arguments in Russia. It's not dangerous in Russia anymore to argue against a state historian, indeed there's hardly any. I've got friends who run university programs in Russia that are critical of Putin, and people who edit newspapers that are critical of Putin, and they're not shooting any of them. If you have to take some risks now and then it's good for the soul. Indeed, we should take more risks ourselves. But here there are two, maybe three, generations of scholars, my generation, the generation of scholars that I helped train who would now be people around forty-five to fifty, and their students who are coming into things who have their own research and interpretations of these humungous questions that have shaped Russian studies from the beginning.

Let's identify eight for a year. Let's identify the ones that ramify. Not smaller things like, "Who's victimized more in Russia, gays or lesbians, or the Jews or the Chechens?" Let's do these big historical issues that ramify. Let's identify—ideally around here so we don't have to pay too much money—but scholars in the country who have reached conflicting or different views on them. Let's have a format where they come here, two or three. Each presents fifteen

minutes, their interpretations. Then they debate each other a little bit and we open it to the floor. This means reopening all the big questions. When they do it up here they screw it up because everybody thinks mostly the same thing. They say, "Oh, they disagree." Yes, they disagree on the margins. We need fundamental disagreement that's legitimate because it grows out of scholarly research.

The second series I would run would focus on headline news. You know, are we on the verge of a new arms race? The answer is yes, we are, but you need historical knowledge of this. How the future of Ukraine—I don't know how you'd word it—really important to American national security? Something like that. Is Russia an enemy of the European Union? This has become a motif that Putin wants to destroy the European Union. Why would he when Russia depends on selling gas to the European Union, why would he want to disrupt the European Union? I don't understand it. So we need people to explain this argument and have different perspectives—but people who know the history of this, Russia's relations with Europe, or the history of the first nuclear arms race. Are we walking into another one? Choose your topic. I mean Syria. Russia's traditional role in the Middle East. I don't know a lot about it. I'd go to that one, if I could hear conflicting informed opinions.

But these are the things that a university can do in the public service, but not with partisan advocates. Not by bringing in the kind of people that the Senate trotted out to testify last week. These are mothballed cold warriors who sold this malarkey for years, then they went out of business, and now because of Trump and this "Russia-gate" bunk are back in the business. And then these crackpots like [Clint] Watts going on about Putin sitting in the Kremlin and involving

himself in every election in every democracy and by the way, Senator [Marco A.] Rubio, we think he did it in your campaign. Pandering to Rubio who's a birdbrain. And Rubio's, "We were hacked by Putin definitely. That's why I didn't get the nomination." Every politician in America who loses in 2018 is going to say he or she was hacked by Putin.

To take these issues seriously, to do them from the privileged position, privileged in the sense that we have knowledge and we have objectivity and we are open and we don't call each other names, as befits a university. This is what Harriman could be doing. Not only Harriman.I will tell you right now that the organization that I helped re-found, the American Committee for East-West Accord, has tried to get Harvard to invite us up for a debate with people who have different views, and it's been killed repeatedly. It's not going to be permitted. If you want to know why all you have to do is, ask who is the new director of the Belfer Center [for Science and International Affairs]. Ash [Ashton B.] Carter, the former secretary of defense. So that's what they're running now out of Harvard.

Columbia doesn't have that institutional type of ties, nor should it have. This is an opportunity. Now, you could say that what I'm proposing is heretical, but I think it's a return to orthodoxy because this is what Harriman, the Russian Institute, used to do. This is what Indiana did, this is what Berkeley did, this is what Harvard did. They don't do it anymore. But if they could do it when the Cold War was really dangerous to our political life here, they can do it today. But instead they're running these banal sessions on the history of American/Russian relations with people who are arguing about how many angels are on the head of a pin.

Disagreement is good. It's what drives intellectual life. I mean [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel was right about this—though it's spooky what he did with it—that all of intellectual life, all of thought, is driven by conflict. That you have an orthodoxy—in any field, medical science, any field, philosophy—the orthodoxy is challenged by usually younger revisionists. There's an intellectual battle. Some synthesis occurs and becomes the new orthodoxy or the new prevailing paradigm, as they like to call it, in university life and departments. It's then itself challenged from within, either by an older heretic who's aggrieved by the outcome or younger people. That's what drives intellectual life, and study, and understanding. To shut that down on Russia is a grievous mistake, and that's what they are doing, probably unknowingly, though not always.

They're afraid of conflict. Why are they afraid? Are they timid souls? Do they not know any better? Are they limited intellectually? Are they dependent on powerful givers? That's why I worry about who's funding Ukrainian studies, Polish studies, Baltic studies. This money doesn't come without certain—if not ties with certain presumptions about what they're going to get for their money. I understand all the constraining factors, but this is the job of people who are supposed to be tending, not only to our universities, but specifically to Russian studies. And it isn't hard; it really isn't. And even if there are some risks, the penalties are not great, certainly not by comparison to those elsewhere.

I know a number of people who are very eminent souls, far more eminent than the people Harriman brings here to talk all the time, that can't understand why Harriman has never invited them to speak. They don't necessarily have ties to Harriman, but some of them do. Maybe they just didn't think of it, but when you don't think of something it's because you've got the

equivalent of a party line, of blinkers on, and you want people who fit into what you think is kosher. So that's what I would begin by changing. It could be changed very easily, and I think Cooley could do it. Because I think—I haven't quite spelled it out in this detail—but I've bitched at him repeatedly about these one hand clapping events.

They put on a panel the other day called—they had a big event, I didn't go, called something like The Trump/Putin Factor. First of all, they never should have billed an event like that. It's pandering and far from established fact. At a minimum they should have put a question mark at the end, or said is there a Trump/Putin factor? Do you understand the difference? Because otherwise obviously you're going to bring in people who begin with what I think is a false assumption, that there is this "Russia-gate" scandal and now we should do riffs on it. But if you think it's important why not ask is really there a Trump-Putin complicity, and then you get into the evidence and the logic and the arguments and you have an open discussion.

In a way that's no different than saying, we know the nature of the Brezhnev era, but do we really? Because there's a bunch of young scholars who have been doing conferences recasting—and the Brezhnev era was twenty X years long, it was absolutely fundamental in leading to perestroika and to the end of the Soviet Union. This was a pivotal era. Without the Brezhnev era you can't understand Putin. So why not bring in a person who represents the traditional view, bring in a young scholar—and maybe not so young anymore—who sees all this very differently based on his or her research, and then bring in somebody who thinks, "Ah, you're both right," or something like that? Because it's absolutely crucial for reopening and generating new teaching and research and exciting students.

When I went into Russian studies I'll never forget people at Columbia who went into Sino-Chinese studies, saying that people my age thought all the big questions are answered in Russian studies and all the questions are open in Chinese studies. That was just an illusion. It was a professional conceit. So that's how, in a broad way, I'd like to see Harriman recapture what once was. And I assure you when I stumbled into the place, even if this was not consciously thought out programmatically about how they operated, it's what they were doing back then just instinctively.

Q: What a great time to be there.

Cohen: It was. I can't claim any cunning pre-thought. I just stumbled into it like everything else in life.

Q: You should take more credit in these stumblings than you do.

Cohen: No. As I say, living among dissidents in Russia from 1976 until the authorities took my visa way in '82 was very important to me. First of all, it redirected my thinking. I wrote *The Friends and Foes of Change* which became one of my seminal articles—even the CIA picked it up to use for model analysis, and invited me— I was officially invited. I didn't go to Langley, we met in D.C. But they were running a seminar on this model of Cohen's *Friends and Foes of Change*. This was prior to Gorbachev. But I learned things living among the dissidents because among the dissidents—I also read the Soviet press—were children of high level functionaries

who blabbed, blabbed, blabbed. Or people who had been up there and got tossed out. I would say things like, “What do they discuss behind closed doors?” They’d say, “You won’t believe it,” and then blah, blah, blah. So you learn and you think and then you read and you find it echoed in the press, in the censored Soviet press, and then you begin to develop an analysis. But I fell into that simply because of Mrs. Bukharin, but that led to all sorts of concentric circles that were the dissident or nonconformist—

Q: I’m just going to—

[END OF SESSION]

ATC | Session: 3

Interviewee: Stephen F. Cohen | Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux | Date: April 6, 2017

Q: —the session and then we'll go on to Marxism.

Cohen: It may not interest you. It's more about ideology and philosophy, but specifically Marxism. Because it was an important issue over the years.

Q: Let's give it a go. So this is Caitlin Bertin Mahieux. I'm here with Professor Stephen F. Cohen. Today is Thursday, April 6, 2017, and we are here for his third session for his interview for the Harriman Oral History Project.

Cohen: Second session.

Q: We did two yesterday.

Cohen: Oh, we did?

Q: Yes. Count how you will. So let's talk about this.

Cohen: I was thinking about what we talked about yesterday and we didn't go too deeply into the intellectual basis of Russian studies and how it varied in the places where I had been, say

Indiana, then at Columbia, and then eventually when I went on to kind of run my own, our own, center at Princeton, but also around the country. One of the things we didn't discuss is that ideology was a big consideration of Russian studies—Soviet studies I should say—at that time because there was this understanding that somehow the Soviet government had always been communist or Marxist/Leninist. There was an understanding on the part of one wing of the profession that this actually didn't play a very big role, that Russian traditions had kind of kicked in—or political expediency was more important. But there was a very strong wing of the profession that still believes ideology was the driving force and that if you were going to do Soviet studies you really had to know the ideology as a major causal factor.

I won't revisit the merits of that argument, but it was something that was a little tentative in the '60s. Because, remember, in the aftermath of McCarthyism being a Marxist was like not a really great career thing. I mean it wasn't going to be a fast career track. So this school grew up, driven partly by the works of [Johanna] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Remember, this was the era, you and I didn't talk about this, that the Soviet Union was viewed as the major existing model of totalitarian government, because Nazi Germany had [been] said to be the other and it was gone. I partly made my interpretive mark by challenging this model as an explanatory factor, both in terms of Soviet history and in terms of Soviet politics when I fully entered the field in the early 1970s.

Again, I was influenced by Tucker, though Tucker did something interesting in this regard. It had a lot of influence, but ultimately, I thought, not leading where we had to go. He wrote an article, probably in the early '60s, called *The Dictator and Totalitarianism.* He argued that the

totalitarianism model was okay, but that it omitted the personality of the dictator, Stalin. Because Tucker was a personality oriented biographer of Stalin. But Bob's argument made no sense to me conceptually because if the role of the dictator was so important then all those structural elements that Arendt and Brzezinski and Friedrich and the others had built into a model of totalitarianism, which had like five or eight features—it was very mechanical— made much less sense. It was like you moved it from one system to another system. These things either were themselves transformed by the power of a despot and his outlook on life, or they really weren't important, they were just features that existed in many countries but had been driven to extremes, say, in Nazi Germany.

