

HARRIMAN INSTITUTE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of
Alexander J. Motyl

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Alexander J. Motyl conducted by William McAllister on July 26, 2016 and February 15, 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.

Session: 1

Interviewee: Alexander J. Motyl

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: William McAllister

Date: July 26, 2016

Q: My name is William McAllister. I'm a senior research fellow at INCITE [Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics] at Columbia University, and I'm here today, on July 26, 2016, to talk with Alexander Motyl. Professor Motyl is currently professor of political science at Rutgers University. He's currently active in many other programs and organizations, including being a member of the Ukrainian Studies Advisory Board at the Harriman Institute and of the International Advisory Board of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, among many other activities. So, welcome and thank you for coming.

Motyl: Thank you.

Q: Before we talk specifically about Harriman, could you tell us, or tell me, how did you get interested in Eastern Europe and Ukraine, Soviet Union, Russia in particular?

Motyl: I grew up with it. My parents are both Ukrainian refugees who came to this country: my mother in 1948, my father in 1949. Their histories are a little complicated. I'm not sure you want me to go into those. But in any case, the point is they came with that wave of political refugees after World War II. So the question of Soviet control, Soviet rule, Ukrainian opposition to Soviet rule, non-Russian opposition to Soviet rule, the various rebellions, the various liberation struggles, all those things are things that I grew up with, both at home and in school, in the

community. That doesn't mean that I necessarily wanted to pursue these issues academically, quite the contrary. When I was in college, I was determined not to pursue Soviet studies and Ukrainian studies. That was a little more complicated. But in any case, that's where it all comes from. That's also where the knowledge of the language came from, since Ukrainian was my first language.

Q: Well, perhaps following up on your point you just made, I noticed in your CV [curriculum vitae] that you switched from history as an undergraduate to political science in graduate studies, and I was wondering about what was involved in that switch for you? What was the allure of political science perhaps? And maybe it related more to the Ukrainian-Soviet Union situation, as you just alluded to?

Motyl: I wish the answer were that glamorous and that deep. It was actually rather more banal. In my fourth year in college here at Columbia I became fairly disillusioned with the academic profession. And I distinctly remember one day as I was researching some paper I was walking around the stacks in [Nicholas Murray] Butler [Library]—in those days you could still do that, I'm not sure you can anymore—and I was struck by the thousands upon thousands of dust-covered books, and I made a vow that I would never contribute to those dust-covered books. Well, you know, famous last words.

In any case, I had no particular intention to become an academic. Quite the opposite. After I finished my bachelor's I worked for a year, I did the six-month Eurail pass trip through Europe, and then I had to make a decision as to what to do afterwards. I applied to the University of

Toronto for history, for a PhD program, mostly because I had been dating a girl from Toronto.

[Laughs] And I also applied to SIPA [School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University], not so much because I was determined to study international affairs—I wasn't quite sure what that was—but the structure of the program seemed to accommodate someone who didn't know what he wanted to do. There seemed to be a little bit of everything.

So I went to SIPA because that girlfriend dumped me, and history didn't seem all that relevant because it meant an academic track. Then while at SIPA I was actually interested in becoming a journalist, so I specialized in the so-called—I think it was called international communications and journalism track. Took courses at the J [Journalism] School, did quite well, but became very quickly disillusioned with journalism, partly because it seemed superficial and also, and mostly, because my real reason for studying journalism was to become a foreign correspondent in Paris. [Laughs] When I realized very quickly that before you could get to Europe you had to spend your time in the salt mines in Topeka, that pretty much did that. Diplomacy, or the Foreign Service, didn't seem appropriate. I was then in a kind of anti-government mood, as was everybody else I suppose, and I stood before a choice. What am I supposed to do with myself? I worked for a while at this and that, but none of that was going to lead to much of anything at all.

At that point political science seemed like a reasonable option. On the one hand, I had managed to publish my certificate essay. I had written—it was a 150-page essay for the East Central European institute at SIPA. It was actually published as a book. I was about twenty-four years old when it came out. So I could obviously do that. Wasn't sure I wanted to, but I could obviously do it. And at the same time I began thinking in terms of possibly working as an analyst

in some think tank. In those days Radio Liberty was an option, and in order to do that a PhD seemed necessary. Well, a PhD in what? Well, if it was going to be contemporary Soviet, it had to be poli-sci. So I applied to the political science department pretty much *faute de mieux*, having tried a whole bunch of things, realizing that I wasn't interested in them, and then this seemed like the best way to go in order to get some kind of analytical career going.

Q: When you were a graduate student in political science at the time, did you have any interaction with Harriman back then? We mostly today want to focus on the '90s, but I thought perhaps you had some experience back then as well, I didn't know.

Motyl: Just a bit. I took courses with a number of people at Harriman. I didn't do my certificate at Harriman. I actually have a certificate from the now defunct Institute on East Central Europe, and that was really more of my focus. I wasn't all that interested in Russia *per se*. I was more interested in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and all these sorts of places, for reasons that I don't remember anymore. I suppose because I traveled there; possibly it had something to do with that.

But I interacted with people at Harriman, as I said, through personal contacts, and I came to be a close friend of the then assistant director, Jonathan [E.] Sanders. He had been in that position—I'm not sure exactly—I believe from the mid-'70s through roughly the mid-'80s, and I took a course or so with Jonathan. And then when I came back from Europe and went back to the PhD program, somehow or other he and I reconnected, and I would often visit him at Harriman.

It was then that he set up the TV program, because they had a satellite that was able to get Soviet TV. And they would show programs early in the morning at eight o'clock or so, and I would often go to those and watch TV, and I would consort with some Harriman types. But I had, as I said, no particular interest in the Institute per se, but keep in mind that when I was doing poli-sci, it became clear fairly quickly that I was going to do a dissertation on the Soviet Union. So willy-nilly that was going to bring me into the Harriman orbit.

Q: Just on the TV network, so what was that exactly? How did it work, and who had access to it?

Motyl: Harriman got money from someone. Jonathan Sanders wrote a long essay about this. He had a PhD in history. But in any case, they got money from someone, I forget exactly whom. So they set up a satellite dish on the top of the SIPA building. This must be—this was late [Leonid I.] Brezhnev, or maybe this was already early [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev, I don't recall. I think it was late Brezhnev. But in any case, they set up the satellite dish, and Jonathan actually tells a very funny story. He says they had no idea how to set it up.

Q: How to position it—

Motyl: How to position it, exactly. So they had someone downstairs near the TV set. He was on the top floor, and he was moving the thing until they finally were able to position it so that they were getting Soviet TV. So they started getting Soviet TV, and then they had an enormous collection of tapes because they were taping every television program that they got. I'm not sure what happened to that because it was all on those VHS tapes, so maybe they've been thrown out.

Maybe it's been put into some archive. But that was a big deal, of course, because no one else had that, and that meant that Harriman students or students in general and the faculty could have access to Soviet TV.

Then again you have to remember in those days the only thing you had access to were copies of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, right? So this was a real live source, something very different and something that was very exciting. So that was set up, and that existed for a number of years—I'm not exactly sure, five, six years—until at some point websites came along and television became less interesting. I'm not exactly sure when that faded out, but it was in business for a while, and for the first few years it was the greatest thing.

Q: And the students at SIPA or anywhere could kind of come in and access it—

Motyl: Yes.

Q: —in a room that had a TV set?

Motyl: There was a little room. When you entered Harriman, it was the first room on the left. That was the TV room, and the walls were lined with the tapes, and there was a TV set up, and the TV program, the news program, would run I think it was eight o'clock in the morning, which is when we assembled. Students were encouraged to use this, to watch it, and I'm sure many Harriman certificates were probably written on the basis of the television. You know, you'd have

to check, but I would bet that's the case. Jonathan lives in New York, by the way. You certainly want to speak to him.

Q: Yes. Yes, for sure. We'll add him to the list. And do the Soviets know this was going on? Did they care that this was going on?

Motyl: They must have known because they were constantly coming into the Institute, and the Institute never made a secret of this. As to what their response was, I would imagine they were probably delighted to see the truth reaching the ears of benighted Americans.

Q: So let's talk about the early and to mid-1990s, which is when you had more of a key role at Harriman. It's a time when the Soviet Union has collapsed. Area studies were kind of coming under fire intellectually and maybe funding wise as well, which we'll go to together, and Harriman seemed to be having financial difficulties, I could tell from the memos that were flying about at the time that you wrote, one and some others, yes. Do you see these three—the Soviet Union collapse, area studies coming under fire and Harriman having financial difficulties—did you or do you now see these three as connected, and in what ways?

Motyl: I suppose—I suspect we saw it that way then. By the way—you want to ask me another question because I became intensely involved in Harriman in 1988.

Q: In 1988? Oh. Oh, I see. I did not know that.

Motyl: So four years before I became assistant director, and I can explain that to you in one second.

Q: Sure. Yes, please.

Motyl: I became associate director in mid-1992, after Allen [C.] Lynch left the position that he had inherited from Jonathan Sanders. That was a period of crisis, an identity crisis, if not institutional. And the primary reason was that the Soviet Union had fallen apart—that, and then simultaneously the East Central Europeans began moving off in all directions. But the collapse of the Soviet Union obviously raised a very important issue, namely what does an institute for the advanced study of the Soviet Union study when the Soviet Union isn't there anymore? That was the question that we had to address in my very first year. At that point Rick [Richard E.] Ericson, an economist, was the director, and that was the issue. I mean, how do we restructure the curriculum? How do we redefine or define the Institute and its mission, given these new circumstances?

And one of the first questions that had to be addressed was the title, the name of the Institute. That was actually changed before I got on board, if I'm not mistaken. And as you can see, the decision was essentially a cop out; you know, Let's just call it the Harriman Institute because we're not sure what we're studying. But that obviously didn't resolve the programmatic issue. Then the decision was made within the Institute—again, Rick and I were in favor of this, and most of the executive committee eventually was in favor of this as well—to study all of the

successor states of the Soviet Union, including the East Central Europeans, who were not quite successor states, but nevertheless were post-Soviet, post-communist in some sense of the word.

And that was an easy decision, in a way, but that obviously had important implications for the curriculum, for the requirements. I mean, so what should students study? In the past it was easy. You studied one country, and you studied the party in one country and other institutions like that. Now do you study Russia? Well, why? Why not study Lithuania, or Kazakhstan, or Ukraine or Poland? At the same time, if you permit students to study whatever they want to, then what do they have in common? Well, that seemed to be very little. So the result was that we decided that the Institute should be expansive and enable students to study the entire region and various bits and pieces thereof. At the same time, the decision was made that they have to have two languages. I believe they had to be proficient or fluent—well, proficient in one and reading knowledge in another, and the idea was that those who would be doing Russian would at least have to study a non-Russian language, and those who would be doing non-Russian would presumably study Russian, so some kind of communal spirit would result.

And then the decision was also made to institute this core colloquium, or core seminar, dealing with the legacies of the Soviet Union. That was introduced I believe in '92, possibly in '93, and that's still an ongoing course although it's undergone a variety of changes since then. That was supposed to be the one required course, which would introduce students to the great books, great issues of the Soviet Union and East Central Europe and guarantee that virtually everybody would have some knowledge about most things [laughs], if not a lot of knowledge about everything.

Q: So still some reliance on the Soviet Union to help hold things together?

Motyl: Right. Exactly right. Of course, again, it was the legacies thereof, but who knows what a legacy is? And obviously with time, the greater the distance between the Soviet legacy and the Soviet Union, the more questionable is the claim that there's anything that actually binds these places together. Maybe the thing that they all have in common is that they're authoritarian, corrupt, crummy states, but that's not a definition of a region.

Q: Well, let's return—I actually wanted to follow up on that, the issue you just raised in the context of area studies. But before that, just biographically, so you first got more intensely associated with the Harriman in 1988?

Motyl: Nineteen eighty-eight. It was then that the Institute—Bob [Robert] Legvold was director and Marshall [D.] Shulman was still very active, and the two of them, possibly with the assistance of Seweryn Bialer, probably with the assistance of Seweryn Bialer, persuaded the [Andrew W.] Mellon Foundation to give the Institute a grant, a three-year grant. I believe it was in the amount of \$500,000 or so.

Q: Real money back then.

Motyl: That was a lot of money, yes, \$500,000 for a program called the Nationality and Siberian Studies Program, and they asked me to be the director of the program. So that was a three-year program. There was then a one-year extension I believe for an additional \$150,000, so that lasted

from '88 to 1992. The idea was obvious, that nationalities seemed to be important, and of course they were, and that the Institute, which until then had largely been a Russian institute, even though it called itself as an institute to study the Soviet Union, should develop some expertise and some presence in the field of nationality studies. Now Columbia had a tradition of nationality studies that went back to the 1960s, and that had been very much the brainchild of a professor at the Middle East languages institute [Middle East Institute], Professor Edward [A.] Allworth. He had established something called the Program on Soviet Nationality Problems. I'm not sure whether that was in the context of the then-Russian Institute or whether that was independent, but you could find out. But in any case, it existed, and then it sort of petered out.

In any case, Harriman got this big grant. I had just defended my dissertation in 1984, and it dealt with the nationalities. I was teaching at Columbia then. I was there on soft money, getting these one-year contracts, and I was kind of the nationalities guy. So, they asked me to be the director, so that paid my salary for four years. I also had an assistant, Charles [Francis] Furtado, who eventually gave up the PhD and went to law school. In the process we managed to produce—we must have done three, four conferences a year, we had a weekly seminar, we had workshops, we published some five or six major books with major presses. It was extremely active. There's still a record of that in the Harriman publication [*The Russian Institute/Harriman Institute, Fifty Years, 1946-1996*] marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute.

Q: Yes. 1995. Right.

Motyl: So when Allen Lynch left in mid-'92, and the money for the nationalities program ran out, the timing was perfect, and I was the logical person to be the associate director, having been doing administrative work at Harriman for four years before that.

Q: The program that you directed, the Nationality and Siberian Studies [Program], the idea of nationality there was to study nationalities within the Soviet Union and Siberia? I mean, I'm not sure—

Motyl: It doesn't quite make sense, and everybody would always ask why nationality and Siberia? Nationality is the non-Russians. That was always the designation for them. So that made sense, because they were causing all this trouble, and no one really had studied them, and so we should study the non-Russians. The more appropriate second term would have been regional studies, right? But there, Marshall Shulman, so the story goes—again, I don't know this first hand, but the story goes that Marshall Shulman was somehow persuaded that Siberia is the greatest thing and needs to be studied on its own. So, okay, so now it's nationality and Siberian. There you go.

Q: I see.

Motyl: I think the only person who would be able to give you a definitive answer to that would be Bob Legvold.

Q: Going back—well, actually kind of picking up on this, but thinking about area studies and Harriman, that's kind of an expression of the idea of area studies in some sense, is that the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the Eastern European control by the Communist Party seemed to happen suddenly, even to academics. But I'm wondering if people in area studies that you knew at Harriman at the time, or Harriman in general, did they anticipate this? Or do you think that this is the job of the—to anticipate, or is it more to kind of explain after the fact what happened?

Motyl: Yes. Again, that's a good question. As my colleagues from other disciplines at Harriman often would tell me, someone studying Russian literature, [Alexander S.] Pushkin, [Fyodor M.] Dostoyevsky, has no connection with anticipating Soviet collapses. Likewise the historians, they had no connection to this. Likewise, the anthropologists. So the only people who may be charged with either predicting or failing to predict, or anticipate or failing to anticipate, would have been the political scientists, and of course those are the ones that most people think of when they think of Sovietologists. But, of course, truth to tell they are probably only 25 percent of the total profession.

One of the key debates within the field was the stability or lack of stability of the Soviet Union, the imperative nature of reform, radical reform, and so on. I'd say it was the conventional wisdom within the field that the Soviet Union wasn't performing as it should, that it was in some kind of decline, and that something needed to be done. Lots of people argued that radical reform was imperative; however, it was unlikely, because the party would somehow or other prevent it, blah, blah. Others argued that radical reform wasn't perhaps that necessary, but nevertheless

some degree of reform was, and so on and so forth. So, people understood, and I think amongst those who understood this best were the economists. Economists, and Soviet studies people generally, understood that something wasn't right. Of course, the Soviets were pretty much saying the same thing, so it was in some ways a no brainer. But clearly people understood that something wasn't right.

