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Occasional Paper #282

Remembering Adam Ulam



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This Occasional Paper has been produced with support provided by the Program for Research and Training on Eastern Europe and the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union of the U.S. Department of State (funded by the Soviet and East European Research and Training Act of 1983, or Title VIII). We are most grateful to this sponsor.

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REMEMBERING ADAM ULAM

Introduction

Adam Ulam was a towering figure in Russian and Soviet Studies, both literally and figuratively. He inspired generations of students at Harvard and scholars around the world to pursue the study of what was, for many, an intriguing, exotic, and often frustrating topic of academic endeavor. He entertained generations of scholars at the Harvard Russian Research Center during their morning coffee hour with erudite historical stories, be they about the British empire, Russian poetry, Soviet skulduggery—or, his favorite, the Boston Red Sox. After his death, a group of his former students gathered together at the Kennan Institute to honor him by speaking about a range of subjects that he had encouraged them to pursue. Three of them are presented in this occasional paper.

Adam belonged to that great generation of Soviet scholars who shaped the debate about communism and Soviet intentions for the entire Cold War period. Like many of the founding fathers of this discipline, he came to the United States as a refugee in the late 1930's. Born on 8 April 1922 in Lvov, then part of Poland, to an educated and prosperous family, he escaped Poland with his older brother and outstanding mathematician Stanislaus, literally at the last moment—two weeks before the Nazis attacked. He completed his undergraduate degree at Brown University and his Ph.D. at Harvard. He joined the Harvard Faculty in 1947 and went on to a distinguished academic career that included 18 books, many of which remain classics in the field. His biographies of Lenin and

Stalin and his magisterial study of Soviet foreign policy, *Expansion and Coexistence* are still among the best available. He also wrote books on British socialism, on Tito, and on what he viewed as the disastrous impact of the ferment of the 1960's on American academia. At the time of his death on 28 March 2000, he was working on his autobiography.

At the Kennan symposium, we had two panels. The first panel discussed Adam's role as historian and featured talks by Professors Abbott Gleason of Brown University, whose paper is reproduced here, Professor Nina Tumarkin of Wellesley College, whose paper is also reproduced, Sanford Lieberman of the University of Massachusetts, and Dr. Mark Kramer of Harvard University. The second panel focused on Adam's work on foreign policy and featured Dr. Carol Saivetz of Harvard, Dr. Steven Sestanovich, former Ambassador-at-Large for the Newly Independent States, David Kramer, of the State Department's Office of Global Affairs, and myself. Our talks mixed the scholarly with the personal. Adam inspired his students with such respect and affection that no scholarly presentation would have been complete without anecdotes about the milieu in which Adam and his students operated. He was an egalitarian professor who respected students and colleagues alike and judged them by their intelligence and wit, not by their status in the academic hierarchy,

As Adam's former students, we are grateful to the Kennan Institute and to its Director, Blair Ruble, for enabling us to hold this symposium, and we encourage you to read and reread Adam's

seminal works on Russia and the Soviet Union. They will enlighten you with the wisdom, imagination, and erudition of a cosmopolitan, cultured European scholar, for whom intellectual integrity, not transient academic fashion, was the basis of the life of the mind.

*Angela Stent
Georgetown University*

ADAM ULAM AS HISTORIAN
Abbott Gleason, Brown University

Adam Ulam never lost his appetite for his subject. He was a man extraordinarily well matched with the circumstances of his academic career. I used to imagine at times that he saw the Cold War as what amounted to a vast multi-dimensional board game, with both geographic and temporal dimensions. He played this game with verve, gusto, and absorption for almost fifty years, utilizing his extraordinary memory and his flare for systemic analysis, which it seemed to me must have some kind of genetic relationship with his brother Stan's remarkable mathematical abilities.

Adam also had something in common with Mycroft Holmes, famous again recently as "Sherlock Holmes' smarter brother." Only instead of ensconcing himself at the Diogenes Club in London, it was Harvard's Russian Research Center (now the Davis Center) at 1737 Cambridge Street to which Adam repaired almost daily for those five decades. Student research assistants would bring him piles and piles of books and periodicals and he would pillage them for his East-West board game. He was utterly dependent on his office, and almost as much so on his daily colloquies with his colleagues over coffee.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle told us that the sedentary Mycroft would have excelled his younger brother had he only had the energy to examine the muddy footprints on the field or the Trichinopoly cigar ash on the carpet at the murder scene the way Sherlock did. Here the parallel with Ulam becomes more complex. Ulam was neither portly nor physically inactive, but his abilities and temperament were ideally suited to

a universe in which the sources came to him, rather than his having to go to them. Travel in the physical world made him nervous, whereas the opposite was true for the world as it was found in books. And for that, his situation five minutes walk from Widener Library was ideal. Not that Adam went to the library very often; emissaries brought what he wanted to his desk. This mirrored a process in which Adam did not go out to the world; he sucked it in and filtered it through his powerful and systematizing intellect, of Hegelian scope but Bismarckian in its view of power and human folly.