So the question would be, for example, if you were in a seminar arguing this, if [Adolf] Hitler had died in—I mean to do this counterfactual stuff is important. If Hitler had died in 1934, or Stalin had died in '34, would things have unfolded as they did? For example, would there have been the Great Terror in Russia? Some people were arguing yes, because everything was driven by these objective totalitarian factors, the ideology, the monopolistic control and the rest. But other people began to wonder with no Hitler, no Stalin, who would have been the leader and would the personality of that leader have mattered? So that opened up the field in a way, but it also drove it back to the question of how these people interpreted their own ideology. What was Marxism and Leninism for Stalin, and what was National Socialism for Hitler? The racial element in Hitler didn't come solely from Hitler. Hitler had picked it up in the streets of Bavaria and elsewhere after World War I. It was widespread in Germany, but nobody could have personified it and turned it into a kind of charismatic genocide the way Hitler did, or could there have been another such leader?

Then the question about Marxism/Leninism in Russia, would any leader have felt the need to enact a mass purge not only of the party but of society? So this was a case. But the problem was, did you really need to know Marxism and Leninism to understand Soviet politics and history? If the answer was yes, Marxism/Leninism itself was kind of an artificial construct. Marx himself never thought of his teachings applying to a country like Russia. He had built a model based on British capitalist industrialization and fused it to the political model of the French revolution and come up with a model, but essentially it was western-centric. Occasionally he would say things to people in different countries who came to him like, "I don't know, maybe it will apply." Because he didn't want to discourage his followers. I think the first volume of *Das Kapital*—if I'm not mistaken—the Russian translation was the first ever foreign translation.

So Marx had his adherents in Russia early on and was he going to say, "You people are irrelevant?" So he'd say things like, "You know, who knows?" [Friedrich] Engels was even less rigorous because he was more entrepreneurial. He would say, "Sure, you guys should look into it." But intellectually it wasn't a construct that fit Russia in 1917. Russia was eighty-two percent peasant, and the political future of Marxism/Leninism actually was already in the east. The next big place was China, which was even more peasant. And then, eventually, for God's sake, Cuba. When you added the imperialism, which Lenin did—actually it was first [Rudolf] Hilferding. So the question was, the extent to which a Russian specialist needed to immerse him or herself in ideology, and if so, to go back and understand Marx himself?

So there were two things that converged in the ‘60s, or several. One, the discovery of Marx’s early manuscripts which were published, I think, in the ‘20s but didn’t become widely known until the ‘60s. They revealed, it seemed, a completely different Marx, a Marx who was more interested in analyzing individuals, a Marx who was a humanist, a Marx who never really had broken with Hegel. Tucker wrote his first book, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, about this. And so when I fell under the mentorship of Tucker at Indiana and he was finishing the book we, his graduate students, took seminars with him about Hegel, Marx, German philosophy, and the rest. How this related to Russian studies wasn’t exactly clear, but Tucker treated it as part of Russian studies. So that was one factor.

The second factor was that, in the aftermath of McCarthy, to be a Marxist young graduate student or junior professor was a problem. I was never a Marxist. My interest in Marx was simply the intellectual part of it, how did this all fit? But there were some people. And then there was the Vietnam War in the ‘60s when quite a few young Americans, in a kind of not very clear and understanding way, declared themselves to be Marxists. But this had to with imperialism and the American war in Vietnam, and it was as much attitudinal as it was intellectual, thought this may be somewhat unfair. How do you separate the two?

All this was swirling around when I got to New York in the 1960s. Of course it would be hard to find a Marxist in Indiana or Kentucky, but all you had to do was go down to the Strand Bookstore in New York and many were there buying used books. Which was one of the beauties of being in New York. There used to be in Union Square the Thomas Jefferson Bookstore. It was the bookstore of the American Communist Party and they had most everything that the Soviet

Union ever published in English, which were hard to get. For example, the complete fifty volumes of Lenin in English, the thirteen volumes of Stalin in English, pamphlets, everything.

You know how it became known as the Thomas Jefferson Bookstore? So during the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt administration, the communist party wanted to relate to the New Deal, wanted to Americanize itself. So they began appropriating Jefferson's name. They weren't going to take Roosevelt's name. They took the name of Thomas Jefferson because then nobody cared or even knew that he'd been a slave owner. Then he was thought to be the most radical Democrat of the American founding fathers. So there were a lot of communist operations, they weren't fronts, they were clearly communist, but were called the Thomas Jefferson School, the Thomas Jefferson Series on the American Working Class, Thomas Jefferson Bookstore.

In fact—I don't want to make a mistake here—but Roosevelt too was interested in Thomas Jefferson. He wanted to appropriate him for the New Deal. I believe that at that time Roosevelt caused the American nickel, the coin, to bear the image of Thomas Jefferson. Now, I've got to check that, but I believe that happened under Roosevelt because I think Jefferson is still on the nickel, though you rarely see a nickel anymore. So Jefferson came back in vogue as an American founding father, who was relevant to the radicalism of the New Deal but also to the American Communist Party to show it was native.

But one of the things about being in New York—and once we all discovered the Strand, and scores of smaller used bookstores down on the lower east side of Manhattan in the Village—I mean you could quickly build a personal library—and it was all cheap. You could build a library

of hundreds of books as a graduate student up at Columbia if you wanted them, if you were interested. Though we were supposed to read them in Russian, nonetheless there they were.

But back to the question about Marxism when I got to Columbia. Tucker at Indiana had been only one of few Russian studies professors interested in Marx. I said I think he was the great American Russianist of his and other generations, partly because he lived in Russia—he married a Russian woman, he had to stay there with her, he couldn't get her out. But also Bob Tucker was exceedingly smart. But he picked up Russian because he was either drafted, or he volunteered, during World War II and was immediately sent to learn the Russian language to go into whatever they were into. Then he ended up posted with George [F.] Kennan in Moscow in '46 where he met his wife and married her, and then Kennan was expelled and Tucker held on in Moscow somehow.

He actually was one of the creators of a major enterprise called—you've probably never heard of it—*The Current Digest of the Soviet Press,* which was a daily translation of the Soviet press that later was commercialized. It existed for decades in English, but it began as a bulletin for the western embassies in Moscow because a lot of them couldn't read Russian. Bob could read it and was a quick translator, so one of the things he did when he had to leave the embassy—because if you married a Russian national, you had to leave the embassy—in order to survive in Moscow was became an editor and selector of what was called something like *The Bulletin of the Press.* It was commercialized here by a guy named Leo Gruliew and became a commercial project for decades. It's since gone under.

Remember I said how diverse Columbia was? And diverse not only intellectually, but due to people's autobiographies. So there were people at Columbia on the senior faculty at the Russian Institute but also close to it—I think, for example, of a professor in the government department named Otto Kirchheimer. At Columbia if you were in government, or what we would call political science today, they had a dim sense of comparative study. You couldn't just do Russia. "Okay, I'm getting a PhD in Russian politics." No, you had to focus on at least three political systems.

Some did American because we grew up here, you could do what you learned in high school, make it easy. I did British because I had lived in England and I thought the British political system was really interesting. So I knew quite a lot. It was easy enough to read up and pass my generals on that. But I needed a third and I drifted toward France even though I didn't know French, and by the way I had to take a crash course in French in order to pass the reading exam, because you needed two languages for the PhD. I had the Russian, but I spent two months in a summer crash course in just reading, not speaking French. And they let you use a dictionary so I tabbed my French dictionary and you only had two hours and basically you had to translate something and I kind of eked through the exam.

But Professor Kirchheimer was interesting. He was very interested in Russia and here's the reason. First of all he had written a book called *Political Justice,* which was about political show trials in history. So he'd been interested in the purge trials in Russia. That was one reason, but the other reason, as I recall, is his wife, his ex-wife I think, was an official in the East German government. She was a German communist official. Otto had a lot of trouble in this country. I

don't know whether they were still married, whether he had remarried, but this trailed him everywhere and he had trouble, security clearances, and the rest. At Columbia there was a kind of shadow over him even. I remember people said, "He's really smart and everything, but you know, his wife—" so I did my training on France to prepare for my PhD exams with Kirchheimer. He was really an interesting man. He spoke with a heavy German accent. You could barely understand him seomtimes. He was kind and full of intensity. And he was very interested in Russia. One of the things he kept asking about was Marxism, because he was German, Marx was a German. I mean, he grew up in this stuff. It was normal to him.

In the Russian Institute itself there were people who had also come out of a Marxist background. After all, Alex Dallin's father had been a Menshevik, David Dallin. That was a Marxist movement. Erlich's father, who had been executed by Stalin along with Adler—secretly, they found out later—came out of the Russian Jewish bund. But that was a revolutionary movement, kind of a social democratic movement; it was significantly Marxist. There were others who had not been Marxist but had grown up in circumstances where Marxism was perfectly normal in the '30s. So if you were interested in Marxism—not as the ideology of the Soviet Union, but only later as that—if you were interested in the extent to which say Lenin and the Bolshevik movement had authentic intellectual antecedents in German Marxism—and I had to be because Bukharin, my subject, was the preeminent Marxist of the Bolshevik movement, and deeply committed intellectually to the idea of Marx. Though, unlike Lenin who had no interest in [Karl Emil Maximilian] Weber, Bukharin was also influenced by the whole Weber sociology, which itself was a critical answer to Marx.

Stuart Hughes, at Harvard, I think, wrote a terrific book called *Consciousness and Society* where he said that all of modern sociology is a debate with the dead Marx. Not sociology like pollsters conceive it, but elite theory, class theory, structural theory. They were all arguing against Marx, but they took Marx so seriously that they had to answer him and they created their own intellectual movement. Bukharin was influenced by this too.

For me, as a biographer, I had to go back into all this. Tucker—to end this—was interested in the Marx who had grown out of Hegel and [Ludwig Andreas von] Feuerbach and this whole concept of alienation, that people projected the best parts of themselves to an alien object and didn't recognize it in themselves and became alienated as individuals. Remember that psychiatrists were originally called alienists.

Q: [Laughs] I didn't know that.

Cohen: Yes, because it was something—you had schizophrenia, there was something wrong with you, you couldn't live with yourself, you were alienated from yourself. They called themselves alienists. Much of this had come out of German Marxism. Tucker was immersed in that and his interpretation in *Karl Marx, Philosophy and Myth*, really founded—though he didn't get the credit he deserved later in life—founded the whole reinterpretation of Marx as a philosopher that's now commonplace.

But at Columbia none of that was of interest. What was of interest was the influence of Marxist ideology on the government or regime or society we were now studying at what preceded the

Harriman Institute. To the extent that I am aware—this would need to be verified—that element, though it was not a major element, barely existed in any other major Russian studies center in America. Harvard was strongly influenced by its founders, who were Russian émigré historians, Karpovsky and others, and they were utterly dismissive of all this Marcist stuff. This was about Russia, not about Marx, right?

But when you think back about it the early years, just barely pre-Soviet, overlapping with Soviet times, almost Lenin contemporary, Russian thinkers who were revolutionary in some way but real philosophers, like [Nikolai A.] Berdyaev, were focusing—like in his famous book, *The Origins of Russian Communism,* origins he located in Russia—not in Marxism, were partially Marxist. So this whole body of work was there.