The division concerned whether the Soviet system could be sustained without reform, or was radical reform imperative, and in the absence of radical reform would the system collapse, deteriorate, decay? I mean, people used words like decay because it's vague enough to suggest that things are bad, but it's also vague enough not to pinpoint what you mean, right? [Laughs] I mean, decay can go on for thousands of years, right? So that was the issue. Could they sustain themselves in this form, or was it really imperative that something had to be done? And I'd say the majority view was they could probably survive. There was also a sub-debate within the debate as to whether the non-Russians were a stabilizing or destabilizing factor.

Q: For the Soviet Union?

Motyl: For the Soviet Union. There again, as I said, it was a sub-debate because nationality studies in those days were completely marginalized. Most people didn't think they were important. Most people believed that the Soviet Union was essentially a Russian state, which it was. It's just that 50 percent of the population also happened to be non-Russian. So for the majority of Sovietologists, the non-Russians really weren't an issue. But for some of them, people like Seweryn Bialer and a bunch of others, there was an understanding that, yes, they

were an issue. But then the question was, were they on the verge of some kind of trouble making? Or were they essentially bought out, or bought into the system and had been co-opted and weren't really much of a problem? There again, some people said, yes, they were a problem. Others said they were not. In general, people in Harriman, I'd say, were on the side of arguing that the Soviet Union could be sustained and that the nationalities were manageable. Harriman had a reputation as being somewhat soft on the Soviets—

Q: Mm-hmm.

Motyl: —in contrast to Harvard [University], which was more hard line on the Soviets.

Q: So picking up on that, because thinking of Harriman as a place of area studies, as an expression, as I said before, of the idea of area studies in the '90s, area studies, as I had alluded to, seemed to be coming under attack. [John G.] Ruggie writes a memo to [George E.] Rupp and [Jonathan R.] Cole talking about the collapse of the faculty in the mid-'90s in terms of area studies in the different departments, competition at Harriman from functional and global institutes, funding sources become less interested. What did you see? And I'm going to ask about national studies in a moment, and I think there's a relationship here, an important relationship, and maybe you'd be anticipating some of your answers to some of the issues around nationality studies. But what did you see as the issues that area studies had to confront at this time if it was going to maintain itself as kind of an intellectual as well as an organizational entity?

Motyl: You know, to tell you the truth, in terms of the career prospects for students with an area studies background, the one thing that we understood in the '90s was that our students were eminently employable precisely because they had area studies backgrounds. And the argument that was made to us by some banker types and so on was that you can pretty much learn accounting, business in a couple of semesters, but you really can't learn Russian and Russian culture in a couple of semesters, you know, or Ukrainian or whatever the language, whatever the region happens to be. You'd take a summer course, and you're pretty much expert in a lot of the things that they do. So our students were actually doing well. And I think in terms of the overall belief in the integrity of area studies and its value for the students and for the world, I don't think that people in general had some sense of crisis. I mean, it wasn't intrinsically generated. It wasn't because it wasn't working.

I think the problem was in university departments. In general there was a shift in the 1990s for reasons that are extraneous to area studies, I think, namely a shift toward functional specializations and a shift toward theory. That, of course, was eroding the base of area studies because the claim there was that knowledge of languages, knowledge of history, knowledge of culture, knowledge of region was not important. All you needed to know was the formulae; all you needed to know was whatever you learned about things in general. I must confess, when I went into grad school, I was actually one of the people who believed that theory was the wave of the future, while working on area studies. I embodied this contradiction.

But I was very much persuaded that theory was fundamentally important, that the rest was essentially just shoveling empirical dirt. Anybody can do that. Constructing these pristine

theories was the way to go. I pretty much abandoned that view in the course of time. But that said, institutionally, when I directed the nationalities program or served as associate director, it was clear to me that area studies and certain Soviet, post-Soviet studies, however you wanted to define them, were producing results, were training good students, and the students were getting good jobs.

Q: Just to be clear about when you talk about theory, the idea is basically that you can construct theories that will explain phenomena in all countries, or in a set of countries, and so that there is no reason to kind of worry about the particulars of each country.

Motyl: Right.

Q: Rather, that you can create these models that can be applicable anywhere.

Motyl: Right. Right. In political science, some of those theories can be extremely abstract. Many, if not most, are actually grounded in certain empirical realities. Likewise in sociology. I mean, people appreciate that reality matters. You may not need to know the language, but you really need to have read a few books about the place. You've got to be able to demonstrate some knowledge. The problem is with theories that treat people, their culture and history, as irrelevant. It's really just a question of correlating numbers with numbers.

It may be that this shift towards functional, non-regional work had to do with the larger shift towards quantitative knowledge. Perhaps it has something to do with the spread of global

capitalism. I'm guessing at this point. But it's a larger phenomenon. It doesn't just concern the universities; you find this all over the place. I mean, this view that somehow knowing these larger theoretical models will give you the ability to understand the world in a way that this kind of fine grain knowledge does not.

Q: Given that this was shifting, that this was changing in this way, could Harriman have done something to have addressed this, in the sense that, as you say, area studies seemed to be working for students—getting good jobs and that sort of thing—but yet underneath it there were these changes that we've been talking about in terms of functionalism and theory? Was there any interest at Harriman in trying to address these issues as, maybe this is the wave of the future, and we should kind of get on board with it somehow? Or is it just that, No, things are working okay. We can just kind of let it go?

Motyl: You know, students have to take courses in individual disciplines, and once they're taking courses in individual disciplines they're invariably confronted with all these theoretical issues. In a way, you see, there is a structural impediment here, because the students who would have been most under pressure to work in the theoretical vein, say, again in the political science department, were obviously those who would be working on PhDs. But if you're working on a PhD, a Harriman certificate is pretty much irrelevant. You really don't need it. It's just an additional hoop that doesn't bring you much. Unless, of course, you do it simply because you might be able to finagle some language grant or some travel grant along the way.

Meanwhile, departmental requirements increasingly are becoming theoretical, and of course are focused on PhDs, which always were more theoretical than the Harriman certificate. Besides, the certificate was, what, sixty, seventy pages or something like that, whereas the dissertation is many more. So you had students, as it were, having to answer to two masters. That was less of an issue when the departments were less theoretical, and that becomes more of an issue when the departments become more theoretical. I'm not sure there is anything that Harriman could do about that, or any regional institute. I mean, it could arguably institute a PhD, but that would mean an enormous undertaking administratively. I suppose the introduction of the MARS-[REERS] Program [Master of Arts in Regional Studies – Russia, Eurasia and Eastern Europe] is in some sense an attempt to address some of these issues, but that happened after I left, so I don't know at all what the debates regarding that were.

So in a way you're stuck. You're a regional institute defined in these particular terms. You provide a certificate. The certificate is useful for people who do a master's and have professional aspirations. It's pretty much useless or perhaps, even worse than that, an encumbrance for people going on to do PhDs. That may not have mattered in the past, but increasingly as the political science departments and the departments are going off in this quantitative direction, Harriman is kind of left holding the bag. And as I said, I'm not sure there's much you can do besides hunker down and say, Well, you know, we do offer a product, it is useful, it does get people jobs, and there is a value to this, and like it or not, we're going to stick to our guns. And in a way I suppose that's what the Institute did.

Q: It seems that way. This question I have in my mind alludes back to I think something you said before about, Faced with the collapse of the Soviet Union—since Harriman defined itself as an institute studying the Soviet Union—what do we do? And I was wondering—I noticed formally there was this merging of Harriman with the East—

Motyl: Central Europe—

Q: —East Central European Center, and I was wondering, it seems that perhaps that would—I was wondering whether it was contentious or not. It seems perhaps not. I don't know, from what you were saying before, that—

Motyl: There were some issues. Again, this was done, I forget exactly the year, but it was within the year or two of my coming on, so Rick Ericson was still in charge. East Central Europe was in bad straits. We had the money, they didn't. We had the students, and they didn't. But mostly we had the money, right? At that point Harriman's endowment was something like twenty million when I came on board, and East Central Europe had virtually nothing, and it wasn't doing well, and it looked like it was one of these no-future institutions. And since the Soviet Union fell apart, and we decided to study Russia plus all of the successor states, it seemed not unreasonable to include within that fairly large cornucopia of countries the twenty-plus that had emerged from communism in East Central Europe. What's the difference between Ukraine and Poland? Why not do both? So we started pushing that. And there was some push back from the East Central Europeans, as you can well imagine.

Q: Who was in charge of the East European Center at the time, do you remember?

Motyl: The associate director was John [S.] Micgiel, whom you want to talk to. He's now the director of the Kosciuszko Foundation on East Sixty-Fifth Street, off Fifth Avenue. The director—it wasn't Debbie [Deborah D.] Milenkovich. It may have been István Deák.

Q: Deák.

Motyl: Right?

Q: Sounds plausible.

Motyl: They were in crisis, right? I mean, maybe crisis is too strong a term, but they were kind of in this awkward position—doubly awkward because the place was no longer communist, and East Germany had become Germany, you know. They were also searching for some solutions. But there was some resistance because they wanted to retain some identity. I think our, kind of, program maxim was, Well, why don't you just merge with us, and we'll all be Harriman, and then within Harriman you could study Poland, Russia, or whatever it is that you wanted to. And I believe, as a result of some of the resistance, we came up with this notion that they would then retain a kind of semi-autonomous status as an East Central European Center.

So there was some push back, and if I'm not mistaken István was not on board immediately.

[Laughs] I think he had some qualms about this. But then the solution was, Okay, well, you'll be

a center, and then you'll have more access to the twenty million, whatever that meant, and you're still going to have your half of the twelfth floor. So they kept the office, and pretty much nothing changed. It was no longer an institute, it was now a center; the Center was part of Harriman.

However, the Center still retained some kind of programmatic profile.

Q: In '96—I don't know if you're still at Harriman in '96? So, the Ford Foundation, according to our research, tells Rupp that they want to fund an initiative to kind of—the words that we have is “revitalize area studies,” even though from the Harriman's point of view it didn't need revitalization, as you've said, with granting twenty-five million to U.S. universities, not to Columbia specifically, but Columbia would be a part of that. I was wondering, do you have any idea how Columbia responded? Did this filter down to Harriman at all?

Motyl: Gosh, I don't remember that at all.

Q: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Motyl: I have no recollection. [Laughs] I don't remember that at all. Jeez.

Q: Yes, yes. No, it's—

Motyl: By the way, if I could just interject here, one of the points that was often made by people in the '90s was that Russian studies is in decline, hence regional studies are in decline, and so on. What we always said was, Well, yes, in a manner of speaking. There are fewer people doing

Russian studies, but you have more people doing Lithuanian, and Kazakhstan, and Ukrainian, and Jewish and so on. So if you add them all up, it's really pretty much the same number, right?

One has to keep that in mind, right?

Q: Well, this is a nice segue to where I wanted to go in talking about nationality studies, because they seemed to grow through you and other people in the '90s at Harriman, elsewhere. You were founder of the Association for the Study of Nationalities [ASN], I believe?

Motyl: No, no.

Q: Involved, instrumental—

Motyl: I was involved.

Q: Okay.

Motyl: I was instrumental in its revival because it was actually founded back in, oh, gosh, roughly 1970 by a small cohort of scholars who did the nationalities. There may have been, I don't know, twenty, thirty, forty of them. I mean, it just gives you a sense of how tiny the field was. They published this magazine, *Nationalities Papers*, that kind of came out, kind of didn't come out, and it was sort of serious, it wasn't too serious. And it was pretty much a moribund institution. It was in the mid-1990s that a then recent PhD from Stanford [University], Ian

Bremmer, who was a friend of mine, he had this bright idea to become president, and he was twenty-three or twenty-four. He was one of these wunderkind types.

Q: The Eurasia Insti—Eurasia—

Motyl: He's the president of the Eurasia Group, right, exactly. So he wanted to become president, and he approached a bunch of his buddies. I was one of them. Mark [R.] Beissinger was another one. He's now at Princeton [University]. And he said, "Well, you know, could you be VP? Could you be VP?" He needed us, sort of the gray hairs, in order to provide this whole project with some degree of gravitas. [Laughs] And there were—as you could imagine—there was some consternation amongst the old guard within ASN, but eventually he got them on board. He was elected, and he wanted to get this thing moving. And he came in with a lot of energy. He was also using it as a vehicle for promoting himself in his career, which was understandable.

And it was then the mid-'90s, I forget exactly when, '95, '96 perhaps, that we came upon the idea of organizing annual conferences on nationalities at Columbia. Now we had already done those at the Nationalities and Siberian Studies Program, right? So we had done annual conferences on that issue, and then we published the transcripts of the proceedings in *Nationalities Papers*, so we had a very close working relationship with them. As a matter of fact, the first conference we did in 1988 or '89 was called "The Soviet Nationalities and Gorbachev." Then the next one was called "Soviet Nationalities Against Gorbachev," and I believe the final one was called "Soviet Nationalities Without Gorbachev." [Laughs] We occasionally had some Soviets coming. They were getting increasingly flustered by the titles. But anyway, we had a

working relationship with the editor of that magazine, Henry [R.] Huttenbach. He used to be at CCNY [The City College of New York].

We've got this relationship, we've got conferences that we've been doing, we've got a relationship with the magazine, and the next logical step was to do an ASN conference at Columbia obviously, because I was here, and so on. So we did two, I believe, two years in a row. One was like a half day, the next year we did a full day, and lots of enthusiasm, lots of people, and we decided to do the convention. This was, I guess, '97, '98, thereabouts, a few years before I left. I still remember the first time, the first year. We got a whole bunch of submissions for panels. This is before computers. So I was cutting up all the submission ideas, and I had them all spread out on my floor and putting them into panels, organizing the panels. Anyway, the thing worked, *mirabile dictu*, it actually worked.

At that point Harriman had to make a major decision, because organizing a conference of three or four hours is easy. It doesn't require a major commitment of anything. All we needed was [Room] 1219 or 1512, and that was sufficient. A convention is different. You need ten, twenty, or however many rooms, and of course the logistics are just so much more complicated. And at that point Harriman had to come on board and essentially declare that it would be the formal sponsor of the ASN convention. Again, as you can imagine, there was some controversy within ASN. Why Columbia? Why not do it all over the place, as many of these institutions do? And our answer was, Well, for starters I work here, so I can pretty much guarantee you support. For another, everybody likes New York, so what the hell, right?

Q: We've—I convened at conferences on that basis.

Motyl: Yes.

Q: So as you say, this is an important moment for Harriman because it also represents a much stronger commitment than to nationalities studies than it had before.

Motyl: Yes. Yes.

Q: On the one hand, it seems that one might think of the relationship between area studies and nationality studies. On the one hand, you could view it, as you said before, which is, you have people doing this kind of the same thing, in some sense, I mean, the same numbers of people studying Poland, studying Ukraine. It's now not done under the banner of area studies; it's done as nationalities studies. On the other hand, intellectually at least, it strikes me that perhaps area studies and nationalities studies are different in the sense that one kind of claims an area as something that is intellectually useful to study, as an intellectual object, on the other hand, an area that's comprised of many different countries, many different nationalities. But the nationality studies, the kind of intellectual claim is that it is important and perhaps sufficient unto itself to study different countries, different nationalities embedded in particular countries. So that the two could be seen as somewhat—there's some tension between the two ideas. And I was wondering, A, do you see that, or do you see it that way? And B, were there expressions of this in Harriman? The Harriman coming in and doing the ASN conference suggests that it, kind of,

brought into, eventually, the idea of nationalities studies and, in this context as I'm describing, maybe backing away from the idea of area studies and moving more toward nationalities studies?

Motyl: Yes. My own sense personally is that there's far more synergy between the two. I understand, you know, you've set up these two polar opposites, and I understand the logic behind that. But I think in practice it was more of a synergy. I hate to use that word. [Laughs] But nevertheless, there's more of a kind of a complimentary relationship between the two. Because people studying, for instance, Ukraine invariably—I mean there's just no way that you can study Ukraine without studying Poland, and without studying Russia, and without studying the Soviet Union. So like it or not, you're in a region. The same would hold true for Lithuania, right? And Estonia and, you know, you go down the line.

The only nation that you could arguably study without studying any other nation is of course the Russians. Now, of course, that, too, isn't quite true, especially if you recognize that Muscovy and then the Russian Rossiya were empires, but very few people thought of Russia as an empire. I mean, this is a relatively recent innovation in our way of thinking about Russia. So in principle that was really the only place that you could get away with the claim that the two were somehow interconnected—the two were identical. And I think in practice, as I said, not only was that the case pedagogically, but it also turned out to be the case in practice. I mean, people who studied collectivization in Poland invariably conversed with people who studied collectivization in East Germany or Lithuania, and the same would have been true for collectivization in Belarus or Ukraine or other sorts of places. So the conversation started taking place almost from the get-go.