Adam liked the idea that he only worked a measured and regular portion of each day, filling the rest of his time with games and social life. To some extent this aristocratic self-conception was true. He was a genuine hedonist and needed companionship on a regular basis, but one way or another he was playing his gigantic board game most of the time, even as he read himself to sleep at night.

Turning more narrowly to his work, Adam Ulam had little interest in historiography, although he had a great love of history. He took no interest at all in what the dominant paradigms were, in what work "needed to be done" or anything like that. Self-conscious employment of "theory" was anathema. He knew what interested him, he was convinced he knew what was important, he had a sense of what would interest the public, and he wrote about those things. So his work cannot easily be correlated to the methodological preoccupations of scholars, then or (especially) now. He often used the term

“totalitarianism” but was wholly indifferent to the quarrels between those who had rejected the term and those who defended it. To his gifts as a systemic thinker he added those of a keen and sardonic student of the human comedy, a connoisseur of human experience, from the revealing anecdote to the full-dress biography. He was also an inveterate reader of spy and detective stories and of nineteenth-century European fiction more generally. No one not well versed in nineteenth-century novels could have written *The Bolsheviks*, and yet it was not self-consciously novelistic.

Adam directed his books to the educated general reader, rather than to his scholarly peers, who were often exasperated by his hit-or-miss footnoting, his refusal to “keep up”, and his lack of interest in regnant paradigms. He was an individualist in these as well as in other matters and he seems never to have lost his extraordinary intellectual self-confidence. Looking back on his career, one is struck by the sheer *chutzpah* of what he attempted (and largely accomplished): a study of the Tito-Stalin break in 1948, biographies of Lenin and Stalin, an attempt to narrate half a century of Soviet foreign policy in three volumes, a book on the appeal of Marxism to industrializing states in the non-Western world, the Kirov novel . . . , not to speak of all those shorter pieces.

All of this worked for him in his time. His books were translated into many European and Asian languages, partly because they succeeded almost as well as popular history as they did as academic history. He never accepted the loss of a popular audience, to which most academic historians have been

resigned for so long that they scarcely think of it any more. All his books were in his own voice; all of them relied on what are today disparagingly known as “master narratives.” One can hardly imagine it being any other way.

But this success had a certain price. He created no school and in a certain sense broke no new intellectual ground, found no new subject matter for historical treatment. I would venture to say that although he had many admirers, he had no real disciples—what would it mean to be a disciple of Adam Ulam? How would one do it? He found no trove of new information in archives or elsewhere. It was his peculiar combination of gifts that marked his work, his personality and sensibility, but also his ability to create a tapestry coherent both aesthetically and intellectually at the same time. It was his voice: the voice of a European storyteller, loving a joke (but generally at the right time), intolerant of cant or even much earnestness, aristocratic in its acceptance of the world of power as it was, but not without pity. This voice could first be heard in its maturity in *The Bolsheviks*, which will remain around for a long time, because it is such a good read, even as we know more and more about Lenin’s life, as we have already begun to do. *Expansion and Coexistence*, a really grand and magisterial synthesis, has already been somewhat dated by recently published archival information, and it has slightly less of Adam’s charm to keep us interested. But it too will endure until someone has the sheer courage to undertake something comparable by way of a synthesis, or perhaps until people have abandoned the aspiration to do work on this scale.

ADAM ULAM AS WRITER
Nina Tumarkin, Harvard University

Some twenty years ago, when I was in the throes of writing my first book, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*—the book that I later dedicated to Adam—I always kept on my bedside table two books, some pages of which I would read and reread nightly before going to sleep. They were: *A Collection of Essays* by George Orwell, and Adam Ulam's *The Bolsheviks*. At the time I had no idea, really, how to craft a book and hoped that these exemplary models would provide both inspiration and guidance.

Orwell I chose because I then considered (and still do consider) his essays the finest examples of expository writing in the English language. And why Adam Ulam's biography of Lenin? As delightful as Adam's prose could be at its sparkly best, with its witticisms, whimsical phrases, and footnotes consisting of asides, anecdotes, and Mishnaic commentaries, I sought and found in *The Bolsheviks* a different kind of inspiration and influence: its author's philosophical approach toward writing history and biography. I was determined to understand the operating principles according to which Adam wrote about the men who would shape the Soviet experience—but especially about Lenin, whose interpretive biography I myself was writing for inclusion in my book on the Lenin cult. I thus had the experience of reading many of the same sources that Adam had used in his book—plus a good many others—and then reconstructing some of his conceptual and logistical premises and steps.

