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With a Little Help from My Friends

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The story of the development of my professional life as a historian is like history itself: serendipitous, hard to predict, yet wedded to the times. It has depended on multiple influences and a series of fortuitous accidents. Special mentors, good friends, and generous colleagues have made a huge difference. Travel, too, has played an important role and, in some ways, still does. The inevitable questions that emerge from living among and talking to people in different cultures and societies are best approached by knowing their histories.

I was a pretty ordinary middle-class American teenager when I enrolled at Stanford in the fall of 1962. Probably the most important influence on me as a student was attending the Stanford program in Beutelsbach (outside of Stuttgart) and traveling in Central and Eastern Europe, which intensified my interests in history. I loved my history classes on campus, eventually majored in the discipline, and wrote an Honors Thesis, but I never imagined becoming a professional historian. Being taught by 'giants' like Wayne Vucinich (Balkans), Terence Emmons (Russia), and Gordon Craig (Germany), among others, I simply could not conceive of doing what they were able to do: write important books and inspire students like myself with their knowledge and wisdom. I had a wonderful Western Civ. instructor (and later friend) by the name of Lance Farrar, who also encouraged me to think of history as a 'living' subject. At the same time, like many of my cohort, I was deeply involved in the political world of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movement. My dad was an army doctor and urged me to pursue medicine. But I wasn't particularly drawn to my courses in science and I didn't do very well in them. Careers in business, law, or government didn't seem right given the politics of the day. The Peace Corps was a serious possibility, but I was warned I could be drafted if that was my path.

In a couple of long talks early my senior year, Prof. Vucinich, who was a wonderfully empathetic man and an unforgettable mentor, more or less convinced me that graduate school in Russian and East European history was something I could and should undertake. This really came out of the blue: I was shocked, but the more I thought about it, the less preposterous it seemed. One could not be drafted out of a Ph.D. program in the humanities and social sciences because of the perceived shortage of college professors. I also liked the idea of teaching history. I applied to a few places for the Ph.D., but Vucinich assured me they would take me at Stanford. I didn't want to leave what I considered paradise on earth; and he put me in touch with a finance administrator who helped me solve the funding issues. The National Defense Education Act had been passed by Congress, which supported graduate education in perceived critical languages and cultures. That fellowship ended up funding me for almost all of my Ph.D. program. Terry Emmons had recently come to Stanford; Alexander Dallin and Ivo J. Lederer had also just been hired. So, it seemed natural to stay put and study with this bevy of marvelous scholars in the field of Russian and East European history. I had to take intensive Russian that summer to get the fellowship and, of course, I continued with it in grad school. I also studied Polish and Serbo-Croatian.

I think I was probably an on-again, off-again graduate student. To this day, I am very sympathetic to my own graduate students, given the neuroticism bred by pursuing a Ph.D., especially in a time of political upheaval, and by the inevitable personal self-absorption of twenty-somethings. I am grateful for my graduate student pals, among them John Ackerman,

Bob Maclean, and John Beck, for keeping me on a relatively even keel during those years. The intellectual agenda of the time was determined in good part by the political. Many novice historians like myself wanted to know about revolution and revolutionaries; there was a desire to learn more about Communism, the Cold War, and the Soviet Union; and questions about violence and terrorism were on everyone's minds. After all, we felt we were living on the edges of a revolution; some of my graduate student friends were more involved, some less. I was somewhere in the middle. The sociologist Barrington Moore Jr.'s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* was a powerful influence on my own ambitions as a novice historian.¹ Answering big questions about why societies were organized the way they were struck me as very important. The history of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe also seemed crucial in understanding the political dilemmas of the day.

My original idea for a Ph.D. thesis was to write a biography of Rosa Luxemburg, the famous Marxist revolutionary. I was interested in her as a theorist, who opposed Lenin's idea of a highly disciplined revolutionary party, but I was also fascinated by her as a person—a Polish-Jewish female radical from Zamość, who ended up murdered in 1919 in Berlin during the German revolution. But I found out after I won a grant to do research in Poland that a fine biography of Luxemburg had appeared in print by J.P. Nettl.² So I figured I would go to Warsaw in any case and investigate where her Marxism came from. I stumbled across a small but dynamic Polish Marxist party called "The Great Proletariat" (1881-1886) and I decided, true to my 'Moore-ist' origins, to ask why Polish revolutionaries in the Russian Empire (the Kingdom of Poland) readily endorsed a Marxist program, while, at the same time, their Russian compatriots were deeply involved in 'populist' revolutionary ideology. I designed the thesis as a comparative history exploring the social explanations for the different ideologies of Polish and Russian radicals. Luxemburg had written an essay on the subject. I would follow in her footsteps.