And if you look at the way the ASN conventions were structured, and the kind of people who came to them, and the topics that were talked about, you'll find that many of the panels tended to be topical, I mean functional if you like, ironically. So there'd be a panel on identity politics and violence. It's sort of your classic ASN panel: identity and violence, or state building and nation building in—and it will be Central Asia or in comparative perspective, and you'd have a person talking about Turkey, one on Russia, one on Poland, right? And that was pretty much the case from the very beginning. So you had a lot of that cross fertilization taking place, by virtue of the fact that these places were after all part of larger units, larger entities, and continued to be affected by, quote, the legacies of the places.

There's also the fact that after all everybody's coming into this from a department, so the political scientists have theoretical concerns in addition to their area concern or their nationality concern. So, too, the historians, and the anthropologists, and the humanists and everybody else. I think in practice nationality studies was a way of pursuing comparative studies—I actually even argued this once. Damn, it just occurred to me. I wrote something for *Slavic Review* on this—that nationality studies is comparative studies. And for obvious reasons. On the one hand, they're sufficiently similar to compare, on the other hand, they're sufficiently different to make the comparison interesting. And rather than focusing on just one place or Russia, why not look at all these subunits and compare them and see what happens?

And then if you look at what happened in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, a lot of what people do in the field is precisely that. I mean, nationality studies is no longer possible in the way that it was done in the Soviet days. You could pretend to know everything about all

fifteen republics back in the 1980s because essentially every newspaper was the same, regardless of which language it was written in. And the literature in English or in Western languages, you could collect it on one bookshelf. So, hey, it was easy to be an expert. You can't do that anymore, right? But you can sort of be an expert in two or three countries, and most people do that nowadays. They have their one favorite country, and then one or two that they usually compare that favorite to the others.

Q: I wanted to ask you about how you conceptualize nationality studies. It sounds like that perhaps is an answer to my question, or at least that's the way it's done. I don't know if you would agree that that's the way it ought to be done, but that's the way—

Motyl: I think it is done that way, and it's arguably the way it should be done. I'm a little skittish about saying it should, because who knows what should be done in academic life. But that said, it's been fairly interesting and fairly fruitful. You look at just about anything, whether it's identity, monuments, atrocities, collaboration, party building, state building, nation building, most people—most people, not everybody, but most people will do something on two or three countries, or a lot on one, plus a bit on two or three countries. The majority actually does some form of comparative work even if it's not highfalutin theoretical comparative work. But they do a kind of comparative historical work, and that's probably a good thing.

Q: Right. It's interesting that the theory does come back in, not in this kind of grand theoretical way, but as a thing that holds the three sites together.

Motyl: Yes. Yes.

Q: Yes, right. In your work and what Harriman was doing in the '90s, and even going on, becoming more oriented toward nationality studies in the later '90s, and even going back to your time when you were first associated in 1988 as director of the Nationality and Siberia Program, do you have a sense of your work or others' work around Harriman as having much impact on policy making in the U.S. or elsewhere? There seems to be kind of this tension at Harriman between the policymaking and the intellectual pursuits, pursuits of knowledge, you know.

Motyl: Right.

Q: So this is kind of a common question that comes up about whether, in terms of trying to do a history of Harriman, how to parse that. From your own experience, did you, for your own work or other people's work—

Motyl: Yes. You know, I'm just such a small fish, I may have affected the thinking of some low-level analyst in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] [laughs], but more than that I just don't see that. But on the other hand, remember, [Zbigniew K.] Brzezinski was at Harriman and then went on to do whatever he did. Seweryn Bialer, for a number of years, five to ten, had the ear of policymakers throughout the world. Now again, whether that made any difference, I don't know, but he certainly had their ear. Marshall Shulman was shuttling back and forth between Washington [D.C.] and Columbia. Bob Legvold was very closely connected with the policy world. John [N.] Hazard, of course.

Q: I was wondering, independent of—I mean, that’s one way of transmitting, of having this kind of connection. Another way is through the work itself, through publications, the ASN conventions, other kinds of publications that were put out, especially as the Eastern European, taking the 1990s, was trying to increasingly free itself from the Soviet Union or from Russia, and the U.S. was eager to help it do that as it expanded NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]. Do you think that any of the nationality studies work plays any kind of role in trying to kind of encourage this and giving kind of intellectual bases for what happens?

Motyl: My own view of how this works in general is that we write all this stuff, and nowadays, of course, we also produce op-eds, blogs, I mean, God knows how much stuff, right? And who reads it? I mean, frankly, who reads it? Well, graduate students have to read it. Some of our colleagues read it. Some of it filters down to Washington through the think tanks. Some of it’s actually read by analysts in the State Department, CIA and other places. More likely than not, it’s not read, but they get exposed to ideas because they may invite some of us to their conferences. So there’s a chance that it affects, let’s call it the larger intellectual environment. There is a chance that it affects the thinking of low-level or medium-range individuals, unless of course you’re a Bialer or a Shulman, right?

But in general the stuff we produce has an impact on the discourse and the framing of issues, but that’s about it. It’s more a kind of glacial impact. And then once in a while, right, I mean, you’ll have a guy like Samuel [P.] Huntington produce a catchy book called *Clash of Civilizations*, and then everybody’s quoting him. Or there’s that fellow, [Nassim Nicholas] Taleb, *The Black Swan*

[*The Impact of the Improbable*], and then everybody believes in black swans. And it's not really an issue of the intellectual substance. Don't ask me to critique those books. I could easily do that. But the point is, if you can come up with a catchy phrase, then somehow that seems to have an impact. It seeps into the culture, into the discourse, into the thinking, and people then confront it or reject it, but in any case, they deal with it. But in terms of how we affect things, I'm rather more persuaded that at best it's marginal. Short term very marginal, long term not insignificant, but glacial, kind of like we push things in certain directions.

So in terms of nationalities, back in 1987, I'd say that the average American policymaker, policy analyst, journalist, business person and so on, knew next to nothing about nationalities in general and pick any one in particular. They had some vague notion that there were some crazy Estonians, but that was about it. Thirty years later or forty years later, all those people know a fair amount, and I think they know that, well, partly because they need to, but also because there has been a literature and there is a literature which we provide, and which they can then draw on. Have we affected policy, however? I don't know. Honestly I don't know. I'm not so sure at all.

Q: Let me turn to something very different now, more kind of organizational about Harriman in the '90s and funding, and it's kind of problems at the time. It seems that there were many possible initiatives that were being suggested at the time in this flurry—I think of it as a flurry of memos that I was reading, in the context of initiatives, in the context of securing greater funding. I've got a bullet point here of about twelve, but I won't read them all off, but just to perhaps trigger your memory a little bit. There was this idea for marketing area studies expertise to U.S. businesses and financial firms.

Motyl: Well, that was my idea, together with Ian Bremmer.

Q: Yes. Well, Jack [L.] Snyder took it in his—in the memo I saw.

Motyl: Oh, is that right?

Q: Yes. But—

Motyl: Okay, well, then we must have been thinking in parallel terms.

Q: —it's in the air. Sure, exactly. Helping U.S. businesses to do business in the former Soviet Union and in the non-Russian countries. [George] Soros apparently was interested in funding a Ukrainian studies program at Columbia. I don't know if you knew about that.

Motyl: I didn't know that. Really?

Q: Yes. This came out in an interview, one of the earlier interviews that we did here with Ericson. Then there's nationality, nationalism education, and a whole bunch of other things. Well, my first question was to focus on—ask you about that Soros funding idea. But—

Motyl: I don't recall it.

Q: —you don't recall it at all.

Motyl: I should know this because Ericson, I was his right-hand man. I've just forgotten about that. I don't think that money dried up per se, although it may have because of the end of the Cold War. There may have been some issues with that. But the more pressing issue was, we had adopted this programmatic shift to embrace essentially all of Eurasia along with fifteen countries, plus the East Central Europeans. You know, that's what, forty countries?

Q: Yes, [Mark] von Hagen talks about, from the German—in the 1995 statement, from the German-Polish border all the way to the Pacific.

Motyl: To Vladivostok.

Q: Yes, yes.

Motyl: I mean, good Lord. Which, of course, was the area that we had focused on before, but it was essentially one place. Now it was forty places, which meant that you needed funding for Ukrainian studies and for Kyrgyz studies, and you needed funding for Polish, and this, that and everything else. It was no longer sufficient just to get a lump sum for Russian. That was kind of the assumption; Soviet meant Russian, so you provide Soviet studies, it meant Russian studies. Well now you still had that fundamental core that would have been Russian. That was under no threat, but the other stuff wouldn't be credible unless you can actually offer courses. Well, we had no specialist in Central Asian studies, so that meant adjuncts. Well, adjuncts mean additional

money, right? Or you invite people from the outside to come in as visiting professors and things of that sort. That I think, if I'm not mistaken, that was the primary rationale here. So I know that in those days, with Ericson, one of the things that I was pursuing together with Rick was getting money for Ukrainian studies. And it was at that point that we contacted this Ukrainian millionaire in Toronto, Peter Jacyk, and after some to-ing and fro-ing and hemming and hawing and so on, he sent us a check. I think it was like 150,000 showed up in the mail, and he said, "I'll give you more," so we did this big to-do, a big evening. It was in Low [Memorial] Library, and we all dressed up in our suits and ties, and I believe he gave us another 500,000 American, not Canadian, right, and suddenly we had 650,000 in Ukrainian studies, and it was this big deal. Then little bits and pieces of additional money started coming in. And John Micgiel was instrumental in raising all sorts of money for, I believe it was Serbian language, possibly Hungarian. But in any case, he did a ton of work in order to raise money for the individual nationalities in those regions. But Soros was probably part of the conversation. He would have had to be. But if anyone had a conversation with him personally, it would have been the director, not me. It's possible that Rick told me about this. It's very likely, and it's very likely, as you can see, that I just forgot.

Q: So the money that came from this Toronto billionaire, millionaire?

Motyl: Millionaire, yes, construction guy.

Q: A lot of money. How was it used at Harriman, in terms of Ukrainian studies?

Motyl: Well, it went into the overall endowment.

Q: I see.

Motyl: That's the thing. That was one of the other issues. [Laughs] Let's assume it's 650,000. I forget exactly what the amount is. It went into the endowment, so the endowment at that point was about twenty-one, twenty-two. So now it becomes twenty-two, twenty-three. The question that we had, which was a source of struggle between the director, Rick, and I guess Mark von Hagen at some point, and the administration was the payout. I remember this distinctly when Rick and I came in, because we both assumed our positions at the same time. He very quickly had a conversation with George Rupp, and it turned out that we were getting some miserable payout, something like three percent. This was at a time when the university was probably making ten to fifteen on the money and then was giving us three. In addition to that, there was some sort of president's tax. Then, of course, to complicate things even more, way back when in the '70s or '80s when Harriman got this big money from [W. Averell] Harriman, they made a gentlemen's agreement with the president's office that the payout should be something like five or six, and in the course of time the president's office just whittled that down—but, of course, it was a gentlemen's agreement, so there seems to have been no record. So that was always a tug of war. But in any case, as you can imagine, 650,000 at a three percent payout is pretty much enough to fund a couple of adjunct positions. That's really all it came down to. So I believe we may have funded Ukrainian language instruction through that. That would have been the logical thing to do. It was always the languages that were the key here, because everything else you can

kind of—you could always write a paper on Ukraine if you were doing a course on the Soviet Union, right?

Q: Right. This is probably similar to what happened with any other monies that were raised, like by Micgiel and—

Motyl: Yes.

Q: —for Serbia and Hungarian studies, that sort of thing?

Motyl: We also raised some money—there was also an initiative for Georgian, by the way. I forget how that happened, but there was some Georgian prince who used to hang out and eventually contributed something or other. But it was, again, this was Rick Ericson's time, and it went to fund Georgian language. Then John did East Central Europe. Did we do any Baltic stuff? I forget. Eventually, as you know, Cathy [Catharine Theimer] Nepomnyashchy, traveled to Turkmenistan. They established contact with a bunch of other places. I just don't know anything about those.

Q: So, I'm trying to kind of just get a stronger sense of both the internal dynamics of Harriman and its relationship with Columbia at the time. It sounds as if the collapse was kind of handled pretty well, even though the memos kind of talked about We've got to raise more money, we've got to raise more money. In your analysis of why that was so, that in fact there was some successful money raising going on in the context of nationality studies, and that more the conflict

perhaps was with Columbia about trying to get a share of that such that Harriman could do something more than offer some language courses, language training. Is that a fair statement?

Motyl: I think that's right. It was internal. It was an internal conflict, if you like. There was sort of a general belief within the Institute that the administration was robbing us blind, and they probably were, given the fact that they did seem to have this gentlemen's agreement.

Q: Did you feel at the time, did other people feel at the time that it prevented Harriman from developing in ways that it didn't develop, in ways that might have made it more robust, more vital, more interesting?

Motyl: I'm not so sure I'd say that. I think we did a lot of interesting things in the '90s. Again, that sounds self-serving, but the number of students was pretty much stable, the diversity of interests was obviously far greater than it had been in the past, students were graduating, they were—

Q: I meant the question more in the sense of like: there were paths that you couldn't take that you might have wanted to take.

Motyl: I suppose you could say, well, gosh, we would have wanted more money for Ukrainian or Belarusian or Estonian studies or something of that sort. That's always an issue. One wants more. One is never quite satisfied. But that said, I think if you look objectively at what was going on in that period, I'd be hard pressed to say that we were somehow deeply frustrated in terms of

some goal that we could not achieve. We did have language courses in Ukrainian, Georgian—well, Armenian had been around for a while. There was obviously Turkish, and we also kind of extended our hands into Turkish, the rationale being that even though Turkey isn't part of the Soviet Union, but the Central Asians and the Azeris do speak Turkic languages, so what the hell. I think Kyrgyz or Tajik were being offered, at least on occasion. Visiting scholars were coming in all the time from all these republics. Some of them were teaching courses, some of them were giving lectures, so there was a lot of activity.

Q: You said before something that interested me that I wonder if you could kind of educate me about. You made reference to the key role of kind of language in, I guess Harriman, but I also had the sense that you meant it a little bit more broadly, more intellectually. I was just wondering if you could expand on what you meant by that?

Motyl: Well, the belief then, which I certainly shared, but certainly my colleagues did as well, and my belief today, which I share even more, is that in order to understand a place, even if you're an economist, you really need to know the place. That's kind of obvious. But in order to know a place, you really need to know the language. You know, you've got to be able to talk to people, and it's not just the high policy makers because most of them speak English anyway. You've got to be able to watch TV, you've got to be able to pick up a newspaper, listen to some radio, go to a café. All this is pretty straightforward, and for people in regional studies, to be saying these sorts of things is the utmost banality. But unfortunately it's become a heterodox opinion in much of academe and in many universities, which as you know are closing down language departments and reducing language requirements. So my own belief now, as it was

then, but even more so now than it was then, is that whether you're focusing on a nationality or a country, whatever your functional specialization happens to be, you really can't pursue it with any degree of justice if you don't have some kind of entry into the people, and language is the way to do it. Language gives you that entry. And I know in my own experience over the last thirty, forty years, not so much as an academic, but just as a human being who speaks a number of languages, I see that. I'm absolutely persuaded that that is the case. So in that sense, language becomes key. I think Harriman has always understood that, and I think all these regional institutes understand that. It's nice to be able to take history courses and culture courses, but you really need to be able to speak one of these foreign languages and possibly two or three, but at least one.

Q: It's interesting, because the failure to appreciate language seems to tie in also with the notion of theory kind of taking over, because it's not necessary to understand the language. I don't know if you would agree with this, but it's not necessary to learn the language so long as you understand the theoretical conceptions and the modeling within which you can thereby understand a country or a region. And so the models do the work that the language would do, as you just described.

Motyl: I quite agree with that.

Q: Is that a fair statement?

Motyl: The issue is often presented in binary terms, so if you're a theorist you don't need to know the language, if you're a regional specialist you don't need to know the theory. In point of fact, people who do regional studies obviously know the languages, but they are at least theoretically conversant, if not actually theoretical. Whereas in contrast, the people who do the theory and the functional and the quantitative stuff, that's all they do. So in a manner of speaking, the Aristotelian solution would be to combine both. Why not be both theoretical and knowledgeable in terms of regions, languages and so on? That's certainly doable. It's not rocket science. It can be done, people have done it, so why not do it? In a way Harriman is true to that tradition. It may have veered more in one direction as opposed to another in the course of the sixty years or so of existence, but the point is it's been pretty much true to that tradition.