At Columbia, the role of ideology was a big factor, but if you found that narrow and sterile—as some functional thing that Arendt and Brzezinski had tossed in—and had to look into it as I did, there were people to talk to. If you look at Erlich's, I think, one and only major book, *The Soviet Industrialization Debate*, it is essentially a study of conflicting Marxist thinking about industrialization: he took Bukharin, one wing of the Marxist Bolshevik movement in Russia; Preobrazhensky, who was affiliated with [Leon] Trotsky and the other wing; and Erlich was asking two questions that made the book important. In terms of modern economics, were these valid modernization models the Bolshevik thinkers were creating? Modernization was all the rage in those days in academic life. But he was also asking who was right in terms of Marxism? Erlich was, because this came out of Erlich's own background. People like Alex Dallin, too, though not his specialty—he was an enormously ecumenical man because of his family

background. His Menshevik father had participated in these debates. Alex was entirely open to such discussions at Columbia.

So you could go, a person like myself who really wasn't sure about all this, and who needed some guidance, these guys were there. And there were others who were open to this. Tucker was the only one at Indiana when I was there; nobody else was interested. Harvard didn't have it. I don't know about the other institutes that were popping up. But I think if you look back and asked who in Russian studies was open to asking questions not about the official ideology, the mummified ideology, but about the intellectual origin of this in Marx, Columbia was probably—luckily for me, again—the best place to land. And I think that was a feature of Columbia Russian studies without being advertised. It existed more on an individual professor level. So I leave you with that as a sidebar which we didn't discuss, before.

Remember that at that time in the '60s, as McCarthyism retreated, the Soviet threat was becoming routinized. Nobody really thought the Soviets were going to show up in San Francisco. I mean it was now becoming routinized, the Soviet bureaucratization, people understood this. That's how Russia kind of entered into comparative political science, study of bureaucracies and all the rest. How important it was I'm not sure, but intellectually it was valuable because it made you think more broadly. It also alerted you, which became of interest to me, to ask whether there were any real Marxists in the Soviet Union. It turned out there were and they were lurking in the philosophy department of Moscow State University, and elsewhere.

When the dissident movement begins in the mid or late ‘60s and they begin to release their typescript manuscripts, you see some of them wrestling with Marx. The most famous became Aleksandr [A.] Zinoviev, who wrote a book called *The Yawning Heights*, went abroad and lived in Switzerland for years, finally went back to Russia. But he was a towering figure in philosophy at Moscow State University and influenced many of the subsequent outstanding philosophers of the Soviet and post-Soviet period in Russia today. There’s a cult of Zinoviev in Moscow today, not because he was a dissident, but because he had inspired so much philosophical rethinking. Even while it was all officially censored he was doing it at the university with his students. So he was reopening these questions, and others were, about who really was Marx, what Marxism was all about, where did Russia fit in its history.

Though Columbia didn’t do that in terms of curriculum, such questions were alive if you were open to the community collected as senior professors at Columbia. That, in my judgment, was an asset, a virtue.

Q: Absolutely.

Cohen: But remember that it came at a time when models were breaking down, modernization was coming in, the question of where the Soviet communist system—was it just another case of modernization, is that what it was all about? That was Cy Black’s focus at Princeton and the book, *The Transformation of Russia*, that was all about modernization. I mean I got my job at Princeton in 1968 partly because— I slipped into the politics department—because at the interview I claimed that my biography of Bukharin was about modernization. When I gave my

job talk that's all I talked about. "Very central subject," and it was mostly bullshit. I mean modernization was a subject, there are pages in my book about it, but that was not my focus.

So that was another good thing about the pre-Harriman place.

Q: I think also maybe there's something interesting about pre-Harriman. You're talking about this time in the '60s, New York, Columbia, and yesterday you mentioned briefly '68. So I'd love to hear more about how the political movements and issues of the time were reverberating in the Russian Institute at that time too.

Cohen: It's hard to remember, and I was not a central figure in it. My own role in the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement—which were the two elements that drove this—still tended to be shaped by my upbringing in Kentucky and my ties in the south, not in the Northeast. My attitude to Vietnam was I didn't want to get drafted. That was my main concern. When I was called by my draft board in Kentucky, my main concern was to avoid taking the physical. Once you took the physical they were going to induct you—[Lyndon B.] Johnson was now drafting so many people. My deferment as a student expired—it was an undergraduate deferment, but I had married and the married deferment got you a couple of years, but unless you had a kid it was no good. They didn't want to draft guys with kids, simply because they didn't want to pay the—they didn't care if you got killed, they just didn't want to pay the benefits to your family, the widow and kid benefit. And they had to support the family if you went into the Army.

But I was opposed to the war and I had no intention of being inducted into the Army, but nor did I want to go to Canada. So I played, like a lot of us did, we played the loopholes in the draft. Later when they put in the lottery—but I was too old by then. Technically you were draftable until, as I recall, twenty-seven, but if you took two deferments it extended your age vulnerability to the draft. It was a completely unjust system. I mean white kids could often avoid it, but I didn't feel like martyring myself and volunteering so I did what I could do.

The Vietnam War was an abomination. I mean it was horrible. We understood that. I had mixed feelings about seizing campuses and blocking traffic, because I always felt that we needed to reach beyond ourselves to build a broad opposition to Vietnam, and ultimately it had to be electoral. If you alienated the electorate, like burning your draft cards—or also burning your bras which was the women's symbol of protest at Columbia, they all collected their bras and had a bonfire. Nobody knows today whether going braless was a social fashion statement or a political statement, but it later became a norm in America.

The thing at Columbia was set off, as I recall, when [H.] Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael came to campus, but it was precipitated by the university's plan to build a gym down in Harlem, in Morningside Park. The community didn't like it. The university was making all sorts of promises to the black community, they'd have access to the gym, but everybody knew what would happen. Eventually they built the gym behind Low Library, underground mainly. Everybody knew that Columbia wouldn't treat the community fairly, and realtors drive university expansion. Look at NYU. They don't need to be building all these buildings all over New York, but the expansion of a university is very profitable. The people who sit on the boards

of trustees, if you look at them, of universities, a lot of them are realtors in the cities. City government is strongly influenced by realtors, so they get their permits and everything. But all this got mixed up and inflamed at Columbia.

I remember there was a man named Dwight Macdonald, who was a famous American left intellectual at I think *The Partisan Review*. But he was very well-known. He was also—I don't think he'd ever been a communist, but he'd been involved in the '30s in the left movement. He came to campus one day and the students had occupied—I don't know, was it Hamilton Hall or whatever it was?

Q: Yes, it was.

Cohen: The embattled [laughs] administration was in Low library and then there was a kind of rump session that had formed. MacDonald walked by and he said, "Gentlemen, there sits the Duma." Because he interpreted such events through the Russian revolution. Everything that happened at Columbia campus for Macdonald and others was like the Russian revolution replaying. This was preposterous. This was a literary conceit, but it attracted the intelligentsia.

The tragedy of what happened at Columbia—and as I recall, and I may be wrong—I have to tell you how this worked. Going to graduate school is expensive, not as expensive as it is now, and [New York] was an expensive city to live in even then, when you compare it to living in Kentucky and Indiana. And though my wife was singing at the Met and had a decent Columbia salary, it wasn't an abundant salary. I mean we could live, but there were things we—you know,

we had a budget. So when I came to Columbia, they gave me a very small fellowship, very small, but I got two things. Brzezinski made me this junior fellow of his university seminar on communism—which was a very good program, he brought people from all over the country. But also my course work qualified me to become a teaching assistant. This is the way it worked. For which you got paid—I dimly recall they paid us $5,000 a year, but I'm not sure.

I was assigned to teach for a man named Herbert [L.] Deane, who had nothing to do with Russian studies, but he ran political philosophy in the department of government. And what he did with his several teaching assistants was have them teach breakout classes for undergraduates. One was like the history of liberalism, one was like the history of—I don't know—but one was called Radical Thought. Herb, who was the nicest of men, had no idea what he meant by radical thought. So I got recruited to teach Radical Thought, probably because of my Soviet studies, and it was my course. I had, as I recall, about fifty students and I taught it as the history of Marxist movements from the origins.

As a result I had in my class quite a few leaders of SDS, who were on campus and who were trying to drive this "revolutionary movement" on campus. One of them I ran into in the Hamptons a couple of years ago. I wasn't much older than those kids, but this guy now looked like thirty years older than me and he remembered me. But when the shit hit the fan at Columbia the university did some bad things. First of all, they expelled the most radical students to deprive them of their draft deferments. Secondly, an informal consortium emerged, I think this to be true, where the presidents of all the universities in New York City agreed not to take these kids if they tried to transfer to City University or NYU. You following me what they were doing? So these

kids were worried. They didn't want to get drafted. They start applying to universities around the country—like what we call sanctuary cities today—to universities known to be very liberal. One of them was Reed College in Oregon. I remember this—you ever hear of Reed?

Q: Yes, I have.

Cohen: I don't know what it's become today, but then it was considered a stronghold of—as was, by the way, Oregon—because Wayne [L.] Morse was the first senator, or one of the first senators, to break with Johnson on the Vietnam War. I think he was a senator from Oregon. And there was an Oregon representative in the House. But these kids couldn't get letters from senior faculty, so they came to me. They were in my course. Even though I was just an instructor and had no stature, they needed a letter saying they were good students, and I wrote quite a few, because they were.

One or two of the kids in my course were in this Underground Weather [sic] group that was building bombs. As I recall, but not sully sure, one of them had a girlfriend who was living in a townhouse—I mentioned this earlier—I think on Ninth Street in the Village that was owned by Dustin Hoffman, the actor, but he didn't live there, he was leasing it out. And they screwed up the bomb and it exploded. I think—I don't remember exactly—I think that it killed one of the kids and the other two fled and went underground. One of them was in my course. I don't remember today—I should—whether it was the one that was killed or the one who went underground. But somebody from the FBI came and asked me about him. In fact, the only thing I knew was they were very engaged students in the class.

So I had that indirect tie to what was going on at Columbia un 1968. Politically I had misgivings about turning universities into protest strongholds. The worst thing the university did—and this was a tragedy; and I digress. The provost at the time was a wonderful man named David [B.] Truman who was a major political scientist. It was understood that when—God, do I get the names right?—Grayson [L.] Kirk, who wasn't such a wonderful man, then president of the university, retired David Truman would become president. This was his life ambition to be president of Columbia. You know [Dwight D.] Eisenhower had been president of Columbia before he became president of the United States. This was really a position—more so than Harvard, I think, because of New York.