Adam helped form me fundamentally, not as an historian—not in showing me how to find and select my

evidence, or even how to read and interpret it. But he helped to turn me into a writer of history and biography. According to what assumptions, rules, and aesthetic imperatives would I take my pen (I wrote *Lenin Lives!* with a fountain pen!) and word by word, cigarette by cigarette, create a narrative, an argument, a page, a chapter, a book? My understanding of this fundamental (and at the time, terrifying) process was in part derived from reading and rereading *The Bolsheviks*. Here is some of what I found and took from that book, influencing all my professional work—both my writing and my teaching:

- An almost Tolstoyan devotion to the details of the human condition, with Tolstoy's propensity to unpack and expose the ego and bravado of those who aspired to power, and those who achieved it.
- A fascination with power and its soft underbelly. In approaching the Soviet system—which, in the period of much of his best writing, was still thought of as monolithic—Adam was not affected by *the mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (theologian Rudolf Otto's phrase about the Holy, meaning, "that which makes one tremble and be fascinated.") Rather, he was like Toto, the little dog in *The Wizard of Oz*, who pulled back the curtain behind "Oz, the Great and Terrible," to reveal a frantic elderly man manipulating a creaky machinery of deception.
- An appreciation of human agency and human foibles. To Adam, the Soviet system was never a machine or a complex of institu-

tions. Such an approach would have been laughable, especially in *The Bolsheviks*, which described the early period of Soviet history. But in Adam's other works that described the later decades of Soviet history, he also shied away from things institutional. Indeed, I think that for Adam there was no Soviet system, but rather a collection of knowable and comprehensible (to an extent) actions taken by strangers in a strange land, a way of being in the world, pieced together, often *ad hoc*, by particular men (and, rarely, women) born to particular parents in certain geographical and historical settings.

- An understanding that human beings operate simultaneously in the present, past, and future. Take a look at the first chapter of *The Bolsheviks* in which he describes Lenin's family and the milieu of provincial Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and you will see that Adam moves back and forth in time, opining about how this or that aspect of the Ulianov world would influence Lenin later in life. Such an approach to writing may seem obvious, since we all every moment act out according to past imperatives and create (often to our own detriment) the messes of our own lives and the lives of others. But historians and biographers are often timid about putting this fundamental ontological truth about people into the practice of their writing, opting instead to carefully (and two-dimensionally) put one foot in front of the other.
- An easy and almost breezy freedom of expression. At its best,

this freedom was informed by a richness of factual material and restrained by a sagacious judgment. It was the freedom that Adam took to write it down just as he chose to—with associative thoughts and musings, and acrobatic turns of phrase. Adam's authorial freedom was a key component in the authoritativeness of his demonstrated mastery of his material.

- An expertise in the craft of what I call "interrogative biography." Adam liberally posed question after question, both of his subjects, and by them, as though he were in their heads. Peruse Adam's books and you will see many question marks, a reflection of how we all approach the puzzlement of quotidian life. The mind does not usually process the world in declarative sentences. Adam's biographical work proceeds according to the same kind of dialogic imperative that I believe characterizes human thinking.

★ ★ ★

In the last chapters of *Lenin Lives!*, and in my second book, *The Living and the Dead*, about the cult and memory of World War II in Russia, I sought to exercise a measure of the writer's freedom that I had breathed in from *The Bolsheviks*. Some of my writing resembled Adam's, for example, in its use of question marks and the associative phrases and asides. And some did not, such as the personal and autobiographical voice I assumed in *The Living and the Dead*. But Adam had given me the courage and inspiration to make my writing my own, to go beyond the limits of traditional genres and look for new ones.

Now that I have embarked on a new venture that I began after Adam had become very ill—a study of four Russian Jewish *intelligenty* who left the Empire before or during the 1917 Revolution—I am sad to not be able to talk to him about it (if only to share amusing facts or insights). But Adam's hand and voice will nonetheless inform

my new book, which will be an interrogative biography. I will query my subjects, and also try to imagine the questions they might have posed as they made their way through the world.

I am ever grateful to Adam Ulam for many things, and he is, as Soviet propagandists used to say about Lenin, *vsegda s nami*, always with us.

ADAM ULAM AS FOREIGN POLICY ANALYST
Angela Stent, Georgetown University

Adam Ulam's legacy is rich and multifaceted, but perhaps his most important contribution for those of us who write about foreign policy is how he inspired us to think about Russia and the world outside. He taught his students the best methodology—common sense. Adam's reply to behavioral political scientists who sought to quantify foreign relations was to show that the only way to understand the Soviet leadership's motivations and actions was to put oneself in its shoes, to speculate creatively about how members of the Politburo might have approached the challenges they faced, to imagine that one was Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, or Gromyko. The opening up of Soviet archives since the collapse of communism has shown that most of Adam's conclusions about Soviet motivations and actions that he discussed in *Expansion and Coexistence* or *The Rivals* were both perceptive and accurate, even though he had no access to any archives. He instinctively understood Soviet foreign policy behavior and his writings on these issues will outlive those more ephemeral "scientific" contributions to the discipline.