Q: And still today?

Motyl: And still today.

Q: I was going to ask you. You see it even still now, as trying to kind of basically adjoin these two?

Motyl: Today even more so I think, because in the past, when you look at people like Marshall Shulman, Bob Legvold, to some degree Seweryn Bialer, John Hazard, they were Russia specialists, and they really weren't—I mean, they knew theory, but they really weren't theoretically interested. That wasn't their thing. In those days you could actually get a job at

Columbia in the poli-sci department without having any kind of theoretical pretensions, which was fine. Nowadays you can't. Impossible.

So you look at today's director, Alex [Alexander A.] Cooley. He's kind of the new model, if you like. He knows Central Asia, he knows the Soviet Union, he knows Russia, there's no question about his regional expertise, and at the same time he does theoretically sophisticated work on international relations and things of that sort. So you can combine the two. Jack Snyder was never quite the regional specialist, but he, too, knew Russia, and the Soviet Union, and was certainly very theoretically inclined. So it is possible to combine them. Of course, the combination is the way to go, but it does require an investment in regional studies, and that means learning languages. That's tough. That means four or five, six, seven semesters, and not everybody wants to do that.

Q: I'm looking over some of the questions that I had written out. One thing, in a different direction, in terms of influencing the Harriman and influencing the human rights field, as it's influenced—you've spoken to how it's kind of played a role in influencing nationality studies. One of the other areas of interest is to see how it's influenced the human rights field. I noticed that you're a faculty associate, program director, for the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights at Rutgers [University-Newark College of Arts and Sciences]. Okay, so I thought maybe you had given some—I didn't know if you had, in that context, had any association with Harriman in terms of human rights, or have any thoughts about what Harriman has done or is doing about trying to develop the human rights field in academia.

Motyl: This affiliation is purely formal, without any substance whatsoever. [Laughs] But in terms of human rights, you know, human rights have always been an important component of Soviet studies, maybe sub rosa, but a significant portion of people who went into Soviet studies or who did Soviet studies were focused on, well, the nature of the regime. They may have been reluctant to call it totalitarian after a certain period of time, but they certainly would have called it authoritarian. Many people were outraged by that, for whatever reasons. I mean, some of the reasons were purely humanitarian, others had to do with one's ethnic background.

Q: So this goes back—

Motyl: This goes back to the '40s, '50s, '60s, well, this goes back to the '20s actually, if you think about it.

Q: Right, right. But before Helsinki is kind of what I was—

Motyl: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: —okay.

Motyl: It goes back to that period. Again, maybe one wouldn't have used words like human rights. The terminology has changed, but that particular concern with repression, oppression, violence, violations and things of that sort has been part and parcel of Soviet studies arguably since the very beginning, certainly since the 1940s and 1950s. And in that sense, again, it went

into forming the Soviet studies ethos. Some people have been upset by this. Stephen [F.] Cohen has written—he wrote in this famous essay that Sovietology is a vocation, that Soviet studies is one of the few fields where many of the people who study the Soviet Union hate the object of their study. He was right. I'm not sure if hate is quite the appropriate term, but let's say regarded it with extreme skepticism. One generally studied France because one loved France, and so on, right? I guess Nazi Germany might possibly be another exception.

Q: I've known people that have studied other countries that have not liked them, and I've often wondered why do they do that?

Motyl: Right. But again, you find that often enough, but in the Soviet case it was very prevalent for a variety of reasons, but certainly one of them being because the nature of the regime was, let me quote Ronald Reagan and say that it was in fact an “evil empire.” There was something to that. So people were at least were always critical and were always skeptical, and there was always an emphasis in some fashion or other on human rights violations, even if they weren't called that. So in that sense the more overt concern with human rights, as expressed in the human rights center and in various programs of that sort, they obviously have to do with the emergence of human rights as a full-fledged body of study overall. Again, that has nothing to do with Harriman, that's just a concern that reflects general human concerns. But it's one that was able to build on a long-standing tradition within Soviet studies. It doesn't require much of a leap, in our case, to do human rights, because we always did it, in a manner of speaking.

Q: But did it become more explicit though at Harriman at some point in the '90s and 2000s, perhaps, with the collapse of the Soviet Union? I was thinking about how you talked about how Harriman was kind of soft on the Soviet Union versus Harvard being hard, and I imagine this is kind of one of the ways in which that distinction might have played out. And so, perhaps earlier in its history Harriman was—human rights and the Soviet Union was not that prominent, but perhaps it had become more so, especially with the development of nationality studies and Harriman's commitment to that.

Motyl: I think you're probably right. Certainly in the days of softness [laughs], human rights were an issue. While being nice liberals, I'd say there was a tendency to downplay things, or look the other way a bit or to put them in context. There was some sort of rationale going on. That had a lot to do, by the way, with the debates regarding totalitarianism. Harriman was pretty much on the side of the people who rejected the totalitarian model, which was still alive and sort of well in Harvard and other places, and if you studied totalitarianism invariably you studied repression, so you studied human rights, willy-nilly, right? And if you had junked that and thought of the Soviet Union as being sort of like us, well, then it kind of followed that their human rights violations could not be that egregious, if only because it would be a self-criticism, right? So I think there's something to that.

Then remember, one of the things that the Soviet Union's collapse does is permit people to become critical of the Soviet Union in ways that they could not have been during the Soviet Union's existence. So at some point everybody says, Oh, of course it was repressive! And it was in the early 1990s that people started saying things like, well, of course it was an empire. If you

had said that it was empire in the 1970s or '80s you would have been thrown out of the halls of academe. You couldn't get away with that kind of social impropriety. At Columbia if you said it was totalitarian, that was already a mark against you. But because the Soviets themselves started using words like totalitarianism and empire in the late '80s and early '90s, it suddenly became possible to express these views in polite company.

Then at the same time, I think you need to look at the directors. So Rick Ericson, an economist, sort of a hard-nosed critic of the Soviet economic system, had no illusions about its capacity to work well, had no particular illusions about the vitality of the post-Soviet Russian economic system. He wasn't a policy guy either. He wasn't trying to get the ear of the Kremlin or the ear of Washington, as were many of the others. So for him to be critical of human rights was easy.

Then Mark von Hagen comes along, and Mark was very much committed to human rights. It was part of his intellectual makeup, and if I'm not mistaken he may have also taken part in certain human rights activities. But for him it was just a no-brainer. Human rights were simply important, and it was going to be part of the agenda.

And then even more so for Cathy Nepomnyashchy, who follows him. She was in charge for, what, nine years, so she was very much committed to these sorts of agendas, and in her case as well, it goes back to her intellectual interests, because she had written her dissertation, if I'm not mistaken, on Andrei [D.] Sinyavsky, so she was very much connected to the human rights or dissident community, as Legvold, Bialer were not. They were connected to the Kremlin policy community and to the Washington policy community, whereas Ericson, von Hagen and Nepomnyashchy, including Motyl, but in a secondary capacity, we were just people, so to speak.

We didn't reach those high levels of policy authority. I think that then accounts for the bringing in of more human rights-y kinds of issues into the Harriman agenda.

Q: Did the emphasis on nationalities studies also kind of increase this kind of focus on human rights?

Motyl: I think invariably, invariably, because the working assumption amongst many people in nationality studies is that the nationalities were subordinate to the dominant Russians. Now some people would have said they weren't just subordinate, they were exterminated. Others would have said they were subordinate, but also collaborators, whatever. But the point is it was pretty much clear to everybody that there was a hierarchical relationship, and that the nationalities were here, and the Russians were here. Well, that almost inevitably entails some form of human rights violations.

Then when you add to the mix the people in nationality studies, including myself, very often had the kinds of ethnic backgrounds that I had: family members, refugees from East Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, some of whom may have been repressed, many of whom would have had relatives who had been repressed. That immediately brings in an additional dimension. Sooner or later, if you have people like me, we'll start talking about relatives who wound up in Siberia, and whether you write about human rights or not, it's somehow in your mental makeup and begins to affect the way you frame issues and the way you see issues.

Q: Fascinating. Let me let you go shortly. I'll just focus on one final topic, which actually goes back a ways in our conversation. I was wondering, you were there in 1988, in Harriman, so you're there before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and you're there over this transition period. I was wondering if you can kind of convey a sense, kind of a tangible sense, of kind of like a feeling for what people were thinking. I know you talked before about that there was some anticipation, but it basically was a sense that this country, the Soviet Union, could kind of stumble along for a long time. It wasn't going to collapse immediately, and yet it collapses immediately. How people both in their sense of themselves as academics, for the Harriman Institute, I mean, a more kind of a feeling, a nitty-gritty feeling of what it was like to be there at the time, because your intellectual, your existential—both personally and institutionally—existential basis, your ontological basis, is being threatened.

Motyl: It was one of the most exciting periods of my life, personally and academically. I happened to be in the middle of the institute that was considered to be the most authoritative place on these issues. And, I happened to be in charge of a program that was dealing with an issue that no one knew anything about! It was just amazing. So you have a number of things that came together, so to speak, in my own personal experience. On the one hand there's just the awe and the shock and the befuddlement as to what's going on in the Soviet Union in general. I mean, what is this Gorbachev up to? Everybody was waiting. Some people were expecting more, others were expecting less. Some people believed in perestroika, others didn't. But sooner or later, by around 1988 or so, everybody's already understanding that this is serious. Whatever the larger plan is, we don't know, but this is really going someplace.

And at that point there is, on the one hand, the exhilaration. Good God! And on the other hand, the expectation for the other shoe to drop. So, Okay, they can't really be serious. Are they really going to go this far? Oh, my God, they went this far. But they can't go further. Oh, my God, they went further. And then every time there'd be some crackdown—there were some shootings in Georgia, then there was the shootings in Lithuania, some arrests here, some arrests there—Oh, my God, this is it, this is the beginning of the repression. And then, of course, when the putsch took place in mid-1991, there you go. It's finally happened. Oh, my God, you know, what does this all mean? So there was just enormous befuddlement, excitement, anticipation. Oh, my God. Right?

And then, for people like me, suddenly this obscure field called nationality studies, which was considered to be marginal, uninteresting, by virtually everybody in the world, is catapulted into the limelight. In '87, '88, thereabouts, *The New York Times* called me to do an op-ed on [Eduard] Shevardnadze. The *LA Times* [*Los Angeles Times*] called me to do op-eds as well. People were calling the Institute asking for my opinion. It's not just me, of course, I mean everybody in the field, all twenty of us were getting these kinds of phone calls. Suddenly all this work, all these publications, these conferences, they were attracting attention. In the past you couldn't get anybody to attend. Now they're actually eager to come, right? All this stuff is changing, and suddenly this marginal, uninteresting, irrelevant field is becoming the core of Soviet studies. Terribly exciting. Really very, very exciting.

Q: Were there people at Harriman who were upset at this, that they both, either because their understanding of the Soviet Union, that they missed the boat on it? As we talked before, perhaps

the political scientists, since those are the ones who were maybe expected to anticipate this sort of thing? And also, just that the way their kind of—the future of Harriman was going to go in a somewhat different direction from what they had anticipated, what they wanted, what they thought was intellectually the way to go, and so they felt threatened by this and perhaps fought some kind of rear-guard action? I don't know.

Motyl: No rear-guard action, but there were certainly people who were intellectually and possibly personally affected in a way. In my experience, it was all positive, right? It was exciting; it was fabulous. And then—I won't conceal my anti-Soviet feelings—when the place fell apart [laughs], I remember breaking open a bottle of champagne and doing a jig in the middle of the day. It was one of the greatest moments in my life. I know there were people at Harriman and in the field in general who certainly didn't feel that way. I mean, people who were on the left saw this as the end of a promising experiment. Some of them were in Harriman, some of them were outside of Harriman. You had people whose professions were threatened because suddenly the work they were doing became irrelevant. If you were a person who had dedicated his life to studying the Soviet Communist Party, you could retool obviously, but you were in a bit of a pickle because it was no longer terribly interesting. People who did guns and bombs could still do guns and bombs, but of course it was now Russian guns and bombs, but that was still okay.

There was also the sense of disbelief. Until 1986, '87, I was skeptical of perestroika and what it was all going to lead to, and I didn't believe that the nationalities would cause too many difficulties. Then around '87 or '88 I was invited to a conference organized by the CIA, and they

asked me to do a presentation on scenarios of non-Russian rebellions. And I thought, pfft, are you kidding? Never going to happen. But in the process of writing the paper I persuaded myself that it's actually very plausible. It was a very interesting experience. It was one of those eureka moments. I thought, Son of a gun, this actually could happen. And as of that conference I went on the bandwagon arguing that the Soviet Union's days are numbered, and I was the black swan at Harriman. Again, I was not sufficiently prescient to have known this before '87, '88, but once I got on board, I realized, Damn, this place is actually on the verge of falling apart. I can tell you when I gave presentations to this effect at Harriman or at Arden House, those conferences that they used to do, people would just kind of look at me and say, Gosh, what has he been smoking? The response was not overwhelming, let me tell you.

Q: This is even in '87, '88?

Motyl: Eighty-eight, '89, '90, right? Maybe around '91 people were getting a little more persuaded that something was afoot, but in those late '80s, early '90s, not at all. Not at all.

Q: Was there a generational divide on this? I mean, aside from—I could imagine that younger people like yourself, in addition to being interested in nationalities, political nationalities, you also had less of a career invested at that point in the Soviet Union. You perhaps had not thought of the Soviet Union for such a long period of time as being, like the U.S., not so bad. I was wondering whether part of the split at Harriman, say, was maybe a generational divide of some sort, you know?

Motyl: You're probably right. I think you're right on that score. We came in with whatever baggage we had, but it wasn't the same baggage as people who had essentially built up the Institute in the '70s and '80s, and they built it up with the expectation that the Soviet Union would exist, and that it was what it was, but the point is it seemed to be some kind of going concern. And we weren't wedded to that institutionally, we weren't necessarily wedded to that intellectually, at least not as wedded to that intellectually as the others might have been. When I wrote my dissertation in '83, '84, and even in the book that followed, I actually denounced, as was then de rigueur at Columbia, the totalitarian model, and I denounced the imperial model for the Soviet Union.

Then in the course of the late 1980s, as I had this epiphany, I realized that the only way you can explain the collapse of the Soviet Union—again, I may be wrong, but that was the realization—was in terms of its being totalitarian and imperial, precisely the two things that I had denounced. And I then not only started preaching that the Soviet Union was about to end—The end is near!—but I went 180 degrees in the other direction and essentially denounced myself in the process and started arguing in this totalitarian, imperial mode, and I've been doing that since. It was partly institutional, but as this case illustrates, it was also generational. I had bought into these models of how the Soviet Union functioned because that was the way everybody at Harriman thought about it, maybe somewhat un-reflexively, right? Then when things weren't working out, it was easier for me to make a jump in the very opposite direction than for many other people in the field who were wedded to these approaches.

The classic instance is Jerry [F.] Hough. He was at Duke University, but he had been a visiting scholar and taught at Harriman on a number of occasions, and he believed that Gorbachev was fully in control until the very, very end when the Soviet Union collapsed. He thought he was orchestrating all of these rebellions and all these things. [Laughs] It was really amazing. But Jerry had built his entire reputation on denouncing the totalitarian model and building up this the Soviet Union is a normal state approach. So, he was very much invested in that particular understanding, and Gorbachev was the man. He was going to transform this country into an even more normal place, so he couldn't even envision the possibility that the whole place was actually running out of control.

Q: Let me ask you one final question in this regard, and then we'll conclude the interview, and thank you for your time. I was wondering about—let's accept the generational model for a second—whether the older folks who had a different conception of the Soviet Union and investment in the Soviet Union, once '91 happened, were they still for a period of time expecting the Communist Party to kind of come back and seize control? Or was it, even on their part, a kind of intellectual acceptance it collapsed, and kind of an immediate recognition, the jig is up kind of thing? It really is gone, and it's not coming back. Was there one or the other, or did they—

Motyl: No, my sense is that people accepted that. Once it fell apart, it fell apart.

Q: Pretty quickly, yes.