Truman, who was liked and trusted by the student rebels, promised them that he would never let the city police on campus. Technically the police could not enter the campus either at the Broadway or the Amsterdam gates. I mean they could have physically entered, but for some legal reason they couldn't come on campus unless they could prove that an actual crime had been committed or unless the university asked for their help. No crime had been committed. People just occupying buildings. And Truman promised the students that he would never permit cops on campus. For some reason, he broke his promise. I do not know even now whether it was Kirk, Grayson Kirk, who did it over Truman's head—because Truman was provost, the second officer—or whether Truman capitulated. But that led to the night when the cops came on campus and roughed up a lot of students with their billy clubs, boys and girls.

I went up to watch part of it and what interested me most was it had little to do with Vietnam. This was a kind of class warfare. The cops resented these privileged kids up at Columbia, places their own kids would never occupy. And moreover all these young women burning their bras and the guys burning their draft cards. The cops were just enraged by working class patriotism, if you want to call it that. I understood it. A lot of people got badly beat up. One of my students, James Kunen, wrote a book called *The Strawberry Statement*, a little memoir which captures all of this, including the cops coming on campus.

That only related to Russia in the sense that people were asking, "Is this what a revolution looks like?" Are we getting a chance to witness a reenactment of something that we've been studying historically? The answer was no. But there were elements that the Russian revolution had been very much driven by war, failing war. It had been driven by using the children of the lower classes as cannon fodder while the children of the privileged Tsarist classes had ways to avoid being drafted and fighting. An unjust war—the First World War in Russia's case, Vietnam in our case—and a lot of ideological groups emerging on campuses, recruiting, arguing what young people should do. You had anarchism, you had the black liberation movement, the Marxists were up at Columbia. Though it really wasn't a reenactment, but it was a kind of—you could see something in the psychology of the moment, of the way people were reacting to this, the posturing, the doubts, the certitudes, the passions, the radical urges.

I don't recall anyone—now, some of the faculty—Erlich may have been a faculty supporter of the students. I'm not sure. This is a matter of record; one could easily check it. But I don't recall any of my fellow graduate students at the Russian Institute being engaged with what was going

on as I was. But I got engaged because I had this course, Radical Thought, and those SDS kids were in it. Do you understand what I'm saying?

But I don't recall it as having a big impact on people I knew. I may have overlooked someone. There was a PhD candidate in French studies who was very sympathetic to the students and he didn't think he'd be kept on as assistant professor at Columbia; but he was and eventually got tenure there. But most of the junior faculty, and the senior graduate students who might have stayed on at Columbia as assistant professor or instructor—pretty much were shuffled out when their terms expired. It wasn't a kind of blood purge, it was just they weren't renewed or weren't offered anything and they went on to other places. Some became quite famous from Columbia in subsequent protest movements around the country, Berkeley, for example. Some became professors at various American universities, teaching from a left perspective. Somebody told me one had influenced Obama a lot in Chicago. I don't know that to be the case. But apart from people in Russian studies occasionally asking, "Was this like the Russian revolution?" I don't recall much more. I don't know if that helps.

Q: It does. It paints a picture.

Cohen: By the way, James Kunen is still a writer, the young author of *The Strawberry Statement*. It was a funny book, partly because it said that he had no interest in the cause—he was an undergraduate. But the reason he went into the occupied buildings is he thought it was really cool to see girls not wearing bras. He turned this into a kind of funny satiric putdown of the political seriousness. One reason why so many guys were clustering around had nothing to do

with politics, he thought, and it was a funny book. Somebody just reprinted it. He's got kids now and he wanted his kids to understand what was going on. He sent it to my wife, Katrina [vanden Heuvel] because he had written for the magazine. It's here. I think I saw it earlier today. That's all I've got to say about 1968, I think.

Q: That's great.

Cohen: Other people who were there at the time—Loren [R.] Graham was in and out. He may have thoughts about '68.

Q: So then let's move on to the other topic that you suggested which I think is really interesting as well, which we should get into if you don't mind.

Cohen: What was that?

Q: About the families.

Cohen: Maybe this is not a legitimate topic for the project.

Q: I think it is.

Cohen: Maybe it's more my own personal case, but one of the things that interested me when I left Indiana, where I very much lived on campus—I was at Indiana as an undergraduate but I

spent a year and a half in England. So I was there two and a half years as an undergraduate at Indiana, and then I stayed on another year and a half for my masters. I came to New York in ‘62. I remember vividly perhaps my first class. Is Hamilton Hall the one that is adjacent to the library and has windows facing Amsterdam?

Q: It does have windows facing Amsterdam, yes.

Cohen: I remember it was a hot day and we were in Hazard’s seminar and we had to open the windows. I can remember the trucks loudly rumbling by. I remember thinking this never happened in Bloomington, Indiana. It was all so pastoral.

The reason that family—and if I digress stop me—mattered is that I don’t really recall any of my colleagues, but there must have been some, living in campus housing. That’s why I said it was more like going to work. There was a guy named George Osborne. He had a bad future, he got disbarred, but he was a lawyer and he had come to study Soviet law with Hazard. And then there was a guy named James [M.] Collins who finished his work in the Russian Institute but later became the secretary of the Republican Party under Reagan. That is, he kept notes at the cabinet meetings. I mean I don’t know how that happened. People went different ways—there were people who went into academic life, there were people who—but I just remember that another difference was that whereas in Indiana we kind of chased the same girls and played in the same pool halls and slept in the same places—I eventually lived in a house in Bloomington—but nonetheless it was a campus oriented life. Whereas in New York you got up wherever you lived in the city and you went to what was our job, our PhD studies.

People were older and some had families. There weren't many women at the time. Susan Heuman—did you interview her?

Q: Yes, we did.

Cohen: She was a wonderful tennis player.

Q: [Laughs] That I didn't know.

Cohen: There used to be a tennis court right next to Butler Library, that whole area was a tennis court. Susan and I would go play there and she would just—I was a mediocre tennis player, but it was like playing a Davis Cup star. She was so good it was unbelievable. There was another guy named Phil Shellhouse, I think he had a big crush on Susan. He was a better tennis player, but she killed him too. I see Susan sometimes in Riverside Park. She lives up on 110th Street in a penthouse. Susan owned her own apartment. I was living down, then, at 96th and West End Avenue. There were also people who weren't married, but they were from this area and their families were around. I had a wife, no children yet. My first child was born in—Jesus—'67, a year before I went to Princeton.

But my situation was somewhat different. I had a wife who was more professional than I was. She was singing at the Metropolitan Opera Company and making a reasonable salary, though not a big one. She sang, as a rule, two nights a week and two nights a week she was the cover, which

meant if a person fell ill— she was on call. Which meant she had to be twenty minutes from the Met, and she had to be near a telephone and there were no cell phones. There were no computers; there was no email. So if we went to a movie, we had to get our seat numbers and then I had to go out—and if the movie house wouldn't let me use the phone go to a pay phone call the board at the Met and say, "Lynn Blair is in row ten at the such and such theater." You had to do that— some people didn't—but you never knew what was going to happen.

So Lynn's professional life to a certain extent structured mine at Harriman. She had an active social life. I never was much for social life, but it took me even further away to the extent that I did. A problem then arose. It was the understanding that if you were a graduate student of merit you would go on the IREX exchange to the Soviet Union. And that meant, since you were going for a year, that your spouse would go with you. And again, I don't recall as many women in politics and history—they were more in literature and cultural studies—as came later. Susan was there, but who else? I don't remember. There were a few. You've interviewed a few women. I think Rita [E.] Hauser was before my time.

Q: We didn't talk to her yet.

Cohen: But I think a few were before me. Or went into business and stuff like this.

Q: I think Jeri Laber was before you.

Cohen: Jeri was before me. She went into human rights, right?

Q: Yes.

Cohen: I never really knew her. But for some of the students who wanted to go on the IREX it was a pretty cool deal because the wife was usually free to travel. It would be a mutual experience and they lived together in Moscow or wherever. I think [William C.] Taubman and his wife Jane, for example, lived at Moscow University and even wrote a book about it called *The View from Lenin Hills* about their experiences.

Bill Taubman was my exact contemporary. We studied with John Hazard together. But he was a New Yorker. His father, Howard [Taubman], had been the drama critic of the *New York Times* for years. He was the most influential drama critic, theater critic, in America. He made and broke Broadway shows. Bill's brother Phil [Philip Taubman] became a correspondent for the *New York Times* and was posted in Moscow. So it's always been a *Times* family. But it was easy for Bill. Jane, his wife, was a Russianist. They just went off together and happily lived at Moscow State University.

It was more complicated for me. There was also another factor. IREX was still being run by Robert Byrnes at that time out of Bloomington and I remember the interviews. I later sat on the IREX selection committee when [Alan] Kasoff was running it and he was in Princeton. He ran it out of Princeton. He was a professor of sociology there. But they grilled you a lot about this notion that the KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti] might sexually compromise you or your wife. They had this bee in their bonnet. It was unbelievable. I guess it was okay to say,

"By the way, be aware of sexual entrapments," and assuming you were grownup you knew what this meant without needing details. But I remember they had a question—this didn't have to do with Harriman itself, pre-Harriman, but those of us who went through the process used to comment on it like, "What did you say?" They always asked the same thing. "So you," the male—and it was all male driven at the time— "are not at the room in Moscow University, you're off at the library and a really good Russian guy—" they were always really good Russians because they assume that no American woman could withstand a really good guy; it was all in this "—whom you know casually comes to your room and knocks on the door. Would your wife let him in?" This was basically the question. You could see what they were getting at, right? This was already mid-'60s, and I mean we were all groaning, but you had to give these selection guys some answer.

There was also a saying, "Don't take a bad marriage to Moscow." That it's very stressful there and it'll only make things worse. I think there was some documented evidence for this. There was also the question, if you had kids whether they could go to the Anglo-American school there, which was run by the embassy. There weren't many kids involved on the exchange. People had school-age kids but—I remember when I later went on the senior exchange in 1976, the academy exchange, I did put my two oldest kids for five months in the Anglo-American school.
But the extent to which we had a right to that, because technically we weren't part of the embassy, was uncertain. Our representative in Moscow was the cultural department of the American embassy where there was an IREX representative or an attaché who had taken on this thing.

So the question of the exchange affected family. Also the extent to which—studying Russia, in addition to being a kind of full time obsessive profession, the extent to which it affected family and personal relations. I knew of a couple cases where they claimed it busted up their marriage, but I think those marriages were doomed anyway. But Russia was usually just so remote from anything that the wife did or was interested in—you know what I'm saying here? Those were different times when it was hard to manage a two-career marriage. Now—I wouldn't say it's easy, but it's accepted.

Q: The norm at least.

Cohen: Or both of you even try to get appointments at the same university. Used to be a rule against that. They wouldn't hire spouses of either gender. Not same departments, or some universities at all. I watched that break down at Princeton, eventually. And I only brought it up because it would make it a lot easier if your spouse was into Russia, if not as a—

Q: Academic?

Cohen: Or anything, but just thought it might be interesting. And this became a little more complicated because there was the insistence on going to Russia, in order to be a scholar and to go on the exchange you had to know Russian well, and I did not. So a lot of us went off to these horrible intensive summer language programs. You know about them, the eight week ones? I wasn't going to go to Middlebury. I went back to Indiana which had—

Q: Their own?