The issue of Russia's perception of its place and role in the Eurasian land mass was one with which Adam dealt at length in his writings and which remains a key question as we debate Russia's role in the twenty-first century. To what extent is Russia capable of becoming a European power, in the sense that this concept is understood today? In other words, what do Adam's writings teach us about Russia's ability to become more fully integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures, or is Russia

more likely to remain poised between Europe and Asia, seeking an elusive Eurasian identity and place in the world?

Russia's ambivalent identity and contradictory attitude toward its geostrategic role, argued Adam, was a product of both history and ideology. Adam was not a historical determinist, and did not believe that Russia was incapable of becoming integrated into Europe because it had not experienced the Renaissance, Reformation, or Enlightenment. Indeed, Russia's pre-Revolutionary ruling elite was thoroughly Europeanized. Nevertheless, Russia's expansionist policies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made Russia a Eurasian power in a military sense and its rulers made choices that delayed its modernization. After the revolution, Soviet ideology, with its dialectical world view that outlived the belief in Marxist-Leninist tenets, created generations of *apparatchiki* who viewed the West with a mixture of suspicion, superiority, and inferiority, and rejected the idea of integration with the West.

Much of Adam's best work dealt with the first generation of Soviet leaders, most of whom—with the important exception of Josef Stalin—had direct experience in Europe and understood its culture and norms, even if they rejected them. Stalin, of course, was the ultimate Eurasian and he eliminated most of the remaining Bolsheviks who had any affinity for European norms. Thus, for the last half of the twentieth-century, the USSR was ruled by men who were inculcated with a Soviet-Eurasian world view. Many of

Russia's current leaders still subscribe to this view of Russia's identity.

The postwar Soviet Union was a European power in a military-geographic sense. Its empire reached to the Elbe river. Nevertheless, it was not a European power in a political-cultural sense, because it rejected those institutions and values that we define today as "European"—democracy, transparent markets, rule of law, active civil society, respect for human rights, tolerance of different religions and ethnic origins, political pluralism. A European power in contemporary definition practices coexistence, not expansion, in its foreign policy. Gorbachev's perestroika and commitment to a "common European home" represented the beginning of a move away from Soviet norms toward European norms, but Russia today still faces a major challenge in deciding how far it seeks to become integrated with the West and devising strategies for pursuing that integration.

Since Adam wrote his foreign policy books, there have been significant domestic changes in Russia that could facilitate Russia's greater integration with the West. Soviet ideology is dead, yet the dialectical approach to foreign policy that Adam described has not yet disappeared. As new forms of nationalism replace the old ideology and reinforce Russia's desire to be accepted as a great power, Russians continue to debate their identity and interests, but suspicion of western motives remains. On the other hand, Russia's adoption of a market system—albeit an imperfect one—and its integration into the global capitalist system represents a major break with its previous isolation from the global economy. Nevertheless, a

country can be part of the global economy without internalizing the values and norms of Euro-Atlantic societies.

One major barrier to Russia becoming a European power is the state's failure, so far, to come to terms with the Soviet past, to engage in what the Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, confronting and overcoming one's past. With the exception of a few groups such as *Memorial*, there has been no concerted effort on the government's part to confront what Stalinism was, why it developed, and what should be done to prevent the Russian people from having to endure similar horrors again. Examining and accepting responsibility for the past is an integral part of what is needed for Russia to become a European power.

Did Adam believe that geography and history were destiny? Is Russia predestined to remain outside the Euro-Atlantic mainstream? Despite Adam's emphasis on historical continuity, he also understood that society was not static and that change was possible both in domestic and foreign policy behavior. Russia could one day become a European power, but it would have to undergo a major transformation, including dealing fully with its imperial and communist legacies and developing a post-imperial foreign policy concept. The concept would stress coexistence rather than expansion and would be a product of a genuine willingness to live with its partners as a European power with limited ambitions. Russia would have to learn to be a good neighbor.

If Russia does not undergo this transformation in the next decades, then it could become a weak Eurasian power.

It would draw closer to some parts of the former Soviet Union and focus on its relations with China, India, and other Asian and Middle Eastern nations. It could still retain institutional links to Euro-Atlantic structures but would remain outside the West's political and economic mainstream.

In his last book, *Understanding the Cold War*, Adam wrote, "It is the lack of

predictability that defines this era in Russia." That quote will remain valid for the foreseeable future. It is the scholarly community's loss that we will not have Adam to guide us with wisdom and humor through the maze that is contemporary Russia, with its unexpected endings and beginnings.