Motyl: That wasn't an issue. I think the more substantive issue was the question of, Now that you have fifteen states in place of the Soviet Union, should we pay as much attention to the non-Russians as we should to the Russians, intellectually? That invariably was also tied into a policy preference. Which country is the strategic priority for the West in general, the United States in particular? Should it be Russia? Or should it be the non-Russians in general, or any particular combination thereof, in particular? And you see that reflected in today's debates regarding, for instance, the war in Ukraine. Should we be extending a hand to [Vladimir V.] Putin, or should we be extending a hand to Kiev, right? That was already visible to a certain degree in the early 1990s. I think it came to a head during the Chechen War, because there you had the Russians behaving in a manner that was obviously egregious and was entailing huge violations of civil rights and human rights. And I think many people were perfectly comfortable condemning the Russians, but then you had some who were kind of—Jack [F.] Matlock [Jr.] was one of them, by the way—who were saying, well, *raison d'état*, secessionist movement. We cracked down on the south, so why shouldn't the Russians do the same? So there was a certain kind of carryover, if you like. And, you know, it's a legitimate argument. I'm not suggesting that it's illegitimate. But it was already clear that there was a certain gulf even then.

Q: But within Harriman, there was—

Motyl: And within Harriman.

Q: Right, exactly. That's what I was interested in. It's like what's happening. I mean, positions may be perfectly legitimate in some intellectual sense, but the question is what's the intellectual tension—

Motyl: The tensions were already there.

Q: —and political tension within Harriman? So this history that you previously described kind of gets played out now in terms of emphasis on Russia versus emphasis on other countries.

Motyl: On the neighbors, let's put it that way, right?

Q: Right, exactly.

Motyl: Now the 1990s, again, things were pretty much benign. There was the Chechen War, there was Nagorno-Karabakh, but everything else was pretty okay. The Russians, you know, [Boris N.] Yeltsin was okay. It's after 1999, with Putin coming to power, that things start coming to a head, and then push comes to shove, and people start making choices, and things get more complicated. But, of course, it's in 1999 that I left Harriman [laughs]. So my only contact with those sorts of debates were through that course I taught with Cathy from 2001, well, for about ten years.

Q: Well, that sounds like a good note to end on, for the moment. And I thank you again very much for doing this.

Motyl: My pleasure.

Q: This has been fascinating. It's been great. And there may be, if you're willing to do a follow-up interview after we kind of assemble all this.

Motyl: Sure.

Q: And see if there are some points that we'd like to pick up on.

Motyl: Sure.

Q: That would be wonderful, if you would be willing to do that.

Motyl: Absolutely.

Q: Thank you very much.

Motyl: My pleasure.

[END OF SESSION]

Session: 2

Interviewee: Alexander J. Motyl

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: William McAllister

Date: February 15, 2017

Q: My name is William McAllister. I am here today on the fifteenth of February 2017, with Alexander Motyl, and we are going to pick up on our conversation that we had several months ago now.

You were here as an undergraduate in the early to mid-'70s, and then in the late '70s, early '80s, as a graduate student at Columbia. I wondered—about either period, but more specifically, I guess, when you were a graduate student—if you could characterize the kind of intellectual and political atmosphere at the time? Especially when you are a graduate student, it's about eight, nine years after, ten years after the Columbia movements of the late '60s, and I was wondering if there was any—and then that generated faculty tensions, as well as tensions among students, we know from some of our earlier interviews. I was wondering if any of that kind of persisted into the late '70s and early '80s?

Motyl: I recall from the early '70s—let me just start with that. I was here at Columbia from '71 through '75. I believe 1971, my first year here, was the last year of the big demonstrations, and I believe it was in the spring of '72 that there was the seizure of the campus, and so on. I was very much on the margins of that. I had a bunch of friends who were involved; I wasn't. I looked at it all somewhat skeptically, thinking, well, why would you seize Hamilton Hall in order to protest the war in Vietnam? I couldn't quite see the connection. But that was very politicized. But within

a year—I remember thinking about this then, and I was struck by the irony—it was exactly one year later that streaking began. [Laughs] And I remember the same friend of mine who was picketing Hamilton Hall in '72 was streaking in '73. Even then, it was emblematic to me of the shift that seemed to be taking place amongst the student body, from this extreme politicization to whatever it is that streaking happened to represent.

Then I went away. I traveled a bit, I worked a bit, from '76 through '78, I believe. No, '75-'76. Anyway, I returned to SIPA, and the atmosphere in the late '70s in SIPA—well, mid- to late-'70s—was already very different. Partly because it was SIPA. Of course, then it was known as the SIA, School of International Affairs. People were there with a purpose. They were largely thinking of some kind of career in the Foreign Service, in Washington—things of that sort, so they weren't necessarily going to be the rebels. But in general, I don't recall the same kind of politicization that had been present at Columbia in the early '70s.

I do recall that SIA was thinking of hiring [Henry A.] Kissinger. I believe this was in the late '70s, and I do recall a whole bunch of demonstrations. Now, whether those were organized by the SIA students or whether they were organized by poli-sci or other students, this I just wouldn't know anymore. But SIA was very different. I mean, certainly not within the student body, certainly not within the faculty, as I recall, at that time.

Q: It sounds like what you saw with the streaking perhaps had also taken hold, that there was a bigger cultural shift, that the cultural atmosphere, if you will, the hippie atmosphere of the anti-war left movement, kind of ameliorated a lot of differences, as well as the professionalization of

people who were at SIPA. Is that true also for the faculty, too? Again, there are stories of tensions among faculty in the late '60s over taking sides around the war, and mostly about the war. To some extent, I suppose, about also one's attitude about the Soviet Union, and U.S. relations with the Soviet Union. Would you say that the faculty also, that those kind of differences had, to the extent that they were ever there, maybe a little bit more noticeable?

Motyl: You know, when I consider the courses I took as an undergraduate here—remember, I majored in—for the first year, I was a major in math. Well, that wasn't an issue; we were doing set theory. Then I focused on history, and my particular interest was nineteenth century European intellectual history. Well, that wasn't an issue either. And then in my junior and senior year, I took an inordinately large number of courses in the School of [the] Arts, with painting, woodcutting, as well as lithography, and there again, politics just didn't really enter the picture. So I certainly didn't encounter that as an undergrad.

In SIPA, I don't recall much of that. I remember there was one professor, James Mittelman. He used to teach a course at some affiliate of the United Nations, and we used to go there and meet with speakers. He was clearly on the left, but it wasn't this kind of rabid left. It was just clearly on the left.

When I eventually returned for my graduate studies in political science—that was 1980, I believe, maybe 1981—there was a little bit of tension, but not all that much. The person in political science at that point who represented the distinct left was Professor Mark [J.] Kesselman. I took a seminar with him, as well as a course. It was a course on, I believe, neo-

Marxist movements—something like that. And it was a straightforward political science course, which happened to deal with neo-Marxist movements. He never concealed the fact that he was a Marxist, but I don't recall that having influenced his points of view significantly. I do recall at some seminar, someone did ask him, "Well, how does it feel to be in the same department with Zbigniew Brzezinski at, who that point rather more in time was on the right. And he gave some kind of evasive, diplomatic answer, something along the lines of, well, he says what he thinks, and I say what I think, and there you go.

Q: Thinking about that time and when you were doing your research—or when graduate students in general were doing their research, or faculty were doing their research—access to the information that you would need to do your research was quite different from how it changed over time. One of the questions I had was how does the change in access to information, perhaps starting with—well, the change starting with glasnost perhaps, but certainly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and then into the 1990s and 2000s—how does that change in access, both in people being able to travel—of course, now, with the Internet—how did it affect your own personal research, if it did? And then I'd like to ask you how you think maybe it changed the field, or people's research in general?

Motyl: Yes. In terms of my own work, the interest that I had originally in the late '70s, and which served as the focus for my first book, was Ukraine. And that was always the interest, but it wasn't the exclusive interest. When I joined the political science department in '80, '81 to do my PhD, I decided I would focus on the so-called Soviet nationality issues. And Ukraine was obviously one of the key areas, but it wasn't going to be just that.

Specifically to your question, the striking thing is that then, you could actually be a specialist in the Soviet nationalities. At that point in time, there were fourteen non-Russian republics, one Russian republic, and of course, up to one hundred different nationalities, but one could actually claim to know just about everything there was to know, at that time, about all fourteen of them. Now, again, obviously, I, as a Ukrainian specialist, knew more about Ukraine than my colleague who might have—well, for interest, Ron [Ronald Grigor] Suny, who knew Armenia; Rom [Romuald J.] Misiunas, who knew Lithuania. Obviously, those were their areas of interest, and mine was Ukraine. That said, I'd say when it came to the nationalities in general, most of us, all of us, pretty much knew what everybody else knew, except for our own particular republic or country, where we knew much more than everybody else. So, there was this kind of—it was a priesthood, or a sisterhood, a brotherhood—call it what you like—of people who specialized in the nationalities.

Q: And that was because the amount of information was fairly limited—

Motyl: It was limited.

Q: —that you had access to?

Motyl: I could have taken all the books written on all the nationalities in English and placed them on half a bookshelf. Well, maybe a little more, depending on which books you counted. Then you take the articles; it would have been another bookshelf, if that. Then you take stuff that

was written in German or French or something else, and maybe another bookshelf. That was it. There was nothing else. The stuff that was appearing in Russian, well, again, maybe another few bookshelves.

Then, of course, you had the indigenous languages, and that created a bit of a problem, but the advantage was that all of the press, the Soviet press—the Communist party newspaper coming out in Tajikistan was 90 percent similar to what came out in Ukraine, was 90 percent similar to what came out in Estonia. And you had the local language version, but you also had the Russian language versions for that, plus all of the major journals and everything else. So, you could, knowing two languages, be a specialist in the entire region, and pretty much know everything that we knew, and pretty much knew as much, if not more, than what the Soviets did. Because we knew things they didn't know, because they weren't permitted to study these things. So we actually had this repository of knowledge, which was perfectly accessible.

After 1991, well of course perestroika, glasnost begins to upset the apple cart, because suddenly, there is not one or two newspapers per republic that you need to read. Suddenly, there are twenty, thirty—and they're different! [Laughs] They're very different. After 1991, with the independence of the states, not only are the media different, but of course, you had different countries with different policies, and studying the Communist party of Tajikistan was no longer like studying the Communist party of Moldova: most of the time, they said and did the same things. Well, after independence, that wasn't the case anymore. You actually had to study these places. And in that sense, the field of nationality studies started fragmenting, and it became impossible to claim that you really knew anything about fifteen countries. I mean, no one knows

that much about fifteen countries. So in my own work, I started focusing on Ukraine, obviously, and Russia. Those were the two key players, and that made a lot of sense since I spoke the languages, could read the languages and continue to do research on them.

This has had a significant impact on the field. For starters, we have got so much more information, so much more data is easily available, and it's easily available to just about anyone in any part of the world. As a result, that sense of a closed brotherhood of people—priests who have access to oracular powers [laughs]—has been pretty much demystified. We are no longer quite what we used to be: the only people who could speak with authority about these obscure issues. Now, anybody can. And a lot of the stuff is in English—or if not in English, translated into other languages—so it's accessible to a whole bunch of people.

It's also made comparative work, or at least of the kind that was done before, far more difficult. Well, let me put it this way: on the one hand, it's made comparative work far more imperative because you really need to start comparing these countries, in all sorts of ways. But it's also made it more difficult because the amount of information has increased exponentially. It's not arithmetic. It used to be arithmetic in the past, with a very low slope. Now it's exponential. Every year, we have X times more, and it's just impossible to keep up with this stuff.

It's also become impossible to keep up with the stuff in the country that you specialize in. It's impossible to read every website in Ukraine and Russia. Back in 1991, you could probably have read most of the newspapers in both countries more or less on a regular basis. Well, that's totally impossible at this point in time. So people start fragmenting even more. It's hard to be a Ukraine

specialist. You can still do it, but there is a certain degree of superficiality built into that. So people start studying issue areas—you study the left, you become a specialist on agriculture or other such things, because that you can more or less follow with some degree of facility.

Q: When you say, “You follow agriculture,” would it be just in Ukraine, or agriculture across the countries?

Motyl: Probably just in Ukraine, but at least there, you have a basis for looking at agriculture in Uzbekistan. But we were able to compare Ukraine with Tajikistan, with Uzbekistan, and we kind of knew everything about these countries. Well, now that’s just fallen away. You might be able to know more or less everything about agriculture in a number of these places.

Q: That’s fascinating to me, because in some sense, it reproduces in reverse the development of the comparative field for Western Europe. Whereas when I was in graduate school, everybody would study France or Spain or Italy, and that was it. And then that became unacceptable—you had to be much more comparative, not only across Western Europe, but perhaps to Central and South America, or the East, or something like that. Whereas you’re describing a situation where you once were more comparative across, and then the amount of information that’s available has caused this kind of intense specialization. Has it affected the disciplines in any way? In other words, are people—I guess we are talking pretty much political science here—

Motyl: Yes.

Q: —that there are jobs for people now, or that conferences are organized in this fashion, around these very particular topics, and there is little kind of, if you will, area studies more focus, encompassing a larger geographic area? That that's another hit, shall we say, perhaps, for area studies, is what you're describing?

Motyl: I think so. I think so. And you see that within the last twenty, twenty-five years. There has been a marked shift in political science, I think in general, and certainly at Columbia, from country/regional specializations to functional/theoretical. Theory has now become the rage. You know, I spent a good part of the 1980s arguing for the importance and the indispensability of theory. I'm not sure if I contributed to this shift, but in some sense, I bear some of the moral responsibility for the shift that's taken place. My own sense is that it's gone way too far because at this point, too many people are focusing on too many large issues without that fundamental knowledge of the countries or the regions that they're studying. Maybe it's my old age or something like that, but I am becoming increasingly persuaded that if you don't know the country's language and culture and history, you really can't know anything about the place, whatever the functional or theoretical issues may happen to be.

Now, I recall that, when I was still at Harriman, we were told that something like thirty, forty years ago, the number of students at SIPA who specialized in regional institutes was roughly 60, 70, 80 percent of the total student body. Now it's more like 20, 30 percent. So there's been a radical shift towards functional, towards theoretical.

And you see this in political science as well. In the past, if you sold yourself as a Russia specialist, well, that was something. Nowadays, you've got to be a specialist on transitional societies, or democratization, or things of that sort. And if you do Russia in the meantime, well, that might be nice. But I'm not sure it's necessarily relevant for most departments in most places in the country.

Q: Before you talked about—somewhat humorously, but—the demystification, the loss of status as the oracles, if you will, of Eastern Europe. I was curious about a kind of a decline in taking expertise seriously as a result: that anybody can get access to this kind of information, and participating in this wider, perhaps, Internet phenomena, as an actuality, or at least as a metaphor, for this access to information. And as a result, the expertise of academia, for example—at least in this area, if not other areas—has declined. Do you have a sense of that at all?

Motyl: That's a very interesting point. Clearly, there's been a broadening of access, and clearly, there has been a decline in the prestige. Whether the two are connected, which is what you are suggesting, I don't know. I'm inclined to think you may have a point here. You know, you go on the Internet, you read a couple of Wikipedia articles, and you know all you need to know about Russia. And who is to doubt that you know it? And since everybody has equal access to these things, specialized knowledge becomes rather cheapened. Certainly, the importance of having specialized knowledge doesn't decline; it actually rises, I think, objectively.

Q: What rises?

Motyl: I mean, increases. The importance of specialized knowledge under such circumstances actually becomes more important. It's just that it's not perceived as such. It's perceived as being less important. You know, what do you know that I don't know? I've read the Wikipedia articles, which you may have written, so what difference does it make? We both know the same exact amount of stuff. So there is that, clearly, and it's hard to argue against that at some level, and of course, academics, when they argue against these sorts of points, they tend to do that in the most abstruse language, which just undercuts the argument in the first place.

Q: And part of what you are saying, I think, picks up, perhaps, on the kind of information that's available, or at least the kinds of information that people access. Maybe, for example, on the Wikipedia article, if you look at the footnotes, the footnotes, if they have done well, they are referencing your book, you know? But there's also sites that don't do things very well, and they are citing other kinds of information that are not as well sourced, not as well researched. And so there is another aspect to this, which is, information has an equivalence, whether it's a scholar who has been studying Ukraine all his life, or whether it's somebody who just decided to write something about Ukraine off the top of his head.

Motyl: And they both have the same status—

Q: And they both have the same status.

Motyl: —in the world. Right. There is another tendency that has to do with institutional dynamics of the academy: the need to be constantly publishing. You could get tenure in the 1960s with an article. Nowadays, you need two books and ten articles. Well, that's great, on the one hand. It may be a stimulus to production—and it is. But at the same time, it's also an incentive to cut corners. And that may not necessarily be the best of things. So even the scholar himself or herself has a certain incentive, well, perhaps to water things down a bit.

