

## Why Russian Studies in the West Failed to Provide a Clue about Russia and Ukraine

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## Why Russian Studies in the West Failed to Provide a Clue about Russia and Ukraine

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The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has brought the sobering realization that, even 30 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia continues to be a brutal empire. At the same time, after expecting Kyiv to fall in three days, the world has been amazed by the Ukrainian resistance and resilience. How could the international community be so wrong about Russia and Ukraine? We argue that these failures can stem from the ways Russia, Ukraine, and the rest of Eastern Europe are studied in the West and call for a major review of both the quantity and quality of 'Slavic' studies.

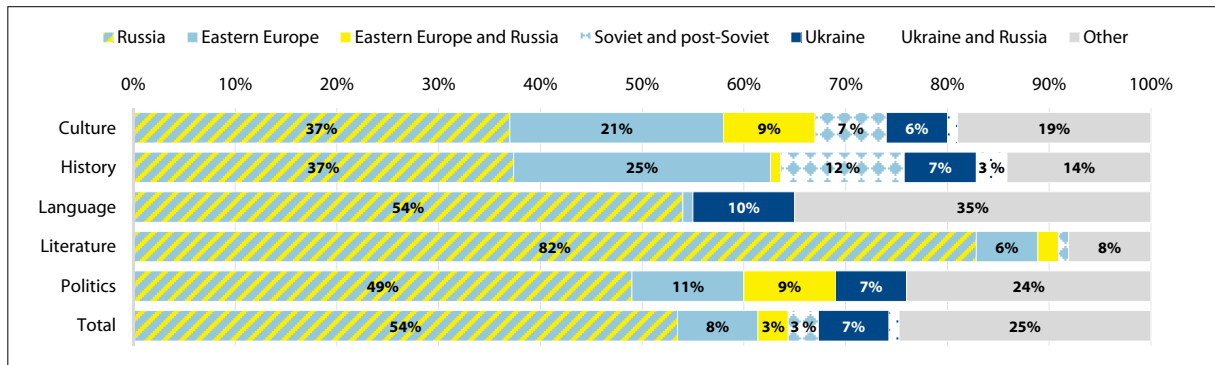
As the first step, we collected data on course offerings in the academic years 2021/22 and 2022/23 at 13 top private and public US universities. We focused on courses in Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian (including Soviet and post-Soviet) studies. We selected only the courses offered by undergraduate programs (since they cover many more students than graduate courses) and only those that were actually scheduled (i.e., a sufficient number of students signed up for those courses). To compute aggregate statistics, we classified the courses into five subject areas (language, literature, culture, history, and politics) and several groups over time and space, e.g., Soviet and post-Soviet, Eastern European, Ukrainian, Polish, Baltic, etc. We then calculated the number of offered courses over the last two academic years and examined the share of courses devoted only to Russia, to Russia and other countries, and to Ukraine.

Figure 1 conveys the gist of our findings. 82% of 'Slavic' literature courses are in fact Russian literature courses (the share is even higher if we include Soviet and post-Soviet writings). We understand that Russia is a large country, but it does not account for over 82% of people or literature in Eastern Europe. In other areas the situation is better, but Russia still dominates. For example, just over a third of courses in history focus solely on Russia, but if we count courses that cover Russia together with other countries (e.g., Russia and Eastern Europe—the yellow bars in Figure 1), the Russian hegemony is apparent once again. In fact, some courses effectively treat the USSR as Russia (e.g. "Russia: History of the Soviet Union"). Furthermore, some courses are completely in line with Russian historical narratives, incorporating all East Slavs and the entire USSR into "Russian" history (although some Eastern European and Central Asian nations were occupied by Russia, their histories are quite distinct from Russia's).

These statistics are not driven by a particular university or group of universities. Figure 2 documents that these patterns apply broadly. For example, although the share of Russian literature ranges from a whopping 100% at Cornell University to a "modest" 52% at the University of Chicago, the median share is close to 90%.