Cohen: Famous one. It was one of the two that IREX offered to you. You either go to Middlebury or Bloomington. I was a bad language student because I had no interest in grammar, never understood it, hated the intensive courses, resented the people in there who were all better than me—there was one German guy. Because Germans conjugate and decline like Russians—he just understood everything. So I just went to the classes but played pool every night and I violated the pledge you sign that for eight weeks you'd speak only Russian. So I went back to the pool halls where I had the habit when I was an undergraduate at IU.

You can see the result in my Russian today—I read fine, but I have minimal grammar when I speak. I just bite off the endings. Because I noticed I can't hear the endings when Russians speak so if they don't enunciate them why should I? But the wife was also supposed to learn Russian. So my poor opera singer wife, Lynn, trudged off back to Bloomington with me. The only saving grace being she was from Indianapolis, and was happy to see her mother and all the rest, but it was hot and it was dreary and she didn't play pool and it was a stress and a strain on both of us. Then after going through all that language study the Russians rejected me. They rejected me repeatedly for the student exchange, even though I was applying out of the pre-Harriman, because they knew what I was really studying, Bukharin. I kept telling them I was studying the ministry of foreign trade in the '20s, but saw through that. I never did get on the student exchange. I only got in on an exchange much later when I went on the academy exchange.

Q: So then—

Cohen: But family was—as in any profession— a factor. Later when I left Columbia and I was a tenured professor at Princeton, and Katrina became my spouse the question arose—this is just a sidebar but it may interest you—the era when you live openly together only when you were married had passed, and Katrina and I had been living in sin for years. But I wanted to take her on the official academy exchange with me to the Soviet Union, otherwise she would not have been permitted a visa. And I wasn't going for long periods of time without her.

The IREX said I had no right to take her because she wasn't my wife. So I looked at the original [laughs] treaty of the exchange program with the Academy of Sciences and the language never used the word wife, *zhena*. They used the word spouse, *suprug*. The words *zhena* and *muzh*, wife and husband, did not appear in the treaty. Only *suprug* and the feminine version, *supruga*. So then I got out all the ancient dictionaries I could find and nowhere in the history of the word *suprug* did it specify husband or wife, in the sense of IREX's objection.

Q: And it worked?

Cohen: IREX finally said, "Okay, try it," and the Russians were okay with it. But I had to fight the IREX board here to put her down with me as entitled to— like me, an academic visa, so the visa was *uchenia* or something, scholarly, not tourist, and she needed that kind. I went back and forth using that exchange after '76 taking Katrina along, always as my *supruga*. So there were complications about—but this was later. And of course Katrina developed her own interest in Russia, came to understand and speak Russian better than I do, and has deep ties to Russia of her

own even though she continues to run *The Nation* magazine. She just wrote a really nice article in *The Nation* about [Yevgeny A.] Yevtushenko, our old family friend, the poet who died last Saturday. A Russian paper's going to publish it too. Katrina may actually want to go to Russia more often than I do these days, if just to escape Trump. I said I'm not sure you escape him in Russia either. But you know, we lived there often together, she and I. The only other thing I can say about Lynn was when she went with me on the exchange, finally, with the kids, we tried to rig up something for her with the Bolshoi Opera, but it was just too complicated.

Q: So she had to leave that behind?

Cohen: She was leaving the Met soon anyway by then to go out on her own. And she was happy enough in Moscow, exploring opera and going around with her new friends. One of the interesting things about Lynn was that through her—I knew nothing— we learned about the gay community in Moscow in the 1970s, which congregated around ballet and opera. I met quite a few gay people, Russian gay people, through her in Russia. So you know, roads lead—but this strays away from Harriman.

Q: It's really interesting.

Cohen: My one direct contact with Harriman in Russia was when we were living in 1992—Katrina, and Nika, who was now one year old—at the House on the Embankment. Suddenly Katrina gets a message from Pamela [B.] Harriman. She got it from Pamela because Katrina sort of comes from that world of the Harrimans and she knew Pamela slightyl or Pamela knew her.

Pamela, who was kind of overseeing [W.] Averell [Harriman]'s legacy at Harriman, I guess she was on the board or something, I don't know how this worked.

[INTERRUPTION]

Cohen: So where were we? I had left the Harriman years ago. Life was completely different because—as you'll see from that book I gave you—Katrina was also embedded by this time in Russia. This was by the early 1980s, as embedded in Russia as I was with her own—by the way, speaking of Columbia, this will interest you maybe. I don't know the year, you can ask—have you interviewed Colette [Shulman] yet?

Q: No, next week.

Cohen: Are you doing the interview with her?

Q: I'm not, no.

Cohen: So tell your person to ask about this. The year, I think, was '86, but Colette and Katrina—Katrina being my wife—created with their Russian women friends—this is interesting to me—a feminist journal called *My i Vy*, *You and Us*. The idea was to get American women to dialogue with Russian women about gender issues, women issues. There was already a big feminist movement in out country, big time, with all its stars and its political successes, and in Russia there was acarcely any. The motive, on the part of Katrina and Colette, was not to instruct

these Russians but to be there for them for discussion. So they created this journal, which I'm told—Colette would know the figures—the print run in Russia was maybe several thousands and the issues were like maybe what *Time* or *Newsweek* magazine looks like. But I'm told it had—I didn't really pay much attention. This didn't interest me. But they were busy for years doing this, and it had a big impact. A lot of the Russian women who later came to the Harriman as fellows, like Nadya Azhgikhina and women like that, grew out of that association.

What was interesting to me—because I do not favor these NGO operations in Russia of the kind the National Endowment on Democracy is running, where they're giving money to political parties under the guise of teaching them how to do democracy. They favor candidates and groups that favor us. But what Katrina and Colette got involved in were issues like birthing homes in Russia, the really harsh conditions under which women were giving birth when they turned to the official hospitals or birthing houses, and to introducing them to alternative ways of birth, ways to lobby the government to be more woman accessible. This caught on in Russia and they had some success. Whether it was in only Moscow or also in the provinces I don't know.

But there's a weird way how my scholarly history at Harriman, which led me to Princeton, which led me to meet Katrina—but I knew Colette and Marshall [D. Shulman] before. I think I probably introduced Colette to Katrina. Then their joint Russia/feminist interests brought them together. I think Colette ran part of this out of Harriman. I'm not positive of how Marshall felt about it or how she did it.

But somebody should get Colette to talk about that, what she did with Katrina vanden Heuvel on creating that. It's a very interesting story. Occasionally I read about it in the Russian press, some woman will write—as they're now at war about a million things in the Duma—they'll say, "I remember in '86 what Colette Shulman and Katrina vanden Heuvel, now the editor of *The Nation* did—and we were right then and we're right today." It's left a legacy. But Colette would be the key person here.

Q: We'll ask her about it. Before the call, though, you were about to say that Katrina received a call from Pamela.

Cohen: So this is an odd story. We're in Moscow for like four months, 1992, and I swapped this apartment—Nika was born in 1991 in May so I vividly remember—I'll never forget it—on May 9, Victory Day, *Den' Pobedy* in Moscow, the whole city celebrates victory over Nazi Germany on May 9—usually what we call VE Day, Victory in Europe Day. When I was a kid it was a big holiday, schools were closed. We don't do it in America anymore. Oh, Tom Brokaw brings out a book to make money, *The Greatest Generation*. But in Russia it is the most sacred holiday of all. Everybody goes to the parks and drinks. So we went to Gorky Park—I'll never forget this—and Nika was three weeks short of one year old.

We were living in this apartment, this House on the Embankment. I don't know if you're familiar with it, but this was the government house built by Stalin for the elite in the early 1930s and this is where the NKVD [The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs] came and arrested about two thirds of its inhabitants. It became a house of horrors. Bukharin's wife was arrested there in

1937. After he was arrested she left their Kremlin apartment. She was living in the House on the Embankment; they arrested her there.

One of the most famous playwrights in Russia at that time was a man by the name of Mikhail Shatrov. He owned the apartment, because his father, who had been an old Bolshevik, lived there—shot, but Mikhail got back the family apartment. It was run down, but I thought it would really be cool to live in the house, so we did a swap. He had just acquired a very young wife, in this case even younger than Katrina, and he was older than me. He wanted to live in New York for a time so we swapped apartments for four months. He lived here and we went to live in his Moscow apartment.

So we're living there, and I'll never forget that May 9th in Gorky Park when these Russians, kind of half drunk, playing musical instruments, veterans came marching by, and I look down at the blanket on the ground and Nika's gone. Where's Nika? By God, she'd gotten up and walked off and followed the veterans. Those were her first real walking steps—I'll never forget. She'd been cruising. You know what cruising is? When kids begin to walk they hold onto furniture around the room. And this filthy apartment with nails out. I had to get a hammer and drive in all the nails. She was cruising, but she never went off and walked. There on May ninth she got up and walked, so I remember the date.

Pamela gets in touch with Katrina, maybe through the embassy, that she's coming to Moscow with a Harriman delegation. I can't be sure I've got this exactly right. Not sure what they were doing. But you know Harriman left all this money, a lot of money. Cooley's got a relatively big

budget; I mean it's serious. He can always use more funds, but he's got a big budget. Most places couldn't afford to hire you [refers to interviewer] to do this. But the Harrimans kept an eye on the place. One person who kept an eye on it for them was Dick [Richard C. A.] Holbrooke. You know who Holbrooke was? Richard Holbrooke. The guy who always wanted to be secretary of state and died suddenly of a—

By the way, Katrina thinks we killed him because we were out in the Hamptons and he came to dinner with his wife, Kati Marton. Dick was on a diet. Dick was about six foot two, but he had a big pouchy stomach—everybody knew he wasn't a well man—and he loved dessert. I'll never forget this, I said to him—and we were arguing, he and I, over Ukraine and the stunts he was pulling going to Kiev and sleeping in tents. This was in 2005. I said, "We shouldn't be involved in this," but he disagreed. I said to him, "Edy's frozen yogurt for dessert—" you know Edy's?

Q: I do, yes.

Cohen: By the way, they seemed to have stopped making it. It's disappeared from the stores. It's ninety calories for this much [gestures size]. It's better than ice cream. The enzymes are good for you and it's wonderful. Chocolate, vanilla, whatever you want. Dick had never heard of it. He nearly ate the whole damn pint, he liked it so much. Two weeks later he has an aneurysm or something in his brain and he's dead. Katrina said, "You killed him with the Edy's yogurt."

Two months later, if I've got this right, we go somehow to Katrina's father's old friend Ted [Theodore C.] Sorensen, who was President John Kennedy's speechwriter. I encourage him to eat Edy's yogurt and two weeks later he drops dead.

Q: Maybe this is why we don't see Edy's anymore [laughter].

Cohen: I know. But anyway, so Pamela comes to—Mrs. Harriman comes to Moscow—she was a force of nature herself, dead now—with Holbrooke and Bob Legvold. Was Legvold the director of Harriman at the time? I don't know.