I loved my time in the archives in Warsaw. Every historian understands that special thrill of working with archival materials that teach them new and sometimes unexpected things about their subject. Even though it was a hard economic and political period in Poland, I also personally loved my time in Warsaw. I made instant friends with a small group of very supportive American historians, Chuck Strozier, Bill Freeman, and Tom Simons (who was in the embassy). I had traveled and done a bit of work in Eastern Europe, but not really lived there. I was not a great classroom language learner, but I thrived on the excitement of being in the Polish language environment and getting to know Poles. This was also true of the time I spent in Yugoslavia and in Russia, where I also had to struggle with language. I still find the attempt to speak languages in place exhilarating and fulfilling, as well as frequently exasperating.

I returned to Stanford from my 14 months in Poland (and several weeks in Moscow libraries) with a ton of material, but I thought I needed to work in the Hoover Institution's extraordinary archives on the Russian revolutionary movement in order to make the comparison viable. It took another four months or so before I started to write my 'grand' comparative study of Polish and Russian revolutionary movements. This was 1971-72 and I used Stanford's early computer facilities and punch-cards to deal with the large comparative biography I had assembled of hundreds of Polish and Russian revolutionaries, cross-tabulating variables to test out my ideas about their social, religious, educational, and geographical determinants. The dissertation turned into an ungainly mix of comparative history, prosopography, and Polish and Imperial Russian history. I was offered my first job relatively late in the year—at Boston University—and submitted my thesis two weeks before packing up my car and driving cross-country with my dog and girlfriend at the time to teach my first class.

I should say I had the great good fortune of also getting a position as a Research Associate at the Russian Research Center (RRC) at Harvard. I would do my teaching at B.U., but would spend the rest of my week and frequently weekends at my office at the RRC. There I got to know a large number of scholars in the "Soviet studies" field at various stages of their careers. Some became great friends, like David Powell, Walter Connor, and Nina Tumarkin. I also found some mentors,

¹ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

² J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1966).

like the brilliant Adam Ulam, who was a major influence on many of us whom he regaled with pithy insights about the history of international affairs, especially Soviet-American relations, at the Center's daily coffee klatches.

When I first looked for an academic job, I thought to myself I would find employment at a small college in a peaceful and bucolic corner of the west coast, start a family, and enjoy my students. I had loved my time in the archives, but I did not see myself as a researcher or even as a publishing historian. This changed being among so many accomplished writers and scholars who had been assembled at the RRC, and who helped me face up to my sometimes clumsy prose and contorted arguments. (My wife and fellow historian, Katherine Jolluck, has graciously taken up that role since we were married in 2000.) I also learned to appreciate the intellectual stimulation of the interdisciplinary study of my area through attending countless seminars by fellows and visitors. My closest B.U. colleagues and friends—Nancy Roelker, Fred Leventhal, Dietrich Orlow, and Arnie Offner—were also very supportive and served as mentors and exemplars of active, publishing scholar-teachers.

I realized that my comparative 'magnum opus' could not be finished properly unless I also used the Imperial Russian archives in the Soviet Union. So I went to Leningrad and Moscow on an International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) fellowship in 1975 and worked in the archives of the judiciary and police. Once again, the experience abroad was thrilling and revelatory. Thanks to the legendary archival acumen of Gregory Freeze, who became a constant work companion and excellent friend, I was able to complete my goals for that period. Life in the Soviet Union was even harder than in Poland, but getting to know Russians and the Soviet Union firsthand, making friends, speaking their language, and sharing their lives, was exciting and meaningful for me.