Q: A last question on this topic. I was wondering, has this had an impact on how you teach, or what is it you teach, in terms of the kinds of sources, say, or the expectations of the students in terms of their ability to get information, or suss through which information to use and not to use? In the old days, it was pretty easy to know what information to use, and now they have to sort through a lot. So, I was wondering if this has—both what you expect of students, how you teach, what you teach, has this all been affected also by this change of information availability over the last twenty, thirty years? Thirty, forty years now?

Motyl: It depends on the students. I've been teaching courses at Columbia even after I left. So I team-taught this course with Cathy Nepomnyashchy, and then I have been teaching several courses on my own since then. Columbia students are different. I haven't noticed any particular change. You assign articles, you assign books, you assign stuff on the Internet via JSTOR or others, and most of the students will read most of the articles most of the time. In addition to that, they come with a certain knowledge base. Now, again, these are graduate students, but nevertheless, they come with a knowledge base, which means that you share a common

language; maybe not an entirely identical common language, but there is a large degree of overlap.

I found that amongst Rutgers students, that's not the case. It's not because they're not smart. They are intelligent, they are ambitious, but their knowledge base and their willingness to read is significantly different from what I've encountered at Columbia. And that complicates things enormously. There are simply things that one can assume when speaking to Columbia students that one cannot assume when speaking to Rutgers students. That changes everything, because you need to explain things that you wouldn't necessarily have to explain. Even when they claim that they understand, one can't assume that they genuinely understand.

So there is a difference of some sort, and I think it has something to do with the Internet; it has something to do, obviously, with the quality of high school educations that these kids are getting; it has something to do with the fact that Rutgers is public, Columbia is private—I mean, there are lots of factors that go into this.

Just to give you several examples. In a number of my classes, students had no idea who Simone de Beauvoir was, this despite the fact that my campus has a highly developed women's and feminist studies program. They had no idea who Jane Austen was. They had no idea who Emily Brontë was, and they had no idea who William Faulkner was. I will grant you, these were Soviet courses, Russian politics, and perhaps one needn't have known who William Faulkner was. That said, that wouldn't have happened here at Columbia. They might not have read any of these authors [laughs]—

Q: But they knew enough for cocktail party talk.

Motyl: That's right.

Q: Yes. I have my own fellow feeling about the problems of high school education, and how they are preparing students. Let me turn to your own work and use a phrase that we were chuckling over before, which is to delve a little bit into your intellectual scaffolding. So when you first began your graduate studies, or maybe even before, who were your intellectual influences, or what works were the works that had a major impact on your thinking?

Motyl: To be honest, [laughs] I am not sure there were any. I can refer to one moment—this was when I had finished my freshman year in college at Columbia, and I was then still a math major, and I was very much under the influence of contemporary civilization. I was absolutely enthralled by [Thomas] Hobbes and [John] Locke and all of those people. That summer, after my first year, I read *War and Peace*, and having read the final chapter of *War and Peace*, where [Lev Nikolayevich] Tolstoy devotes some seventy pages to his philosophy of history, I decided I was going to be a historian. So that was Tolstoy's fault. Of course, I quickly became disillusioned with history and decided to become an artist, but that's another issue altogether.

But my own road toward political science was—I decided to do political science not because I wanted to, but because I tried many other things and was disappointed. And political science seemed like the only thing that made sense, given the disappointments. So initially it was math;

that didn't work out. Then I thought history—well, I wasn't so sure about that. Art? Well, that was nice, but it seemed a little shaky and a little too daring for me, for this lower-middle class boy in the late 1970s. Then, when I went into SIPA, I thought, well, maybe something with government. Well, actually, this is one of these instances where politicization actually made a bit of a difference: I realized when I was at SIPA that I didn't want to work for the American government. [Laughs] It was a semi-political move. I also majored in international media and communications in SIPA, and decided I wanted to be a foreign correspondent and be based in Paris [France], but of course, that turned out to be a bit of a pipe dream because I realized that first, you had to go to Topeka before you could make it to Paris. Well, that wasn't it.

And in the process, while I was at SIPA, I did get a certificate at the Institute on East Central Europe, and I had the good fortune to take a course with Professor Tom [Thomas P.] Bernstein. It was on peasants and communist systems, and I wrote a paper for him, which was accepted by *Slavic Review*. That, plus the fact that I was able to publish my certificate essay as my first book, persuaded me that, despite the fact that I wasn't sure what to do with my life after getting my degree at SIPA, I was obviously capable of producing academic work. The article in *Slavic Review* and this first book in East European Monographs, which was a subsidiary of Columbia University Press. Well, that was something. I wasn't quite sure what to do with a PhD, but it was better than the alternative, and the alternative at that point in time was pretty much nothing. I had tried all of these other things, and they weren't quite working out in the way that I thought they might. So a PhD seemed the way to go.

So I can't say that I did this because I had read the big book, or I was enthralled by some idea. It wasn't that at all. I even had no particular notion what political science was like. To me, it was just the study of politics, and what that meant wasn't very clear to me. I learned all that in my first year in political science, and partly under Mark [J.] Kesselman's influence. He opened my eyes to all this big theorizing, as did a number of other people at that stage.

Q: Well, picking up chronologically, thinking about your time over in graduate school for the PhD, and then beginning your publication afterwards, were there particular people or books that helped you shape how you wanted to think about Ukraine, Soviet/Ukraine relationships, or the Soviet Union in general? About nationalities? Thinking about, for example, the Soviet Union as an empire of nationalities rather than how the Soviets wanted you to think about it, which is just a non-nationalized whole? Were there any works or people who had an influence in those regards?

Motyl: Well, certainly Edward Allworth. He was the father of nationality studies. I took a number of courses with him, and consulted with him. He was actually the one who suggested I apply to SIA. If it hadn't been for him, it might never have occurred to me. Which just goes to show how clueless I was, because I was actually taking courses in the SIA building, and it never occurred to me that this might be a place to pursue a higher education. Certainly Seweryn Bialer because he turned out to be a mentor. And then in terms of the readings, I remember being impressed by people like Barrington Moore [Jr.], his work on revolutions. He also had a big book on Soviet politics.

I was certainly under the influence of books by Bialer, especially *Stalin's Successors* [*Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union*]. There were a number of publications by Allworth—mostly edited volumes, but nevertheless, he wrote a number of things. In terms of poli-sci, I remember Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* made a big impact on me. I thought that was very cool. It was big, it was majestic, it was bold, and it seemed right. But in any case, it was a very, very, very important book—a nice book, a good book—that made an impact on me. There were a number of books in the course I took with Kesselman. I remember one by Göran Therborn—he was a Swedish Marxist—called *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?* I remember thinking, A, it's a great title, and B, it's a pretty interesting book.

Actually, the Columbia professor who had the greatest impact on my thinking was a non-Sovietologist, the gadfly Giovanni Sartori. He opened my eyes to the importance of conceptual clarity and definitional rigor. The obsession with concepts that I developed and still have is entirely his responsibility—and my good fortune.

By the way, when I was a graduate student, all the way through my dissertation, it never occurred to me at that point in time that the Soviet Union was an empire. No one thought of it then that way, except for Hélène Carrère d'Encausse in France, and maybe a couple of others who were sort of on the Cold War right. Columbia wasn't, Bialer wasn't. I mean, he was sort of thinking in those terms, but not really. The conventional wisdom was it's a multinational state, sort of authoritarian. I think I mentioned this to you before: totalitarianism and empire were boo words that were simply excluded from the lexicon. And I was very much under that influence, despite having come from a Ukrainian-American background, where the Soviet Union was the

evil empire. And despite knowing in my heart of hearts that it was [laughs] the evil empire, I certainly didn't pursue that kind of logic and that kind of language in my dissertation. Quite the opposite.

Q: Yes, no, it's interesting how that can happen, that things that are in front of you in one way get blocked, in part because, I assume, you were at Columbia, and that wasn't the discourse.

Motyl: That wasn't the discourse. It simply wasn't the discourse. And that made all the difference in the world. As I said, I pretty much bought into it. I think I had some doubts, but go back to my dissertation. I talked about models of the Soviet Union, and I distinctly rejected the totalitarian model, out of hand, in a sentence or two. I did the same for the empires model: nonsense! Threw it out the window altogether.

And it was because of that, because I had been so cavalier in rejecting these notions, and because I realized in time, in the 1980s, that this was very much as a result of my having bought into this, quote, "hegemonic discourse" that I then went 180 degrees in the opposite direction. I became more Catholic than the Pope, as it were, and I embraced totalitarianism and I embraced the imperial model. And I've been doing that for the last, what, thirty years. Essentially everything that I have written about the Soviet Union or the post-Soviet states has been, in one way or other, informed by one or both of those particular models. I mean in modified form, of course, but in some fashion.

Q: So let me pick up on two themes that you mentioned there. One, just on this latest, is that a function of what you've experienced—what you've been seeing, living, the history you have been living—that you've kind of had this change in how you apprehend the Soviet Union? Or again, is there some more bookish scaffolding involved?

Motyl: Yes. I'd like to say that it's primarily the former. That would be the appropriate answer, that I went into the field and I saw the light. But the reality is that much of the studies I did as an undergrad on the Soviet Union, and likewise in SIA, and then eventually in my graduate studies, they dealt with repression. I was always very aware of the repressive aspect of the Soviet Union. One of my chapters in my dissertation actually deals with the KGB [komitet gosudastvennoy bezopasnosti], another deals with the oppressive nature of ideology, and things like that. In essence, the irony of my dissertation is that it was actually written from the point of view of the totalitarian/imperial model, even though I was rejecting both at the same time that I was unconsciously employing both.

So to me, I think the real kicker—it wasn't so much seeing the empirical light. I think I had always seen it. It was seeing the discourse, or seeing through the discourse. Seeing through the language and realizing that the concepts that I was using, precisely because they belonged to the conventional wisdom, were ultimately misleading and ultimately going against the empirical experience that I had as a result in my research. And so in essence, what I did afterwards—I think this is what I did—is I essentially brought them into alignment. I mean, the empirical findings didn't change all that much. I haven't revised my view of the Soviet Union. I still think it was, to a large degree, an evil empire. But I began adopting a different language.

And the point about the language is that after 1991, suddenly it became respectable and deemed almost de rigueur to refer to the Soviet Union as an empire. That became a going concern. Lots of scholars were involved in investigating that particular issue historically, comparatively, and in other ways as well. At the same time, the Soviets, or the Russians, and others in the late Gorbachev period in the early '90s were also referring to the Soviet Union as totalitarian. So suddenly, it was no longer a Cold War concept only; it became respectable. And it was then, in those days in the late '80s, early '90s, and mid-'90s, that I had these eureka moments and I realized, Damn! [Laughs] I have been arguing these things without even knowing that I have been arguing these things.

Q: This brings in the second point, I think, that I had, that I was picking up from what you were saying, which is that early on, you were attracted to these works that had big conceptual range. The big picture. And that you've now become less interested in that as a way of thinking about or working about Ukraine or whatever you are specifically working on, and that you are more interested in the specificity that is usually lacking from Huntington, or even Barrington Moore, to some extent, and the other books that you have cited.

That seems to be a mirror transformation of what you described as happening with the Soviet Union, which is that you had this overarching notion of it as this multinational—I mean, that was kind of the discourse and the theoretical frame, but focusing on the specificities of what was actually happening once you could get into the field changed your thinking about the Soviet Union, and perhaps about Russia.

Maybe I'm asking a chicken and egg question here about which came first, because there is this major shift for you from the conceptual to the much more specific, if not concrete at times, and letting that drive the analyses rather than these Huntington-esque notions.

Motyl: It's partly due to that. I think it's partly due to that, and it's also partly due to a reorientation in my work, and let me explain that. In the 1990s, much of my work was very theoretical. I was writing about imperial this and imperial that, revolutionary this, nationalism that. And if you read the books or the articles, there is some specificity, but I am comparing the Hapsburgs with the Nazis, with the Soviets and Russians, and so on. So it's at a fairly high level of generality. And I'm talking about ideologies and structures and discourses, and things of that sort. And then frankly, at some point I kind of ran out of steam in the early 2000s. I sort of said everything I had to say. There is only so much you can write about empires. I mean, I suppose there are many other empires you could study, but at some point, you've kind of said what you have to say, and, all right, what do you do then?

And that happened to coincide with the period—I think this is where the empirical part comes in and begins to adopt a more important role. Late '90s, early 2000s, rise of Putin on the one hand, and then the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. That changed everything for me. The 1990s, especially the period immediately in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, pretty much suggest—well, seemed to suggest—that despite possible ups and downs, everything is going to work out in this region overall, in its entirety, but especially the countries that I was

studying, Ukraine and Russia, were going to evolve more or less okay. Whatever that meant. But nevertheless, one needn't worry too much.

Putin was the first shock. Well, first of all, there were obviously difficulties in Ukraine, but nevertheless, I was relatively optimistic. But Putin was a shock, and I became an anti-Putinite as soon as he came into office. The fact that he was a KGB officer; those mysterious bombings of those buildings and his genocidal attack on the Chechens; the kind of language he was adopting, the ideology he was adopting. I remember arguing in 2000-2001, that this was a guy who was building a dictatorship, and people were still looking at me with these bizarre views. So that, to me, was very bad and very concerning, and a matter of great concern because it suggested that Russia, which of course was still this large state, and which was a post-imperial state—and at this point, my own theoretical ruminations began playing a role—could begin to embark on one of these post-imperial projects of perhaps ingathering the lands and so on. So that was worrisome.

So Putin was the first element of a kind of a re-politicization, and a greater concern with stuff on the ground. It was no longer a question of just discourses, it was actually a real guy in the Kremlin who was killing Chechens, and was eventually going to be killing Georgians and many others. And then there was the Ukrainian bit, the Orange Revolution. Until then, Ukraine was sort of evolving: more or less up, more or less down. It wasn't exactly a model democracy, but it was a kind of hybrid. Fine. Well, the Orange Revolution, again, just suddenly placed this country in the middle of my attention. It was no longer just about transitions, about democracy, about hybrid regimes. It was suddenly about real, live people, some of whom I knew, some of whom

were my relatives, some of them my friends, who were out there on the barricades or were sympathizing with people on the barricades.

And I remember the galvanizing impact that had on me for those six weeks. When those people were standing there on the Maidan [Nezalezhnosti, Kiev, Ukraine], I was in this perpetual state of emotional turmoil. I was writing op-ed after op-ed—[laughs] none of them got published, by the way, but I had this sense of empowerment: I am contributing to the struggle! And of course, at that point, mind you, Putin is obviously on the side of the devils; these are the angels. So suddenly, well, it was the Soviet Union again, wasn't it? There was an evil empire, and—

Q: Or was trying to be.

Motyl: Or was trying to be an evil empire, if you like. And since then, those two concerns have continued to motivate me. I am very worried about Russia. I am very worried, and to some degree elated, by what has taken place in Ukraine, with the second revolution being another one of these majestic instances of people power, and so on. But of course, there's always the danger that the whole thing could fall apart, that the war could expand, that there could be not just an expansion of the war or the fighting, but a massive invasion that would entail hundreds and thousands of lost Ukrainian and Russian lives. It's pretty clear to me that it has nothing to do with NATO's expansion, or at least very little to do with that, and very much to do with the nature of the regime that Vladimir Putin has built up in Russia.

So anyway, all of that then means that you can't just study empires theoretically anymore. You still can, to some degree, but it's now become very real. It's suddenly about this country, this leader, those soldiers and those civilians dying in this particular place in time. And of course, that's unpleasant, right? And since I know many of the people—I know some of the people on the ground; I know some of the analysts, the Russians, the Ukrainians, it becomes personal. It becomes more personal than it used to be in the past, where you could just talk blithely about transitions to democracy as if they weren't affecting human beings on the ground.

Q: I wonder, listening to you talk about this transition in your own thinking, of how you approach thinking about Ukraine and Russia, and thinking about my own change, in that materiality is much more important to me now in my thinking than it was when I was younger. So I'm just curious: do you think that there is something about age here? Of appreciating the much more specific, the concrete, especially in terms of people's lives? That they're no longer the abstractions they were when we were younger, but they are actually real, live people?

Motyl: I think you're onto something. Clearly, we are both experiencing a similar kind of transformation, and it seems to be somehow related to age. You get a little older; you begin to see that life may not last forever. Knees begin to ache. It's no longer an abstraction; it's quite a reality. The material world begins to appear of some interest. [Laughter] It's the only thing between you and the big D, or the big sleep, on the other side. Perhaps that's the answer to the puzzle.