Q: Probably.

Cohen: She tells Katrina they want to talk to me. Nobody had ever talked to me before from the Harriman Institute about anything. I had absolutely no idea what this is about. Katrina thought maybe Pamela was just bored, and knowing Katrina's father, knowing Katrina's there, it would be cool to drop by and say hi. But I didn't know what it was about. So Katrina's in a panic. We're living in a hovel. In Moscow it's considered the deluxe place to live, but the place is filthy. I mean there are nails protruding out of all the furniture. The furniture, if you sit down on it, dust flies in the air. So Katrina decides for the first time in our life we have to clean an apartment. Also we had to get in the proper food and stuff. So we run around. I said, "They won't even show up." But they did show up. Never knew what it was about. To this day don't know what it's about. If somebody interviewed Legvold they should ask him what that was about.

Q: We already did interview Legvold.

Cohen: But I don't know why this high-powered delegation needed to come see me in Moscow in 1992 at the House on the Embankment. But I have this perverse mind where I connect dots that probably shouldn't be connected. I'm sitting there in this apartment, where God knows how many people were arrested, taken out and shot in the back of the head, and in walks Pamela Harriman. I mean I can understand why I was there because I'm a historian of the Terror, and the widow of a man I wrote had lived in this building. What in the world is Pamela Harriman doing in the House on the Embankment? You understand what I mean. It just was weird to me. But there you have a little Harriman connection in Moscow in 1992. It's an anecdote.

Q: I like it.

Cohen: Make of it what you will. I think Pamela was horrified [laughs] by the way Katrina was living. I mean you could see how Katrina and I live here. This is graduate student living with a couple of extra rooms here. Everything's stored on the floors, the cat's all over the place. But Pamela was used to living in more immaculate circumstances, and I think she imagined that Katrina must be living in Moscow in a kind of, at least a small mansion that we rented from some deceased nobleman. But it wasn't so. Holbrooke was unplugged. Bob sort of understood what was going on. He must have been the Harriman director. They were on a tour of Russia related to the Harriman Institute in some way, but no idea what they wanted with me.

Q: Perhaps Katrina was right, it was just a social call.

Cohen: I thought at one time there was some talk about bringing me to Harriman from Princeton because they really needed a historian. They didn't have [Mark L.] von Hagen yet, I don't think. I thought maybe they were coming to have a look at me.

Q: But the living situation made them rethink that [laughter].

Cohen: It could have. They said, "This guy's living with nails protruding out of the floor."

Q: That kind of brings up another topic that I was hoping we could talk about was about all your time over the years in Russia. We talked about your trip at the University of Birmingham when you went with the senior citizens, and your surprise there of finding kind of a different civilization. How did your—?

Cohen: Awakening.

Q: —your impressions of Russia and your interaction with it change over time?

[INTERRUPTION]

Cohen: So ask me the question again.

Q: Let's talk about your living experiences and travel in Russia from those early days on, and your observations of the changes that occurred over time.

Cohen: This is hard for me because this would have been a subject of a memoir that I'll probably never write, though it's on my mind. It's long and I have to do a kind of very abridged version.

Q: Yes, things that really stick out.

Cohen: It's elliptical, and anybody who would be interested can maybe fill in the blanks. So the first time I went to Russia, I told you before, was when I was at the University of Birmingham, an undergraduate, in 1959. There I am right over there [refers to photograph]. I knew no Russian, and I saw this country awakening, and got interested in Russia, and went back to Indiana University. After that I went to Russia, as I recall, in the early 1960s, again on language study programs. You did five weeks—I may get this wrong—in Bloomington and then you went to the Soviet Union for five weeks—I remember the guy who led us; his name was Bebbe. He was a nice but very uptight professor who thought we were all up to no good. We traveled around Russia practicing our language.

My most vivid memory is I was traveling with Rolf [H. W.] Theen—that was the German guy who knew everything in language class. He later became a professor at Purdue. I think he died recently—and a Mormon guy named Howard Biddoulph. Howard was so uptight he wouldn't take his clothes off on the train to sleep at night. He slept in his clothes. I'll never forget one night it was hot and we left the train windows open. The train switched to some kind of coal

from diesel oil, and the soot came in the cabin. When we woke up in the morning Howard looked like somebody in an old American minstrel show. He was covered in black soot, all his clothes [laughs]. We had these mishaps.

So I went in '63. I went again later on another tourist visa or language visa. Then I was rejected, as I told you, by the Soviet side on the two occasions I applied for the exchange out of Columbia, the student exchange—because they knew I was doing Bukharin. Then I went to Princeton and as a professor I could apply for the academic exchange. I'm telling you the background so you understand. Then in '73 my biography of Bukharin was published here. It quickly became known in Russia and I got a smuggled letter, from a Norwegian correspondent, that Bukharin's widow was aware of the book and she was prepared to see me cautiously if I came to Moscow.

In 1975, my wife then, Lynn, and I went to—I think I've got the event right— went to Rome for a big conference on Bukharin sponsored by the Italian Communist Party, and believe it or not, the Chinese Communist Party. Bukharin still being taboo, the Soviets didn't send a delegation. From there we went on to Moscow where I first met Mrs. Bukharin—that itself was an adventure, secret meetings and all the rest—and her son. That began a relationship that deepened over the years because it turned out that her son, Yuri, with somebody else, was translating the book into Russian. That translation was eventually published here in 1980 by Ardis out at University of Michigan by Carl [Ray] and Ellendea Proffer who were publishing things like [Joseph A.] Brodsky and other then-forbidden literature in Russia. They published my Bukharin biography. Three thousand copies. Through a system that was known to me and others, running

through foreign embassies, probably twenty-five hundred of the copies or more quickly ended up in the Soviet Union and were circulated widely by hand.

Gorbachev later read that edition. It was later published officially in Russia in 1989. The Ardis version was called the red edition, it was *tamizdat*. You don't know Russian, right? So *tam* means there. *Izdat'* comes from the word publish. It means something published over there and brought back to Russia. It's a spin on the word *samizdat,* which means self published, which were typescripts that circulated. I could show you the book. It was widely read. Gorbachev read it. But it was all over Moscow by late 1980.

So as I began to go back to Moscow while teaching at Princeton—I was juggling my leave semesters, and I even at one point later took—they were giving maternity leave to women professors. I said we should have paternity leave and they said, "Yes, you're right, take a semester." So I took a semester [laughs] and with Nika and Katrina, we went. I was trying to spend several months a year in Russia from '76 on, however I could go, on the exchanges, on my own. Until '82, when they took away my visa, I often did. Then several weeks after Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, I was told to reapply for a visa and Katrina and I got them immediately.

I spent a lot of time living in Russia over the years, but most intensely in some ways—prior to perestroika. But also after 1985, because the reforms that I had written might happen in the Soviet Union were now happening. That had been the theme of my work, the possibility of a reformation, or at least a resumption of the Khrushchev reforms. I had to be there, on the scene,

after 1985. In ‘87 I met Gorbachev, at his request, in Washington. So I now had ties both to the Gorbachev leadership, to all the dissidents and Gulag survivors I had known in the ‘70s and early 1980s. who are now entering public life. Because I was a well known author, especially to editorial offices, that were now abolishing censorship. So I was able to get an inside view of the process.

Looking back over all this—and again I think it was all—I mean the moment comes when I’m invited by the Gorbachev government to speak on Red Square to the nation on TV on Mayday 1989 because of my Bukharin book. Which I didn’t want to do and that led to this debate with my Russian friends whether this was fate or just accident. That being the case, and looking back on it, and focusing on the pre-end of the Soviet Union—or even really before the Gorbachev period—had I written a memoir I would have called it a Russian fate. The subtitle might have been, to get people’s attention, how you get from Kentucky to Moscow and back, something like that. But I have thought a lot about it. Thought a lot about it at the time. What is the—to use this horrible expression “takeaway?” The takeaway is that my Soviet experiences influenced me in the sense of me learning and understanding things on many levels.

On the more macro level, it was that this outwardly controlled Soviet system that we were all studying was nothing of the sort. It was a mess. I always give the example of the census they did. People lied to the census takers. Everybody knew this. Secondly, there was a system where you had to be officially registered both in the city and at the address where you lived. People had reasons for living in cities where they were not permitted to register, like Moscow. Say you were

an artist in the provinces, and you wanted to be part of the artistic scene in Moscow, but they tried to control the size of Moscow and so it was almost impossible.

I was involved in this. I'll tell you how people did it. You arranged a fictitious marriage. There was literally something called *fiktivnyi brak*, the fictitious marriage. So you have this artist out in Pinsk or Minsk, and you find a woman who for certain compensation will officially marry him. If your spouse lives in Moscow you have a right to go to Moscow and live. So you have to find a woman.

I happened to know one such woman very well. She had compelling needs. She was living in a communal apartment by herself, but she was fearful that they would put in some drunken guy in this apartment or some couple with a loud kid. It was a tiny apartment. But if she'd been married she'd have a right to the whole apartment. Also she worked as an artist's model. She was a very beautiful woman and had one of those bodies that artists like to draw, voluptuous and the rest. That's how she made her living. She had no official profession. It was a familiar profession but the cops would hassle her by saying she was a prostitute because she did things naked. But if she was married you couldn't be a prostitute in the Soviet Union. I mean this was just the way the KGB and the police thought. If you were married obviously you couldn't be a prostitute. So being married was protection, right?

So she and the provincial artist negotiated an arrangement, of which I was party, whereby he would come to Moscow, they would marry—they never so much as kissed, they never had sex, they never lived together. He was officially registered as her husband at her address. So she

wasn't a prostitute, she got the apartment to herself, etc. In addition, she needed money, he agreed to give her something like, I don't know, five hundred rubles a year or something like that. In return she enabled him to achieve his career dream, to be a part of the Moscow artist/painter scene.

I got interested in this. I mean not to be too graphic, I had a romantic relationship with this woman for a while. But we became good friends as well and I learned a lot about Russia from her. I got curious, for example, about how many fictitious marriages [laughs] there were in Moscow because now I was reverting to my scholarly mode. The field called is totalitarianism, but if the state doesn't even know where its citizens are living what kind of totalitarianism is this? This was part of a long evolution of what Misha [Moshe] Lewin—my great friend and scholar who taught at Pennsylvania— studies. He said "Big Brother fell asleep," and he attributed that expression to me. He used it in a book. I don't recall ever saying that. But his point was that due to social changes, education and the rest, the society was escaping the state. Therefore this whole totalitarian model, if it ever had any validity—I never thought it did because totalitarian really was just, somebody said, "a boo label to pin on a boo system." It was bad enough without—I mean maybe the Stalinist Terror was a totalitarian phenomenon, but after Stalin? Now I revert from a personal relationship to a scholarly question. How many fictitious marriages were there?