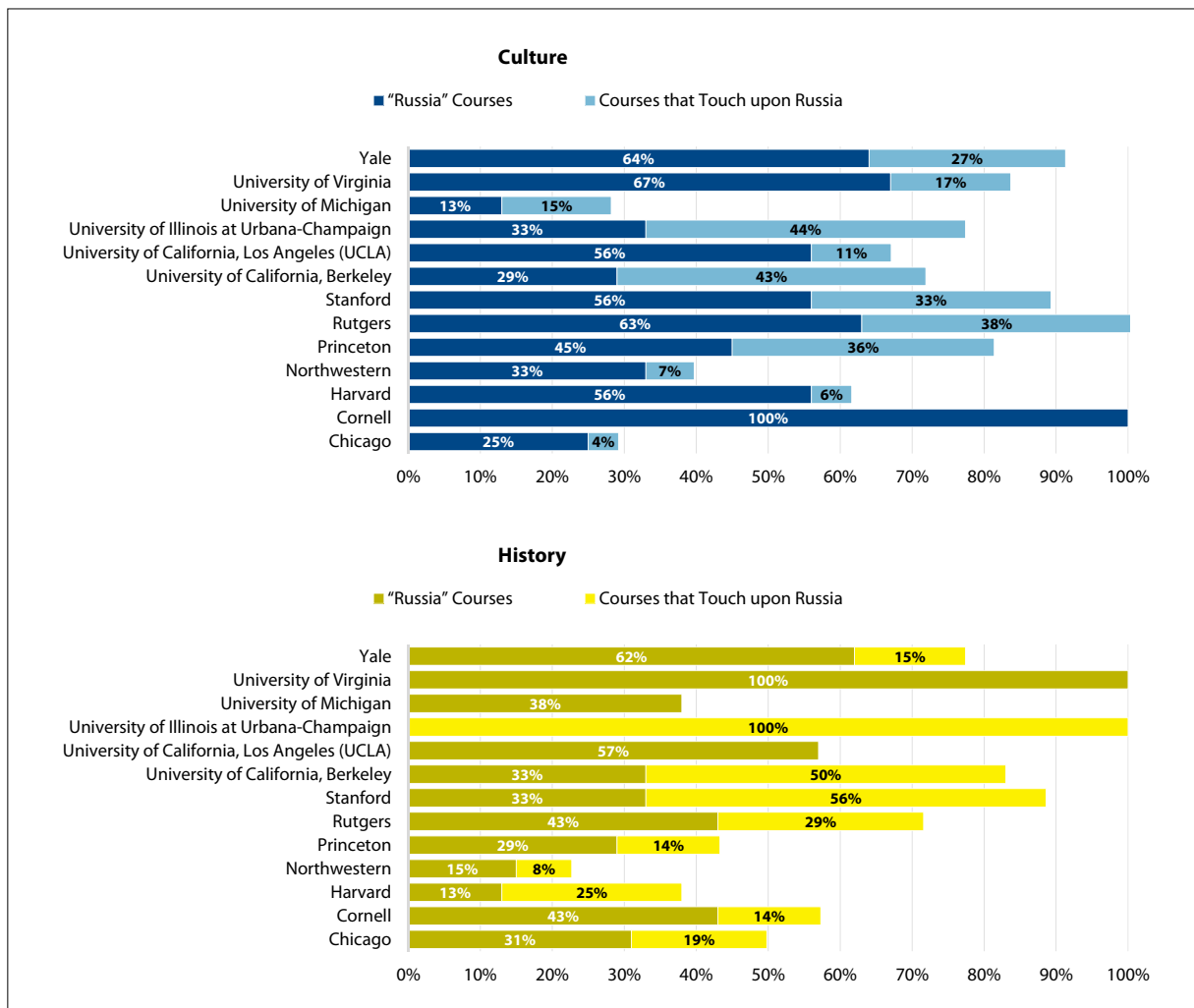
Every classification is subject to judgment calls, and we tried to have the Russian share identified as unambiguously as possible to obtain conservative estimates. However, it is informative to examine courses that are related to Russia and group Russia with other countries. To this end, Figure 2 also shows that these courses further boost Russian dominance in all fields except literature, which already focuses almost entirely on Russia.