Q: That's very interesting, yes. I hadn't thought of it quite that way. That's great. So let me turn from thinking about your own work and thinking over time to Harriman. We talked about it last time from the '70s into the late '80s, and when you were associate director, and into the '90s. So I'm more thinking about it from perhaps the 2000s on, and your sense of what its reputation is now in the field of Russian studies, or von Hagen's words about the Harriman: that it's now studies from the Polish border to the Pacific, or something along those lines. How would you characterize its reputation in that huge field of studies, and how that has changed over the last—now going back to the early 2000s—twenty years almost?

Motyl: Well, it still has a very good reputation. There is no question about that: the quality of the students, the quality of the professors, the program, things of that sort. But the main changes—consider the late '40s, when Harriman and Harvard Russian Research Center were the only two games in town, involved in Russian/Soviet/East European studies. Well, now there are, what, about ten or fifteen East European/Eurasian centers. Harriman is no longer the only game in town. So there is a certain kind of demystification. It's still the oldest research institute, albeit by a couple of months, but nevertheless, it's still the oldest one. But that's not exactly the kind of thing that suffices to build a reputation anymore. And you have got these other places that are also very good, that have significant numbers of students, that have excellent faculty producing excellent work. So that's certainly changed. It can no longer claim to be, well, the only one, or one of two.

Q: What does that mean for an institute like Harriman in terms of paths that it should take, in terms of—or maybe it doesn't suggest anything—or paths it should take in order to survive at a

high reputational level about whatever it does? And that's my question: what should it do, given that there is all this, if you will, competition?

Motyl: Well, Harriman happens to be at Columbia, and Columbia is, what, one of the top five or ten schools in the country. So as long as Columbia retains that status, I think Harriman's status will be pretty much assured. Unless they simply decide to go to Aruba and spend the entire endowment on rum and Cokes So I wouldn't worry so much about that.

I think the more interesting or the more problematic issue—one to which I am not as privy—is the internal dynamics within SIPA and within Columbia. The status of the regional institutes within SIPA has certainly changed, arguably declined, and that's a concern. Likewise, the fact that departments have been very much focusing on theory and somewhat downplaying regional studies and country expertise is also an issue of some concern. Now, when you look at someone like Tim [Timothy M.] Frye, the former director, he obviously can do theory, and he can do Russia. And you look at the current director, Alex Cooley, he can obviously do both.

So it's clearly possible to do both, and it's clearly possible to make the department happy as well as Harriman happy. But there may be cases where that is not so much true, where you may have a conflict between the theory demands and the regional studies demands. That may affect the quality of the faculty.

Q: And the theory—that's a nice analogy that you make, which is that theory is to departments as area studies is to Harriman. That's what you're saying, and it's—

Motyl: That's essentially it, right? I mean, Harriman wants languages, culture, history. In order to be a good Harriman political scientist, you should also know history, culture and language. In order to be a political scientist, you don't have to know any of those.

Q: Is there a change in what Harriman was known for, say, in the early 2000s? Not the quality of its reputation, but the substance that it was known for in the early 2000s as opposed to now? Or has that pretty much remained constant over time. I'm thinking, perhaps, for example, that maybe it's known for having helped nationality studies—we talked about that last time—get off the ground. Is it still known as a place that's important for area studies? Or nationality studies, now that that's taken off, is it as well known? And should it follow a different path, maybe, now that it's helped get that off the ground?

Motyl: No. I think in terms of nationality studies—again, remember, no one quite does nationality studies anymore because it's just so hard to do. But there is a Ukrainian program, they have got Georgian, they have got Tajiks, they have got the Central Europeans. So you can do all sorts of countries and regions and sub-regions, and study any number of languages now that you might not have been able to do twenty, thirty years ago. So I think they are in fine shape. I'm sure there are things I don't know, but at least for the outside observer with a toe in the Harriman door, it seems to be that they are okay. They're obviously doing justice to Russia.

One could quibble; they could do more. What they would probably need if they wanted to have a solid nationality base, whether it's Ukrainian studies, or Tajik studies, or Estonian studies, you

need a couple of people—at least one or two—preferably in political science, because that’s always the key here, who have tenure in these areas. They don’t have that anymore. Or at least a couple of historians who do that and who actually have tenure. Then you can actually build a program around these people. But that, as you know, is a determination that is made by the department and not by Harriman. And departments are perhaps somewhat less inclined to go for the regional specialist and more inclined to go for the theoretician.

So that’s a bit of a concern. I’m not sure if there is anything Harriman can really do about that, other than write occasional memos, meet with the president and try to persuade departments that that’s actually in their interest as well.

Q: Yes, the disciplinary versus institute dilemma is pretty fascinating and driving all this. I don’t know that we talked about this last time, but one of the questions that’s arisen about area studies is the question of should it have been able to anticipate these major transformations, specifically area studies of the Harriman Institute and people at the Harriman Institute? Changes like the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the conflict between Ukraine in the Orange Revolution and Russia, the rightward turn in governments of Eastern Europe? And one question is, should it have been able to anticipate this, and so, therefore, is failure to anticipate these some kind of failure? Or is it not something that really should worry people who take an area studies approach—that that’s not our job?

Motyl: Yes. Well, this is where you are forcing me to put on my theory hat. [Laughs] One of the arguments I was making in the late ’80s, early ’90s—one of the key arguments—was that

even in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, Sovietologists were befuddled. They still couldn't explain it, even *ex post facto*. And part of the reason, I think—and this is one of the reasons that I went on to the imperial/totalitarian model—was that they junked these big models. For all their advantages or disadvantages—one of the primary advantages of the totalitarian model is it forced you to think about the totality of the system, and to look at what drives it and things of that sort. One of the striking developments of the '60s and '70s is that people did indeed abandon that, at least in mainstream Soviet studies, and they focused on bits and pieces. Which was great, but they lost sight of the overall dynamics of the system.

So when the system started breaking apart, they lacked the theoretical tools, or the methodological tools, even, for comprehending what was going on. And then when it did break apart, it was just proof positive that they were lacking something, because they couldn't even explain it in the aftermath. Now, then, eventually, people came up with all sorts of theories about transitions, about post-this, path-dependence that, and so on, but it took a while for people to acquire that theoretical basis.

So should they have been able to do that? I think so. And should they have been able to predict something like the various revolutions, the colored revolutions? I think so too. I think it's our obligation, not to predict the exact moment, the exact time, but we should be able to say that, Look, something is seriously wrong; this is a system that's brittle, and don't assume it's going to survive. At the very least, we should be able to say something like that.

Ideally, one wants to combine the theory and the practice, of course. But that's always easier said than done, because the institution pushes you towards the theory, your own inclinations might push you towards the empirical, and it's not always easy to combine the two. It can be done, but it's not always easy.

Q: No. My experience has been that the best work does that, but that's why it's the best work, because it's so hard to do.

Motyl: It's hard to do. Exactly.

Q: Right. And your analysis of the breakups and the way that you were talking about them, and the relationship of the disciplinary fields, reminds me to some extent of my own field, American political science, now, which is that I think it has failed, like economics failed in 2008, to anticipate this kind of transformation of the American political system that's going on, in part because it does exactly what you were saying. My line on it is that American political science dives deeply into the surface of things.

Motyl: [Laughs]

Q: And that's what they do: they look at these little pieces, just as you describe.

Motyl: By the way, I predict that Putin will collapse. Based on theory. [Laughs] So we'll see in a couple of years whether I'm right or not.

Q: I might pick up on that, but perhaps just after the interview so I don't take up too much of your time. The move to IAB [International Affairs Building] from the brownstone occurred well before you arrived on the scene, so you did not have any sense of that—

Motyl: No.

Q: —transformation whatsoever, right? There's also been the enormous growth of women in the field. I talked with Elizabeth [Kridl] Valkenier, and she remembers being one of two in the program in the late '40s, early '50s. Obviously, that's grown quite a bit in the field. Do you have a sense that this has had any effect on what's being studied? How it's being studied?

Motyl: That's an interesting question. Again, I'm just quickly—

Q: Yes. No, no! Take your time.

Motyl: —doing a survey of the women I know—

Q: Take your time.

Motyl: —in the field. I was about to say they pretty much study the same thing the men do. I think there is one difference. Women do not study war, peace, guns and bombs as much. I'm not sure that they necessarily study, quote, the traditional women's issues more than men do,

although that may be true. But again, from my impression, they study democracy, movements, media, revolutions, nationalism, national identity—things of that sort. There is obviously more women in women's studies. I think that's statistically pretty easy to demonstrate. In my own experience, I can't say that I have noticed any difference in the way the field is, whether it's in poli-sci or whether it's in Soviet/post-Soviet studies. I think the appropriate answer would be to say it's become richer and better. It seems to me that it's pretty much what's it been for the last thirty or forty years.

Q: Just a final question on women in the field, is do you have a sense that it's—this is a more professional career question, about—is it any more difficult, do you think, for women in this field to make their careers happen than what you've observed in other disciplines in the academy? In other fields?

Motyl: Again, this is just based on the experience of the women I know or the women I know of. There has been a significantly larger number of women in the Soviet, post-Soviet, Ukrainian, Russian field. And there has been that growth, and it's all transpired within the last thirty years. That would seem to suggest that if anything, it's easy—or at least, certainly not difficult. Now, whether it's easier than it is for men, I don't know. But that would suggest that the barriers to getting PhDs and getting jobs aren't all that high. There may be some ceilings at some point. Again, I just don't know. But again, from my own experience, women seem to be doing quite well.

Q: This may seem somewhat a question that you've already answered; I hope it isn't. But I wanted to ask you about what is happening in the field now, where you see it going, practical and intellectual issues to arise and that sort of thing? So I was first thinking to ask, in the way that social scientists think about things, is, what are the questions or puzzles you think scholars are thinking about or should be thinking about, now and over the next ten years or so?

Motyl: Yes. You know, scholars like to think that their puzzles are a function of empirical reality. I am not so sure about that. They also like to think that their puzzles are generated internally, within the discipline, as a result of breakthroughs. I'm not so sure about that, either. I think they are largely a function of policy and media relevance. So when the Third World is exploding, we all become Third World specialists; when the Soviet Union collapsed, we start wondering about the collapse of multinational states, and so on and so forth.

And the key issues within the last few years—and I suspect these will still remain the key issues—are the remarkable growth of these populist/authoritarian/nationalist movements and regimes, obviously, in our region, but more so in the world at large, and certainly within Europe. So you have got Putin. The Central Asians have been in that camp since day one, so that hasn't really changed. But there have been changes even in places like Armenian and Azerbaijan. You have got changes in other parts of the former Soviet bloc—well, there is Poland, there is Hungary, in addition to everything else west of them. So I suspect this will be one of the key issues: regime change, authoritarian movements. We will not be studying the fourth wave or the third wave or the fifth wave of democratization; we are now going to be studying breakdowns of democracy, breakdowns of democratic regimes, things like that.

I think war will now become an issue. For twenty or thirty years, we could claim that war was passé [laughs]. It's unthinkable, it's unimaginable. Well, it's not. It was imaginable and thinkable in the Third World. But now it's obviously thinkable and imaginable in Europe, and I think that will become an issue once again. So that would lead to war, peace, security studies.

When you combine those two: a focus on regimes, breakdowns of democracy, again, authoritarian/fascist, potentially, regimes, plus wars and so on, that bespeaks a general trend towards the kind of political science concerns that have driven much of political science over the last several hundred years. In a way, the last twenty or thirty, forty years may be the blip, where we were concerned with discourses and so on. And that's all very nice and good, but ultimately, there are thousands of people dying on battlefields, and might not that be of more interest than the discursive perceptions and the constructions of reality, and things of that sort? I suspect there will be a shift from that kind of constructivism, this kind of discourse-focused approach, to blood and guts, guns and bombs.

Q: Yes, yes. As you were talking, that's exactly what occurred to me as you were describing that, was that sounds like an older political science that you and I are familiar with from graduate school.

Motyl: [Laughs] From graduate school, exactly. Yes, that's right.

Q: And scary as well. In this regard, about these, does this suggest that we should go back and be reading the seminal works from back there? Barrington Moore that you mentioned earlier—

Motyl: Yes, absolutely.

Q: —for example? And are there any works now that you've seen coming out recently that—recently, the last ten years or so, that you think are—I am thinking of a graduate student now hearing this conversation, thinking about, these are the puzzles—what works that are coming out recently should she or he be looking at?

Motyl: Well, I'm a little reluctant to say this because this will be criticized, perhaps—maybe not by you, but—if I were to recommend any one author, I would say, why don't you read a whole bunch of books by Samuel Huntington? Starting with his earliest and ending with the latest. And yes, civilizations don't clash, and yes, civilizations quite aren't so neatly modeled as he presents them. And yes, participation in institutionalization can't be divided in the manner that he suggests in those books, and so on, and so on, and so forth. But Huntington had the capacity and the ability to think big, to think about a whole bunch of issues, and if you look at his career, look at the kinds of things he's written about, they are just enormous—the variety, I mean: democracy, breakdown, revolutions, militaries, globalization, civilizations, clashes. Oh my God! It's all there! And some of it's a little half-assed, and some of it's very good, but it's all very interesting.

I would recommend look at Huntington. Reject if it you like, that's perfectly fine. But he raises many of these important issues. And he had that capacity to think as a traditional political scientist who's focused on questions of politics as defined by people like Max [Karl Emil Maximilian] Weber as ultimately about power, about violence and things like that—as much as we don't want to admit that.

And then, as you say, I think now is the time to go back to some of the classics. We should be rereading [Karl] Marx, for sure. Now that we have a Leninist in the White House, it might be a good time to be reading *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* again. I would certainly go back to Barrington Moore's work on Soviet politics, on revolutions and especially on injustice. You know, many of these people were smart. They had very important and interesting things to say. As a matter of fact, I tell my students if there is one book you should read, don't read Motyl, don't read Barrington Moore, don't even read Marx. Go back and read Plato's *Republic*. If you've read Plato's *Republic*, you pretty much know everything you need to know about politics, or at least the important questions. Maybe not the right answers, but the important questions.

Q: Yes, that is foundational. Thinking about—and again, I may have asked some of this before; again, I hope not—about moving from thinking about now and forward, thinking less now about it intellectually and more institutionally—and to some extent, these are maybe follow-ups to what I was asking before—because of the specialization that we were talking about before, is it harder for faculty and students to come together at a place like Harriman? And also because of the importance of disciplinary careers, is this just a very—I mean, both of those obviously go hand in glove.

Motyl: Well, there has been a fragmentation in general within the university setting. The cries for interdisciplinarity are symptomatic of the fact that there has been this very deep and profound fragmentation. I'm not sure it occurs along disciplinary lines, and I'm not sure that the disciplines are artificially constructed hegemonies or anything like that. I think they have a perfectly legitimate reason. But within the disciplines, within every single discipline, there is a growing specialization, so people within a discipline rarely talk to one another, and then of course people between disciplines have no reason to talk to each other as well.

So you have got this enormous amount of fragmentation, an enormous amount of specialization. I don't think it's a construction. I think it is, quote, an objective reality that happens to reflect the exponential growth of knowledge and the incapacity of the human mind to be a Renaissance person, and the materiality of the human body. You can't do that anymore. You can only learn so much about particular things. We talked about nationality studies. At best, you might be able to get away with doing Ukraine and Russia, although even that's a bit of a stretch. But how can you possibly be conversant in Ukraine, Russia and the U.S. economy? It's very hard. I mean, at a certain superficial level, sure. But more than that, it becomes very complicated.

And then, in addition to that, every one of the disciplines, every one of the sub-disciplines, every one of the sub-sub-sub-disciplines develops its own jargon, which makes it even more difficult to communicate. So that is a problem. I see that in my department at Rutgers. We only have ten, eleven people, but everybody pretty much does something else, and some of what my colleagues

do is of some interest; some of what my colleagues do is of absolutely no interest. But more importantly, I wouldn't even know how to talk to them about that.

Q: Yes. You are answering the question underlying this, which is some notion of a way in which, at the least, a kind of intellectual or organizational rapprochement could occur, where the different fields—I'm thinking also if, like, history and the social sciences could be useful to each other. For example, I run an interdisciplinary graduate student program, and we had a student in political science who did field experiments in Africa who knew nothing about Nadine Gordimer, even though Nadine Gordimer wrote about her area. Didn't know her at all. And I was thinking to myself, well, what if we had—and this is why I am thinking organizationally, and a place like Harriman could help make this happen—of kind of dual dissertations, where she hooks up with somebody who is a specialist in African literature, and that they find things that they have to contribute to each other that each would not, obviously, know on his or her own. But it's this more collective rather than individual enterprise that is perhaps a way out of this quagmire, intellectual quagmire, that you describe, basically.