They didn't have to be like this one. There were all sorts of ways you could have fictitious marriage. It was the system that required what was called the *propusk* [pass]—you had to be registered in a city— due partly to the shortage of urban housing. About a third of Muscovites, I

think, still lived in communal multi-family apartments. Khrushchev began and Putin today is building apartments. They still need housing in Moscow. It's a perennial problem of many rapidly industrialized societies, urbanized. But it also was a particular Russian problem where you had this great influx to cities of people who were essentially peasants. One academic question was about cities. Did the cities urbanize the peasants or did the peasants peasantize the cities? This is an interesting historical question. So as I asked around Moscow, just asking people casually. Anybody know any fictitious marriages? I mean suddenly I realized—it's not scientific—but there were really a lot. Anecdotally that becomes scholarly information. You see my point about the nature of the system. There were dozens of such examples.

I generalized it—borrowing in part from scholars who were working on black market economics, scholars here—that in fact the Soviet system had, between the purported red monolith at the top and the black market at the bottom, illegal, people selling black market, there were multicolored levels. There was pink, there was beige, there was gray, there was black. You with me so far? All right, so then you begin to think about this, and you imagine in your mind a new model. You say okay, that's the empirical reality. We've got to stop this bullshit of the totalitarian monolith—we have to study each level. But here's what's more interesting—and I borrowed this from somebody.

I always acknowledge my intellectual debts. Many people don't. I've been ripped off so much in scholarship, they don't even remember. It's okay, but I always document my debts. Some guy, I think it was Alexander Yanov, a dissident philosopher and sociologist who came to live in New York—and he's still around someplace—said that there was a staircase from top to bottom of the

Soviet systen. People went up and people went down. So I used this metaphor and I begin to think about it and try to see how many of the people I knew in Russia went up and down the staircase, from officialdom to below.

That led me to the other thing that—due to of my ties to the Bukharin family and Gulag survivors, which led me to the dissident movement, and my ties to certain dissidents who actually had come out of the official *Nomenklatura* system, or were the children of high officials, because I was on an official exchange and the Academy of Science people loved to blah, blah, blah, and because of my biography—still forbidden—of Bukharin but which was of great interest to the party intelligentsia—the dissident ones who wanted to go back to Lenin and to NEP [new economic policy] of the 1920s and markets and Bukharin—a lot of people wanted to talk to me. One thing about me that was different from most Americans, certainly our government, was that most Americans want to tell Russia what to do. "You should do this, you should do that, you should do this." I had no interest in telling them what to do. I wanted them to tell me what was going on.

I often took the posture of a kind of semi-educated, but not overly bright, American to which everything had to be explained in great detail. Given the lousy quality of my Russian language, it was fully believable. "He really sounds dumb." So people talked to me at length and in detail. Also I developed a reputation as a person who never betrayed a confidence, because it could be dangerous. Never, ever. Not to the authorities, but I also never told one Russian about my conversation with another Russian, even if they were friends. I wouldn't say, "Oh, Petr, that's interesting because Ivan told me—" I never would do that. If they wanted to tell me together that

was their decision. Then there was the fact that by accident I had, living there, ties down below in society and ties up above in officialdom. I think it's fair to say that I may have been the only American of my generation who had that kind of—I don't know how to put it— extensive access, exposure. Maybe there were others. I knew of a guy at Harvard, who had native Russian, and they said he could disappear for a year in Soviet Russia without a visa and never be caught. The limitation was I was only in Moscow.

My ties to the provinces were simply through people like this woman I was close to. Her mother lived on a collective farm about forty-five miles from Moscow, and she would go out to the collective farm every two or three weeks, take her mother stuff from the city, and bring back produce. What this gave me, living in Russia, in addition to a lot of fun, was—and maybe other Americans had it but they too were secretive. I wasn't coming back home and saying, "I'm writing it up, I did this and I did that." But these insights crept into my written work, particularly I mentioned last time to you my article, *The Friends and Foes of Change*, where I saw the forces of conservativism and reformism operating in the Kremlin, in the dissident movement, down below in society, but at each of these multicolored levels. So that was important to me for my scholarly work.

Also there were things of interest, because of the way I had grown up. Yes, Soviet life—I only speak of Moscow—was not a place where you and I would want to have grown up, but it was a place with real virtues that we lack here generally. I would like to write about this, but this is not the time. There's no audience for it now, there's no curiosity about the Soviet Union. The hateful public discourse about Russia today just makes you like some—worse than a Putin apologist,

like a Soviet apologist. But maybe I will. Other people have mentioned it, but it needs to be spelled out that because of the austerity and harshness of life in Russia personal friendship was exceptionally important. Russians have two words, *drug*, which means friend, and *znakom*, which means acquaintance. We Americans are very careless with this language. You meet somebody and you have a drink and you say, "He's a friend." He's not a friend. You have an acquaintance; you've met. Maybe the person will become a friend.

I often ask people how many actual friends—not counting family—do you have? If somebody says to me "dozens," I say this person has no idea what friendship means, because it hasn't been really tested. They have close acquaintances or casual acquaintances. But for Russians this distinction was enormously important. You and I are now acquaintances. We're not friends. We could grow into friends, but we're acquaintances. They would never blur that distinction. Why? Because a friend in need is a friend in deed in Russia, one who has been tested.

When you needed something in the Soviet Union that you couldn't get officially, say an abortion, outside a state clinic, a doctor to perform the abortion for your wife or your girlfriend or just for yourself, in a sanitary condition, in a way that you can stay the night and be attended if anything goes wrong, be given the proper medications to take home. The state abortion was completely accessible and free, but it could be very sloppy and people were worried. Usually it went okay, but it was a harsh experience for the woman. Russian women have feelings even if—I mean abortion had become the ultimate form of birth control there. Too many women were having too many abortions, and when they wanted to have a kid their plumbing was screwed up. But there were people who, for legitimate reasons, wanted an abortion, they wanted it safe. The

way this was arranged, bartered usually—usually money didn't pass hands—the doctor wanted something that was hard to get, and you recruited your friends not only to find the doctor but to help you get what the doctor wanted, in exchange.

I got involved in this once at the low end of the feeding pole. It turned out that to close the deal the doctor wanted a carburator for his Zhiguli, which was the Italian Fiat, the small family two-door sedan. But the carburators were stressed in Russia. It was hard to get a carburetor. I couldn't help with that, but to close the deal—because the guy who had the carburetor wanted, you won't believe this, an Elton John album. Elton had played in Leningrad and was the rage. He was bigger than the Beatles by now. I was tasked to produce an Elton John album.

I had nothing. The way I did this was just disgusting. I snuck into the apartment of a friend of mine at the American embassy and stole the Elton John album from his kid. But the point is that I saw how transactional the system was. It was transactions rarely involving money but instead involving goods and services, because there was a deficit of quality goods and services. Whether it was a cultural item, say a book of poetry by [Osip E.] Mandelstam that had been published in '62 in a print run of maybe five hundred but had long since vanished, but was a precious item, or a carburetor for a Zhiguli or Elton to close the deal for the abortion. Do you see what I'm saying? This could be all sorts of things. So you saw this transactional society.

When Gorbachev later said the society was pregnant with perestroika he was right. The entrepreneurial nation was there, the market was there, black and gray and pink. The people were ready, at least in Moscow. The free speech was there in the *samizdat* of the dissidents and

anecdotes people told every day. By the way, someone told me I was the main individual American moving unpublished manuscripts to the west and then published books, the *tamizdat*, back to Moscow during those years. I'm not sure, but I was a very active conduit.

The system, so to speak, was fairly simple, though it gave me two hernias. You had to find somebody in one of the Moscow foreign embassies which had the diplomatic pouch, which meant that it couldn't be opened. These were cargo on trucks and planes and trains and ships where this "pouch" stuff was shipped. I usually had somebody at the American embassy, and but sometimes the ambassador put an end to it. I found somebody at the Italian embassy—they were the leakiest of all because there were Italian communists there. But you had to keep doing this because you couldn't carry them out yourself. I did it for nearly seven years, and then they canceled my visa and ended my conduit and gave me two hernias. I had them both fixed, two years apart, I think. Because you couldn't leave anything in your apartment or hotel room. So I'm walking around Moscow with ten books on my back or manuscripts like this, in shoulder bags.

What I carried out, and then became well-known, is a kind of a Saturday Night Live skit— the narrow escapes and the rest. But it was all accidental again. I'd meet one person who'd take me to another person, and then another person, "You can't say no, Steve," "Okay, okay." And pretty soon I was overextended and getting into trouble. I was warned a few times, because the KGB knew what was going on. I never felt I was in any real danger, except once perhaps. Worst that could happen, they wouldn't permit me to reenter the country. I did, of course, worry about my Russian friends, and rightly.

I remember I once had a very bad reaction when I returned home, when I behaved badly, when I overreacted to me sense that that we took so much for granted here. Did you ever see the movie Moscow on the Hudson with Robin Williams?

Q: Yes.

Cohen: He's a circus musician who defects one tour in New York, in Bloomingdale's. He's living in Harlem, right? They tell him to go to the supermarket and buy some coffee? He hyperventilates and faints when he sees—

Q: All the choices.

Cohen: This is because you couldn't buy, in Soviet stores, instant coffee or even good coffee. I used to get it at the diplomatic stores, because when we went to Moscow we got these checks, or coupons, at the embassy, and I'd buy stuff for Soviet friends. But when Robin Williams fainted I fully understood.

After spending four months once in Moscow, I flew to Florida—my parents were then living down in Hollywood, Florida where my father was now in the golf course business. I'd been in Russia for four months with my kids, little kids, Andy and Dusty, my first wife, Lynn, and we flew home via London. I was very close in Moscow to the dissident Roy [A.] Medvedev—we later did a book together—whose twin brother, literal twin, Zhores, you can't tell them apart—

well, if you knew them long enough you could—had been banished to London. He was a scientist. Still lives there, he's alive, ninety-four or so. The kids were used to Roy sneaking in our apartment late at night, and Roy and I in the kitchen whispering in Russian. Roy didn't speak a word of English. So we go to London and Zhores [A. Medvedev] comes to our hotel and the kids can't believe it. Here's Roy and he speaks English in London. They didn't understand it was his twin brother.

Then we flew on to Miami—there was a flight from London to Miami—to visit my parents. We went, the next day, to some lavish outdoor dinner or luncheon party where all this food was on the table and people are talking endlessly about the best new restaurants, et cetera. I just got so squirmy. It wasn't fair to them, not their fault, but I remember sort of leaving sort of abruptly, rudely. Both my wife and my mother were very angry at me about it. But it's very important for Americans, not just scholars, to understand that people in other countries live their lives as they have to, and as they must, and as they can, in societies very different from our own. We should not be so judgmental. We should just try to understand. It was [René] Descartes who said, I think, I'm paraphrasing, "don't laugh, don't cry, just try to understand." There was no attempt to try to understand the Soviet way of life, so that's what I tried to do, successfully or not.