I returned to Boston with so much terrific material that I felt completely deflated. How would I ever integrate this new and interesting 'stuff' into an already oversized dissertation? Besides, there was no time to do more writing; I was back on a demanding teaching schedule. If I didn't publish a book it was clear that I would not get tenure. One of my B.U. friends and colleagues, Dietrich Orlow, came to the rescue when he recommended applying for an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship in Germany. I received the grant and headed to the *Osteuropa Institut* at the Free University of Berlin for a year, 1978-79, to finish the book. (This began a long and fruitful set of relationships with a number of younger German colleagues, including Manfred Hildermeier and Stefan Troebst, who are friends to this day.) Although the idea of comparative history still appeals to me—a couple of my recent books have been written using the 'case study' method—I decided I had no choice but to give up the idea of writing a big book and instead break my study into two: one book on Polish Marxism in the 1880s and the second on Russian Populist revolutionaries during the same period. I finished the Polish manuscript in Berlin and submitted it successfully to a press, plus wrote several chapters of the Russian book. The comparative material 'informed' the two books, but was not central to the narratives. They ended up being two distinct historical monographs on the revolutionary movement in the Russian Empire.³

When I was in Berlin, I spent a lot of time in the 'east.' I got to know a group of people in East Berlin and learned about their difficult personal and political struggles in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). East German friends in West Berlin, who had escaped from the GDR or were bought out of prison, also deepened my interest through the stories of their harrowing experiences. There was a lot that was comparable with Russia and Poland, but there was the additional intriguing situation of the inter-German relationship. I also was fascinated by the four-power character of Berlin, crossing the formidable Checkpoint Charlie as often as I did. This led me to the next large project, which was to investigate the origins of the GDR through writing a history of the Soviet occupation. Historians had left the subject to political scientists. My German colleagues thought it was a hopeless effort since one couldn't use the Soviet or East German archives. My view—and this was the early 1980s—was that there was enough material around in various archives in West Germany—not to mention in the U.S. and U.K.—that one could at least give it a try. Also, with perestroika and changes in the GDR, it became possible to use dissertation collections in Moscow and East Berlin and to talk to historians in the GDR about their

³ Norman M. Naimark, *The History of the "Proletariat": The Emergence of Marxism in the Kingdom of Poland, 1870-1887* (Boulder: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1979); Naimark, *Terrorist and Social Democrats: The Russian Revolutionary Movement under Alexander III* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

work on the subject. I was also able to interview a number of Russians who had served in the Soviet military administration. The book was underway and several chapters had been drafted when I moved back to Stanford in 1987-88 (as a visiting professor) and was hired permanently at the end of that academic year.

The subsequent book, *The Russians in Germany*, was close to completion when the wall came down in 1989, which meant I could now use the party (SED) and other archives in united Germany.⁴ Then, much to my surprise, the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, making it possible to work in the Moscow archives of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany, the central institutional focus of my study. I won't go into detail here about the travails of access: but the ability to use the Russian archives, especially, was crucial in documenting properly many of my conclusions about Soviet actions and intentions in Germany. My department chair at the time, Jim Sheehan, urged me to take my time with the book; what great advice that was from another good friend!

The beginning of the 1990s was a time of immense excitement for East Europeanists, as the formerly Communist region was being rapidly transformed into free societies. Former Yugoslavia, however, was sinking into war and conflict. As a graduate student, I had spent time in southern Herzegovina with Prof. Vucinich on an archaeological dig and had visited the region a number of times. I watched with horror—as did Vucinich himself, who still had an office at the History Department—as the Yugoslav Federation descended into bloody crisis. I was astonished that the same vivacious multi-national society that I had known and enjoyed broke apart into warring ethnic factions. I decided to try to answer the question 'why?' by comparing the Yugoslav case, Bosnia in particular, with similar cases that I had encountered during my studies: the Armenian genocide (which I was introduced to by my friend and colleague Ron Suny), the Holocaust, the driving out of the Germans from Eastern Europe, and Soviet 'ethnic cleansing.' The resulting book, *Fires of Hatred*, was an important learning experience for me, since it opened up questions of forced deportation and genocide that have remained part of my scholarly trajectory ever since.⁵