Motyl: I think you're onto something here. Again, it's a question of bringing people together in some fashion. But of course, it can't be artificial. That's the problem. And you see this very often in attempts by universities, whether it's Columbia or elsewhere—you know, we are going to create this interdisciplinary dialogue amongst people who don't want to talk to one another because they have nothing to say. On the other hand, bringing people in and actually forcing them to collaborate on some project might just work.

But going back to the Harriman example, many of the founding people in Harriman were in the OSS [Office of Strategic Services]. And part of the strategic reason for the Harriman's existence was the Cold War. And there you had an instance of people coming together because there was a problem, and it was a practical problem, and it was a practical problem that wasn't defined by them, although they would probably have agreed that defeating Nazi Germany was an issue and was a priority. But the fact that the government was able to define the problem for them meant that people could come together and they could overcome their initial inability to agree on what is actually an issue, what is the puzzle. You know, the puzzle for the historian isn't necessarily the puzzle for the political scientist, and so on.

Q: As I learned, historians actually don't think even in terms of puzzles. [Laughs]

Motyl: But here, you have a puzzle, which is to say a policy priority. How do we defeat them? How do we overcome this particular problem? And I think from that point of view, you can create interdisciplinary teams, whether it's a question of dealing with terrorism, or of dealing with Russia, or dealing with Putin or dealing with some particular issue with Ukraine. You can form teams. But again, they have to be natural. You can't really just take anybody from one field and just put them together with somebody else. There has to be some degree of overlap.

But once they're given a problem and they're asked to provide solutions—and here I mean policy solutions: What should we do? And I don't mean generally, Well, let's build civil society and promote democracy. Well, sure, we all agree on that. I mean, where do we spend the money? Exactly whom do we give it to? Whom do we fight? Whom do we not fight? Those are the kinds

of issues that have to be addressed. Unfortunately, many political scientists, and certainly many historians and others, aren't equipped to address those. They tend to elide policy altogether. That's unfortunate. That is very unfortunate because the policy angle can actually bring people together and force them to apply their theories, look for commonalities, develop something like a common discourse, or at least a semi-common semi-discourse, and possibly play some positive role in resolving important issues.

My guess is this is going to happen. The last twenty, thirty years was this golden period where history was ending and conflict was disappearing, the European Union was the wave of the future, and—well, that's not true anymore. States are coming back. Nationalism is coming back. Wars are coming back. Democracies are falling apart. And I think most of us are concerned about these things, and we want to do something about that, and this would be one way of creating some kind of academic policy input. It would also make the work we do, I think, more relevant to the public, and it would also, I think, contribute to enhancing our prestige. As long as all we do is just write incomprehensible papers that no one reads, then your average Joe can look at Wikipedia and say, I can do that too. But for actually contributing in some significant fashion to policy, well, that's not something that your average person can do.

Q: Thanks. That's very interesting. I've thought a little bit about this issue. And in addition to problems, people can come together interdisciplinarily over methods, to some extent, borrowing methods from one another. But the thing is that the terms in which it's usually put, as you described before, when universities do this interdisciplinary thing, is to somehow make the ground—I don't have a good language here, but—conceptual somehow. It's on the basis not of a

specific problem, not on the basis of a specific method, but on some kind of conceptual terrain that somehow they are going to be able to speak to each other. And as you say, the specialization, increasing specialization, undermines not only the ability to have the same puzzles, but even the same language that they're going to be able to speak. So I think the problem-based model is interesting.

So the last set of questions I wanted to ask you was to fill out our sense of the folks at Harriman over its history, some of whom we won't be able to speak with, partly because they may have died, or are kind of too old. And so I was wondering if I could just ask you or give you a set of names, and if you have any memory of them, any story about them—something like that? Or they may have been before your time. I don't know. Henry [L.] Roberts?

Motyl: Oh, no. Before my time.

Q: Before your time, right. Allworth?

Motyl: Oh, Edward Allworth? No, him I knew well. I took a number of courses, and he was an advisor. And as I said, he is the one who opened my eyes to SIA.

Q: What was he like? You said he was a bit of a mentor, I think.

Motyl: He was a bit of a mentor.

Q: And what was he like as a mentor?

Motyl: He was very detail oriented. Very specific, very detail oriented. For me, that was very useful. I think I have that kind of streak in me as well, but he taught me to pay attention to words, to pay attention to the minutiae. He was like that. He was very focused on specific numbers, on specific details. I remember I wrote a paper for him, and one of the things I distinctly remember—I think he gave me an A, but that's besides the point. But I had said something like “There were less people,” and he corrected “less” to “fewer.” I remember thinking, Damn! I never knew that!

So those were the sorts of things that Allworth was very good at, but of course, in addition to that, he knew his nationalities like no one knew his nationalities. And he was a very kind and gentle man. And there was a cohort of people like that at Harriman: Allworth, Marshall Shulman and John Hazard, who were quintessential gentlemen. Elizabeth Valkenier: a quintessential lady. But those three, they were this kind of old-school scholar who was concerned with facts, who was moderate, never exploded, always willing to listen [laughs], even when you knew they didn't want to. They were remarkable human beings. We don't have them anymore. We are all far more excitable. They weren't like that at all.

Q: And it sounds like you learned from them or took from them, or they gave to you through example. More than just kind of do this, do that, it was more, as you say with the Allworth story, he just corrects it and figures you'll twig onto it?

Motyl: That's right. It was the person. It was the person. And there was another one: Joseph [A.] Rothschild, who was semi at Harriman, but mostly at East Central Europe. Again, a lovely, lovely human being. And these four people, whom I knew fairly well in various capacities at various times, some of whom I took courses with—Hazard I never actually took courses with, but we interacted a lot—but they were just these model human beings. You wanted to be like them. You might not agree with them; that was beside the point. That didn't matter. They were just decent human beings.

And to me, that was important when I was starting out in the field because I had these very utopian, idealistic notions about scholars being dedicated to the search for truth. One of my major disappointments when I came to Columbia as a grad student—not in SIPA—was that that wasn't the case! That this was as rotten a profession as any other profession in the world. But, within the rottenness of the profession there were these people who were wonderful, who were lovely, who were really nice.

Q: I empathize with that. I chose a mentor and advisor, who I was substantively interested in what he was doing, but I wouldn't have chosen him, but he also stood out as a nice, decent person, and that made all the difference for me. Ernest [J.] Simmons?

Motyl: Oh, no. Before my time as well.

Q: [Abram] Bergson?

Motyl: Likewise. Geroid [Tanquary] Robinson, likewise.

Q: Leopold [H.] Haimson?

Motyl: Oh, Haimson I knew. Haimson was a character. I didn't know him as well as these others because he was a historian, and amongst the historians, he did the Mensheviks, and I had no interest in the Mensheviks. But we did interact, mostly in my capacity as associate director. Him I just remember as this hairy man who was constantly smoking cigars, or those little cheroots or something, and talking about Mensheviks. But that's really a very superficial impression. I wouldn't be able to say more than that.

Q: Seweryn Bialer? You mentioned him before. He ran the East European Center. What were your interactions with him?

Motyl: Well, he was my major advisor on my dissertation. And he was the one who made me appreciate the importance of the nationalities, in addition to Allworth, of course. He was the one that semi-started me thinking about imperial things. I mean, that was, as I said, not in fashion, but some of that was already present in his own thinking. He and I collaborated on some projects. We wrote up a project for Bellagio [The Bellagio Center Conference Program of the Rockefeller Foundation] and won that. This was in 1988. He was the PI [principal investigator], I was the PI or something along those lines. So we worked together, but I was never quite close to him. I didn't have that kind of rapport with him that I had with Allworth or especially

Rothschild. I mean, we'd joke, we'd crack bad jokes. He loved bad jokes. I mean, he really loved really bad jokes.

Q: This is Rothschild?

Motyl: Joe Rothschild. He was just wonderful in that regard. And I'd like them too, and so we had that immediate rapport. Bialer: he was my mentor, he was my advisor. And I spent time with him in extracurricular settings. I was never close to him.

Q: Any interactions with Zbigniew Brzezinski when you were here?

Motyl: No, no. Not on a personal level. I mean, Bialer used to host this seminar on a weekly basis and I used to go to that when I was already a PhD, and Brzezinski would occasionally show up. That was my only contact with the great man.

I do remember one thing he said, for what it's worth. He was chatting with someone else, and they were talking about American football. Brzezinski said, "You know, I never understood this game until I realized one day that it's the most extraordinary combination of air and land power that one can imagine." [Laughs] Which kinds of fits the stereotype of Brzezinski, right?

Q: And of academics in general.

Motyl: Right. [Laughs]

Q: Did you know Peter [H.] Juviler?

Motyl: Yes! Another gentleman. Another lovely human being. Peter and I were close friends. Again, he fits that bill, right? Mild-mannered, excellent scholar, you could trust him with a million dollars, you could trust him with anything. And you'd know that you could count on him, and if he said something, he would do it.

Q: Robert [L.] Belknap?

Motyl: Belknap I knew, but not well. We interacted at parties, things of that sort, and I remember him as being the tall, white-haired equivalent of Leopold Haimson. He was the Slavic studies [laughs] odd presence: a little too tall, with the slightly funny laugh. But we didn't know each other well. But he was clearly one of the characters. He was the sort of person that you would say, this is Harriman: we have got a hairy historian and a very tall Slavic specialist, in addition to the other people.

Q: You mentioned John Hazard. Did you take any courses with him?

Motyl: I never took courses with him, but back in the late '80s, I organized a number of conferences dealing with the nationalities, and he attended all of them. As a result of that, before, after, and during the conferences, we interacted on a variety of occasions, so I had the opportunity to have this kind of closer contact with him. And then, of course, he was always at

events, and I would occasionally speak to him in my capacity both as a student and as an associate professor.

Q: Right. I'm just kind of curious. Thinking back to Haimson and to Belknap, when you talked about them as characters—and partly, you talked about them physically. I was wondering if there was anything—in their being outsized in their own way physically, were they also, just at—I don't know—seminars, or at parties or whatever, would they be the kind of people who would—I'm trying to think of what people who are characters do, as opposed to how they might look, as to kind of draw attention to them—I mean, did they like to draw attention to themselves?

Motyl: Well, Belknap was just tall. He must have been about six-five, he had white hair, he often wore his black leather jacket, and he had this very distinctive laugh: sort of a cross between a cackle and a laugh. So you couldn't miss him. He was just there. And he had this slightly naive quality to him. Despite being one of the leading, if not the leading scholar in Russian literature, he had this very charming naive quality. He was almost a bit of a little boy. And in contrast, Haimson was the worldly-wise scholar. He'd smoke the pipe, the big cigars, sit back and pontificate about the Mensheviks or things like that. I don't mean that in a bad way.

Q: I know. I understand.

Motyl: This is all said with admiration and love for these people. [Laughs]

Q: Did you have much interaction with Jack Matlock?

Motyl: For a couple of years—late '80s. When the Soviet Union was falling apart, there were all these seminars and a couple of press conferences, and we talked, and we knew each other well enough for me to say, Hi, Jack, Hi, Alex. I haven't seen him in about fifteen or so years, maybe more. But for that period of time, late '80s, early '90s, we interacted a fair amount.

Jack was a no-nonsense guy. Unlike Rothschild, who told funny stories and loved bad jokes, Jack was your consummate diplomat. He was very busy. He always had the answer to a particular question. He and I disagreed on a number of issues. I remember he defended when [Boris N.] Yeltsin blew up the parliament, I was aghast. I thought that was a terrible thing. He thought it was a good thing. And when the Russians were fighting the Chechens and committing all sorts of war crimes, he thought they were perfectly justified, and I was aghast. So there were these two moments. And as I understand it, let's say he is kind of soft on Putin—or soft-y, soft-ish—and I have become a hardliner, as I have said. So I think there is an implicit disagreement on that. But again, I haven't spoken with him in many, many years.

Q: Was William [E.] Harkins here when you were here?

Motyl: He was here when I was here, but I never met him.

Q: The last person I wanted to ask you about is Cathy [Catharine Theimer] Nepomnyashchy, who—

Motyl: Whom I knew well.

Q: Yes. I interviewed Richard [S.] Wortman, and he had nice memories of her doing all sorts of energetic things to make Harriman happen. I was wondering what your interactions were with her, and how you experienced her?

Motyl: Well, she and I, for ten years, we co-taught this core course that Harriman offered. It was on a Monday from six to eight, so I would usually arrive at five and go to her office, and we'd chat. Then we taught the course. Then her husband, Slava [Vyacheslav Nepomnyashchy], would pick us up. He has also passed away, as you know. And almost always, their daughter was sitting in the backseat. Then they would drive to Seventy-Ninth Street, park the car in a garage; they'd go home, and I'd take the subway. So for ten years, I saw Slava, I saw their daughter, Olga, and for three, four hours, I would interact with Cathy. Which is quite a lot if you think about it.

[Laughs] And Cathy, Cathy was just—what I admired about what she did for Harriman is that she brought more culture into it. Because it was always history, social sciences, poli-sci—and that's great and fine and good. But she started bringing in dance and ballet, and all sorts of issues like that, which weren't quite in the mainstream of Harriman activities, but which are obviously important to a full regional understanding of the former Soviet Union. So that was terrific. But she just had this incredible energy and capacity and devoted her life—she genuinely devoted her life—to Harriman, Columbia and her field. I have never quite seen anything quite like this. In the personal conversations we had, she would just talk about events and Harriman, and the conflicts, and the struggles, and the minutiae, and the backstabbing and the gossip. And at some point, of

course, the longer I was away from the university, the less I knew who and what was actually going on. That never deterred her.

She just lived the profession. She lived the Institute. Occasionally, we would meet for lunch, and she was just enthralled, obsessed, with what was going on. She genuinely dedicated her life, in a way that I suspect someone like Shulman probably did too. I mean, he was clearly committed to the institute in a 100 percent way. But very few other people were ever quite as committed to their profession as she was. I know I certainly wasn't.

Q: Well, thank you very much, again, for this conversation. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to share with the eventual listeners and readers of this oral history?

Motyl: Well, as I said before, let me just end on this point. I still do theory; although I have become far more empirically oriented, but I am certain that the Putin regime is brittle. I am absolutely positive it's brittle, and I'm absolutely certain that within five years, we won't see it anymore. So in any case, here you go.

Q: Well, let me follow up on that, as an ending, which is that you said there was theory behind this. So, tell me your theoretical statement or thinking that leads you to this conclusion.

Motyl: It flows very much out of the work I was doing on totalitarian regimes, which led me into thinking about authoritarian and fascist-type regimes. I think the problem with the Putin regime

is precisely the fact that it is highly centralized, personalized. It's a highly centralized, personalized dictatorship, and its survivability and its stability rides very much on the ability of this one man to sustain a cult of personality, which is very much a cult of personality built around his infallibility and vitality. So that means several things. One is the older he gets, the less likely will he be able to promote the vitality bit. The infallibility bit worked very nicely as long as oil prices were high, and anybody could have been president of Russia and done well, even me. But now that oil prices are declining and he's gotten himself embroiled in a variety of adventures in Ukraine and Syria and elsewhere, the chances of his making mistakes—indeed, he's already making them—their strategic mistakes will continue to grow.

And then last but not least, the institutional over-centralization means that on the one hand, the regime—the capacity of institutions to cooperate and coordinate—will decline. That was true in Nazi Germany, that was true in [Benito Amilcare Andrea] Mussolini's Italy, and it's true of every authoritarian regime. You've got institutional fighting and things like that taking place, which means that the overall structure becomes increasingly inefficient. As information goes up to the top, it becomes increasingly incorrect because they are kowtowing, which just inclines him to make more mistakes.

Again, I have been saying this for a number of years, and I suppose sooner or later—give me a few more centuries, and I'll be right. [Laughs]

Q: Too soon to tell. Zhou Enlai's line. [Laughs]

Motyl: Exactly, exactly. Right. But let me go on record: I am firmly persuaded that within five years, we won't see this regime, and that there will be something in the nature of a breakdown. What that means for Russia, for the world, well, that's another issue. But I do think that contrary to the image we have of Putin as being this supreme chess player, grandmaster, who's manipulating Russia and the world, we are in fact witnessing a fairly incompetent leader within a rather brittle regime. Doesn't make it less dangerous, but makes it less stable. In any case, so I hope. [Laughs]

Q: Yes, indeed. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Motyl: My pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]