**Figure 1: Share of “Russia” Courses in ‘Slavic’ Studies Departments of 13 Major US Universities, by Subject**



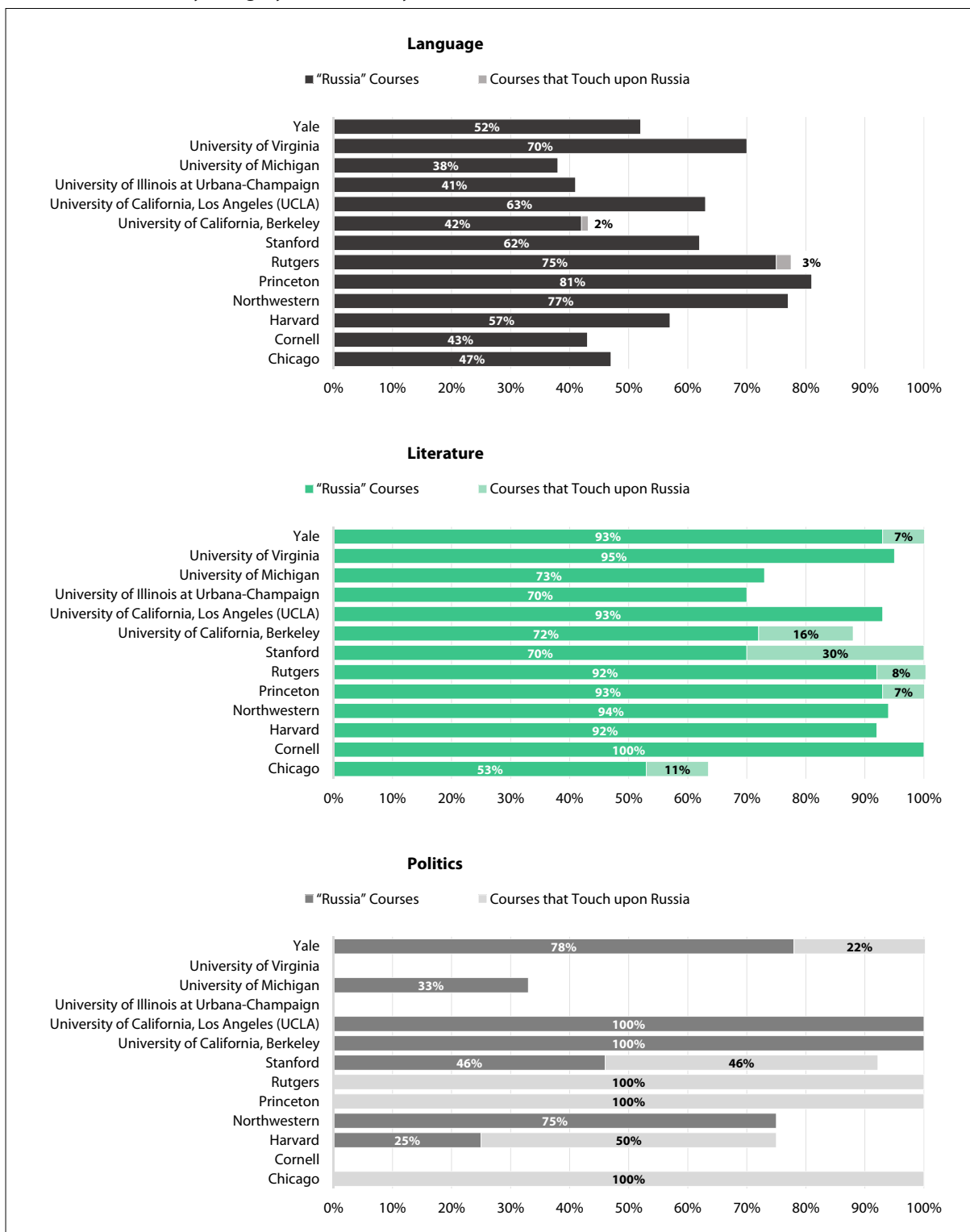
Note: The “other” category includes additional time/space combinations (e.g., Russia & Europe) and individual countries (Poland, Czechia, etc.). We classify courses according to their names and descriptions (e.g., ‘Russian language’ or ‘Russian history’ courses belong to the ‘Russia’ category, as well as courses focused entirely on Russian authors)

**Figure 2a: Share of “Russia” Courses by Category and University and Share of Courses that Touch upon Russia (e.g., refer to “Eastern Europe & Russia”, Soviet or post-Soviet space, Europe and Russia, or Ukraine and Russia) by Category and University**



Continued overleaf as Figure 2b

**Figure 2b: Share of “Russia” Courses by Category and University and Share of Courses that Touch upon Russia (e.g., refer to “Eastern Europe & Russia”, Soviet or post-Soviet space, Europe and Russia, or Ukraine and Russia) by Category and University**



Note: bars represent the percentage of “Russia” courses and courses that touch upon Russia in a specific category. For example, 56% of “Culture” courses and 92% of “Literature” courses at Harvard are devoted solely to Russian culture and literature, respectively, whereas at the same university only 6% of “Culture” courses and no “Literature” courses are in the grouping of courses that touch upon Russia. Percentages in “language” courses are low because such course offerings usually cover individual languages rather than “Eastern European” or “Slavic” languages.

Furthermore, when diving deeper into course descriptions, we see that Russian studies has appropriated contributions of nations subjugated by Russia. For example, Gogol is studied as a Russian author, although he considered himself Ukrainian (Gogol wrote in Russian, but recall that Oscar Wilde identified as Irish despite writing in English). Medieval Rus is classified as Russian history, although it is a part of Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Polish history and the polity was at war with Moscovia for hundreds of years. To appreciate how absurd this treatment is, imagine treating the history of Britain as part of French history just because the Normans invaded Britain. One “Russian literature” course covers Isaac Babel (a Jewish author from Odesa), Svitlana Aleksiyevich (a Belarussian author), and Andriy Kurkov (a Ukrainian author from Kharkiv). We believe Mr. Kurkov would be very surprised to learn that US universities label him as a Russian author while the Russians destroy his city.