I think the other thing was that, intellectually, I knew before I began to live there in the late '70s that given the dynamics and history—because again remember for me everything comes with history. Looking at the history of the regime—

[INTERRUPTION]

Cohen: That the history was eventually going to create reform from above. When I was living there I could see the agencies of reform forming. Later it was said that I foresaw perestroika. For example, my book, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience*, had this final chapter, "The Friends and Foes of Change", which ended, "We should be prepared for the emergence of a new reform movement." I'll take the credit. When so many others here said it was impossible. But I was fundamentally wrong in one regard.

What I had in mind was a modern version of Khrushchev's reforms, liberalization, a bit more markets, easing of the censorship from the top, but not fundamental change in the structure of the political system. In other words, I didn't foresee actual democratization, which was what Gorbachev attempted, actual democratization. By 1987, at least, it was his intent to democratize the Soviet Union. I didn't foresee that. However, I was ready for it. I mean I understood it when he did it. I've had long talks with Gorbachev over the years, because we remain close. I often ask him, "at what point—? I knew when you had left Lenin behind; I understood that. When did you leave Khrushchev behind, when did you go far beyond?" He talks about his evolution into a European social Democrat. It's a little bit fuzzy, but you know— Bill Taubman's got a biography of Gorbachev coming out and we'll see if he gets it right.

There were other things I can say, coming back to my autobiography, having grown up in the Jim Crow south, whose grandfather was working class—my other grandfather, I didn't know him, but I'm told he was a roofer in Indianapolis. So I guess he was also working class. I heard he wasn't a nice man, but I never met him. My cousin said no, he was a very nice man. My

cousin who fought in World War II, and was fifteen years older than me, knew him. But it's a typical American, somewhat Jewish, life. My father had no interest in Russia or anything intellectual. He was here to provide for his family. My first ambition was to be a professional golfer. I had no other ambition at that time. All the rest followed by accident or fate.

Because of my own journey from the Jim Crow south, I was really open to learning things and observing things in Russia. I was given a chance to not only observe, but to live among segments of Russian society, Soviet society, that others were not. I shouldn't say I was the only one, because there may have been many others unknown to me, and maybe you'll interview some. And I had to be quiet about it. I couldn't yack, I couldn't boast on it, couldn't share. I rarely sent an American to a Russian friend unless I explained to the Russian friend why I thought this would be good.

I'm very political intellectually. I'm not political actively here. I don't give a hoot or a holler about the Democratic or the Republican parties. My wife, Katrina, cares a lot. I give some money to candidates that I think are good and often they turn out not to be. I've established talking relationships with some very prominent American political figures over the years. I told you already I met with the first George Bush so I had that experience. I was with Gary [W.] Hart briefly in his presidential campaign and with Bill [William W.] Bradley—the former basketball player, my old friend—I tried to help with two of the worst presidential campaigns in recent American history. Both imploded.

I've not been aloof from politics. I just haven't sought a career or an avocation there. But it's made me think politically about our own country in ways enhanced and revised by what I observed in Russia in such different circumstances. The meaning of friendship, of loyalty, of commitment, of helping, of what you can accomplish. I just wrote in my tribute to Yevtushenko—who was Nika's godfather, I knew him well—that what he accomplished in Russia at great risk, on behalf of good people and good things, I wonder why people in this country who are at no risk at all don't speak out, do as much as Yetuvshenko tried to do in Soviet Russia.

I know quite a few people in Washington, including in editorial offices, who hate this Kremlin baiting of Trump. They hate Trump but they hate the Kremlin baiting even more. I ask, "Why don't you speak out? Where's the editorial? Why don't you speak up in Congress?" "I can't do it. I have to get reelected. The publishers won't understand." And yet the civic courage I saw in the Jim Crow south and I saw later in the Soviet Union, at great risk to the person who exercised it—and yet you don't see it here. That makes me very unhappy.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: We should wrap up though because I have to get the equipment back. But any last thoughts?

Cohen: No. I mean, this is for me now post-Harriman—but in some ways nothing is post/pre Harriman because it was, I explained, a major launching pad for me, or whatever the expression is. I think about some of those senior professors frequently. They're all gone now.

I went to John Hazard's memorial service. It was very moving because John was such a nurturing man. Not many of us had his intellectual interest in the law and the rest, but because he'd lived a kind of Soviet life, studying in Russia during the Terror he was very open to my dissertation topic. He was very folksy outwardly, but that folksiness was a bit of a façade about how deeply serious and substantial he was. He did a lot of, "Oh, gee whiz." If you ever saw him, you'd see. He seemed a kind of urban country bumpkin, but he wasn't anything of the sort. They said he had a great legal mind. But he and most of the others— all of them gone, I guess.

Q: We talked yesterday about your thoughts about the future of Harriman and the direction they should take. Now is a time when it seems they have a chance to be more relevant again.

Cohen: I think they also have a chance, but I just can't tell— again, I've driven Alex crazy and I'm sure he'd like to be rid of me and I don't blame him. If I had somebody hounding me when I was running Russian studies at Princeton, I probably would have hired somebody to off them. But Alex has got a big responsibility because Harriman probably is the only Russian studies center in America that could have a national impact on others—Harvard's just too intermingled with Harvard—along the lines I suggested. And New York is special. But I don't know that he can or would want to do it.

Moreover, the moment is complicated. On the one hand it's a little risky. On the other hand the need is there, the objective need, to reconsider Russia both historically and in terms of current events. This NGO stuff, as I label it, just feeds the frenzy out there. It brings the wrong people,

the wrong subjects, the wrong impulses. I can't judge people if constraints on them are too great or if they don't see it my way.

This money that Katrina's foundation gave to the national association, the ASEEES, for six dissertation research fellowships—we never talked about that event, but it was searingly bad. She—when they said they'd take the money only if she took my name off the thing—she was furious, said she wouldn't give them the money under any circumstances. She was just, "Screw them. This is outrageous." She wasn't insulted only because of me, but because she had written and studied the whole era of McCarthyism when people were doing things like that, defaming reputation over political disagreements.

What changed Katrina's mind is when the letter I wrote—private letter to the ASEEES board. I wrote, five single spaced pages, detailing what happened and how I viewed this—got out. I didn't leak it, by the way. Well, maybe I did but accidentally. But then it got into the hands of people who organized a protest petition. Then eventually some 150 people—senior people and junior, many of whom disagreed with my interpretations of history, with me about Ukraine, about Putin—protested the board's decision and turned it around. Because Katrina believes in grassroots politics, that turned her around. So eventually the ASEEES dropped its demand that my name be removed from the Cohen-Tucker fellowships, and Katrina reinstated her very generous, and needed, funding.

But the affair went on for months and it was really toxic and disgraceful. It got in the *New York Times*. Personally I am just so old and got so many calluses I can't be hurt anymore, but Katrina

really took it personally. She was hurt, outraged, furious. She wanted to go public about it, but I said let's don't do that. But a blogger at the American Association of University Professors, a Russia specialist, wrote about it, and the *New York Times* did a major study, so it became very public. That's part of the history we're living through now. It is what it is and people will do what they do. They'll do the right thing or they won't do the right thing.

I think it's a test for Russian studies now— how we react to this new Cold War situation, because you've got these irrational and unverifiable reasons for the loathing of Putin, which is preposterous. He's a very interesting Russian leader in the Russian tradition, better in many ways than some, certainly no worse than others and most. But Putin demonizing has now been now fused with this loathing for Trump, and everything's so toxic. People fear being called an apologist for Trump and Putin, as I am too often. One's bad enough. So we'll see.

I can see how Cooley is constrained, but leadership has its possibilities and maybe its obligations, so we'll see what he does. But the country's in a bad way. The relationship with Russia is more dangerous now than I think it's ever been. Even potentially more dangerous than the Cuban missile crisis, I think. And this Syrian thing is clearly a false flag. [Bashar Hafez al-]Assad had absolutely no reason to detonate that chemical weapon. He's got the Russian air force. He's winning. He's seeking international recognition. Why would he launch a chemical attack? The people who want to bust up whatever Trump is planning to do with Putin and Syria are again trying to sabotage it. I mean just the way that DOD [Department of Defense] sabotaged Obama when he agreed with Putin that they'd cooperate militarily against ISIS in Syria. Then DOD killed all those Syrian soldiers and that was the end of that, in September 2016.

But the *Times* runs with bogus stories and the *Washington Post*, too. Trump, who doesn't have a brain in his head about these kinds of things and nobody around him to say hold your fire, runs out and said, "I've completely changed my mind about Assad," and threatens military action. We go to military action in Syria, there's every possibility we'll be at war with Russia. Did anybody tell Trump that Russia's deployed the SS400s to Syria and they can control Syrian air space? They can shoot down any American aircraft they want. It's the most sophisticated air defense system around. We don't even have it. What are they talking about?

Sy Hersh and Ted Poston pretty much demolished reports that Assad had used chemical weapons, but their work wasn't reported by the *Times* or *Post*. Nor is much contrarian about Putin or Russia.

Q: It's a scary moment.

Cohen: It raises the question of what people who study Russia are supposed to do based on what they know at moments like this? We belong in our ivory tower, but sometimes not. Russian studies has been through something similar before. They did both. Now we're in new and more complicated times, I think. So when you talk about the future of the Harriman, that's the sort of thing they need to be talking about. Whatever they decide. So I guess we did it. We're done?

Q: I think we got a lot.

Cohen: You got anything else you want to ask? Think for a second. If not you'll stay in touch, I hope.

Q: I hope so too.

Cohen: Will you be the person I deal with on the history of the transcript?

Q: Yes.

Cohen: Do you come to New York occasionally or do you stay mainly in Paris?

Q: I come occasionally.

Cohen: Well, maybe we'll see each other again.

Q: I'd like that.

Cohen: Bring your husband along. I rarely leave the neighborhood these days, but we'll go to the local restaurant or we'll have a meal here.

Q: It's the best neighborhood.

Cohen: I rarely go anywhere. My father-in-law has just decided to celebrate his birthday with two dinners. I'm down for one, but why do I have to go to the second? [Laughter]

Q: But you do.

Cohen: No, I don't. It's optional. It's on my conscience. Was I coherent about life in Russia?

Q: Very. Yes, thank you so much.

Cohen: I think many people—not necessarily academics—who have had long encounters with Soviet Russia over the years have said how it makes them think about life in America. Not that we want to turn America into a Soviet or communist system, but reconsidering the more intangible interpersonal ways we relate to life here, as I said before. Things are too easy for most of us here. I mean a lot of people have a hard life. I wouldn't want to be a white person in Appalachia and other parts of Kentucky today or a black person most anywhere in America, but for the majority of white Americans life, compared to life in lots of countries, is easy. It's not harsh, I should say, less harsh at least. I was looking at the numbers. They've got some twenty million people living below the poverty line in Russia today. I think we have even more. So the question arises, is it easier to be poor in America or in Russia? What's the safety net like? What are their possibilities? We were just talking about this the other day [pause].

Q: Thank you again. It was wonderful. You'll hear from me very soon.

[END OF INTERVIEW]