I continued to work on the subject of genocide, doing some research and writing on the Armenian genocide, on Bosnia, and especially on questions of mass killing related to the Soviet Union. Ron Suny was an important interlocutor on genocide questions, especially during our respective fellowships at the Center for Advanced Study for the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford and through a joint program we organized at the Center on mass violence.⁶ We argued a lot: could Stalin's mass killing of the 1930s be considered genocide? My view was a wobbly yes; his was a definite no. I developed the book *Stalin's Genocides* from a lecture in Berlin, out of those arguments with Suny and other Soviet specialists.⁷ Oxford then asked whether I would be willing to write a short book on genocide for their series on the 'new' world history. It was a daunting effort to learn about the history of the world so quickly. But the exercise, *Genocide: A World History* (2017), was useful in

⁴ Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: The History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁵ Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in 20th Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). An important part of this trajectory is my ongoing involvement with the German Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung that is completing a museum project in Berlin on comparative forced deportation.

⁶ Suny and I tried unsuccessfully to write a common introduction to a collected volume on genocide, but finally gave up. Our approaches were very different. We did collaborate on editing a volume, together with Fatma Muge Gocek: *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), also translated into Turkish.

⁷ Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). It was published by Suhrkamp in German in 2011.

supplying a larger context for my relatively narrow Russian and European twentieth century interests.⁸ In this case and others involving recent work, it has been important to teach the subjects of my scholarship as part of my History curriculum.

I should say that I'm still on the 'genocide trail.' I do not have the feeling I have answered the vexing question about why genocide happens in human society. Historians are good at describing events and putting them together in a coherent narrative. But explanations of 'why?' have escaped me. While working on the three-volume *Cambridge World History of Genocide* with Ben Kiernan, chief editor, and other colleagues, and beginning research for a monograph on the 'why' question, I remain absorbed by the subject.

Doing the research for *The Russians in Germany* in the Soviet and East German archives provided a series of adrenaline boosts. I was also able periodically to join a group of scholars organized by the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project that had forged new opportunities for research in the Soviet and East European archives. Mark Kramer, an old friend from the Russian Research Center, was (and still is) a particularly helpful colleague when it came to identifying and researching new sources. Once again, the excitement of working in newly opened collections in Russian archives on the period of the Cold War led to interesting avenues of inquiry. The bulk of the Stalin papers became available for the first time at the beginning of this century. Other important collections were opened at the party archives. Along with other scholars of the Cold War, I was able to work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, though on a frustratingly limited basis. I decided to continue some of the lines of inquiry in the Germany book by examining Stalin's policies in all of Europe. In the early 1990s, I had also met and organized a conference in Moscow with Leonid Gibianskii, a terrific Russian expert on postwar Yugoslavia, who became one of my closest friends and colleagues. We later worked together on Soviet policy in Eastern Europe in Bellagio and during his visits to Stanford and mine to Moscow. Eventually, we authored some working papers and edited a book together on the subject.⁹

My most recent book, *Stalin and the Fate of Europe*, eventuated from these many years of working in scattered archives and talking with Gibianskii, Kramer, Silvio Pons (Rome), and other Cold War historians, including my Stanford friends and colleagues, David Holloway and Amir Weiner.¹⁰ I decided to cover all of Europe but limit myself to seven case studies from the immediate postwar period. The case study method appealed to me in this instance because I could dig deeply into the historiography of the discrete histories, exploring archival collections, including many at the Hoover Institution, while asking similar questions of each. It is a way to use comparison to understand, a method I've been interested in from the beginning. My great good fortune of having the splendid Hoover Archives on the Stanford campus has made it possible to be an 'archival' historian without having to get on an airplane, which, in these days of the coronavirus, is not terribly attractive. This also helps me in teaching both undergraduates and graduate students about the 'creation' of history.

I continue to be interested in wartime and Cold War history. My genocide work has spawned ongoing projects on Stalin's repressions of the 1930s, on the Holodomor (the Ukrainian killer famine), as well as on Nazi crimes against Poles and Jews. I've written shorter pieces on Majdanek and on Babyn Yar. History, archives, students—understanding the present through the past—remain my passions, as they were from the beginning. I consider it sheer good fortune to have stumbled onto a profession that continues to engage and excite me and make my work such a fulfilling part of my life and identity. But I understand, without the friends and colleagues mentioned above, and many more, I could not have found my way on this uneven, uphill path.

⁸ Naimark, *Genocide: A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁹ See Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii, *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Naimark, *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

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