For comparison, Table 1 reports Ukrainian course shares. The figure is largely populated by zeros. That is, Ukraine effectively does not exist in US academic instruction. Furthermore, these positive shares overstate the presence of Ukraine in the curriculum because the data are aggregated for two academic years, and in the 2022/23 academic year universities started to offer more Ukraine-related courses (Table 2)—special kudos going to the University of Michigan, which introduced its “Let Ukraine Speak” course. Ironically, although more courses on Ukraine were offered in 2022/23 than in 2021/22, more courses on Russia were offered too. Perhaps the thinking was “if we study Ukraine more, let’s study Russia more as well to be fair.” But this bothsidesism makes things less balanced.

**Table 1: Share of “Ukraine” Courses Offered by Category**

	Culture		History		Language		Politics	
Chicago	4%		6%		0%		0%	
Cornell	0%		14%		18%		0%	
Harvard	11%		13%		13%		0%	
Northwestern	0%		15%		0%		0%	
Princeton	0%		14%		0%		0%	
Rutgers	0%		0%		3%		0%	
Stanford	11%		0%		9%		8%	
University of California, Berkeley	0%		0%		8%		0%	
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)	0%		7%		0%		0%	
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	11%		0%		9%		0%	
University of Michigan	15%		0%		19%		33%	
University of Virginia	0%		0%		0%		100%	
Yale	0%		8%		27%		0%	

*Note: One course in Ukrainian literature was offered at Harvard and two at Princeton in Spring 2023, but these courses were not scheduled—likely due to insufficient demand.*

We are not going to debate whether Aleksandr Pushkin is better than Lesya Ukrainka or Adam Mickiewicz, but the statistics clearly document a disproportionate focus on Russia. Is this Moscow-centric view a problem? We believe it is.

The current approach has made generations of US students largely unaware of anything but Russia in Eastern Europe. As a result, Samuel Charap and other Ukrainian “experts,” who are often Russian Studies graduates, predict the fall of Ukraine “in three days” and interpret Ukraine through a Russian lens. The same applies to the media coverage of Ukraine. For example, the New York Times admits that Andrew Kramer, the chief of the newly established New York Times bureau in Kyiv and another student of Russian in college, “... for years ... was the primary reporter covering Ukraine from his perch in the Moscow bureau.” The infamous Chicken Kiev speech of President George H.W. Bush (the speech was written by Condoleezza Rice, another student of Russian at Moscow State University) epitomizes the gross misunderstanding of Ukraine. How can one get Ukraine right without speaking Ukrainian, knowing Ukrainian history, or being in Ukraine? This lack of Ukrainian expertise and training has led to colossal mistakes.

We appreciate that academia can hardly turn on a dime, and that by now thousands of professors have invested much of their time into learning the Russian language and culture. But the case for a more balanced approach to Slavic studies is patently obvious. More resources should be directed to Ukrainian, Polish, Bulgarian, Czech, Slovakian

**Table 2: Number of Courses Offered in Academic Years 2021/22 and 2022/23**

Region/time	Culture		History		Language		Literature		Politics	
	2021/22	2022/23	2021/22	2022/23	2021/22	2022/23	2021/22	2022/23	2021/22	2022/23
Ukraine	2	10 ↑	0	8 ↑	22	37 ↑	-	-	0	3 ↑
Ukraine and Russia	0	1 ↑	0	4 ↑	-	-	0	1 ↑	-	-
Russia	36	34 ↓	16	27 ↑	162	174 ↑	78	94 ↑	10	12 ↑
Eastern Europe	15	25 ↑	12	17 ↑	4	2 ↓	7	5 ↓	3	2 ↓
Eastern Europe and Russia	6	11 ↑	0	1 ↑	0	2 ↑	0	4 ↑	0	4 ↑
Soviet and post-Soviet	6	7 ↑	4	10 ↑	-	-	3	0 ↓	-	-

Note: The data for tables and figures are available from the authors upon request

and other courses, especially in literature. How much money is needed? In his speech at the Kyiv Security Forum, Dr. Michael McFaul said that he needs a few million dollars to increase the number of Ukrainian studies courses at Stanford. With Stanford's \$8.6 billion budget and \$36 billion endowment, the required funding is clearly a matter of priorities rather than financial constraints.

In summary, knowledge is power. This includes the power to prevent wars by knowing who is capable of what, what to expect, and what is at stake. On the other hand, the price of ignorance is the largest land war in Europe since World War II. We can't help thinking that proper resources committed to Ukrainian and genuine Eastern European, rather than Russia-centric, studies in the previous years could have saved many lives and billions of dollars invested by the Western governments into supporting Ukraine today during the full-scale war. This tragic war should spur universities to revamp their Eastern European curricula, give their students a better education, and hopefully make the world a safer place.

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