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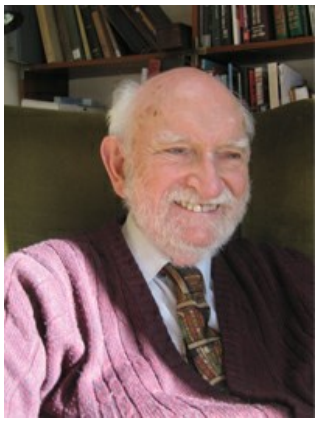
Professor Robert Davies (1963 - Present)

Foundation Director of CREES (1963-78), Professor of Soviet Economic Studies (1965-89), Senior Fellow and Emeritus Professor in CREES (1989-present).



When CREES was established on October 01, 1963, Britain and British universities were very different from today. Both the Conservative and Labour parties assumed that coal, electricity and the railways had been nationalised for ever; most capital investment was in the hands of the state. There were far less students than today, but it was taken for granted that the student population would rise rapidly, that higher education was free of charge, and that children of parents who were not well-off would receive a maintenance grant.

The Soviet Union was a different country from what it had been before and what it would become in the future, These were the years of Khrushchev and his reforms, which for all their idiosyncrasies had made the economy and society more lively and more progressive. Communism and capitalism seemed less far apart, at least economically, than they did in the years of Thatcher and Brezhnev. The Soviet Union offered an economic and social challenge to the West. It was a society which it was interesting and fun to study.

A sign of the times was the decision of the government to accept in full the proposals of the Hayter committee, which reported in 1961 that teaching and research in Oriental, Slavonic and East European and African Studies needed to be greatly expanded, and should be based both on the languages concerned and on the social sciences. The committee proposed that a number of area studies centres should be established within universities, supported by ear-marked grants for lectureships, libraries and travel. Centres for Russian and East European Studies were designated for Birmingham and Swansea,

Russian studies in Birmingham had a long history. In 1918 Professor Sir Raymond Beazley, the professor of history, published *Russia from the Varangians to the Bolsheviks* (alas the book ended with the fall of the monarchy and did not get up to the Bolsheviks). Between the wars a Russian department was established, and in the 1930s its head, Sergei Konovalov, son of the entrepreneur who headed the ministry of industry under the Provisional Government, made arrangements with an émigré research centre in Prague to publish *Birmingham Memoranda on Russian Economic Conditions*, mainly a translation of the Prague bulletin.The Prague centre dispersed in 1939 in face of the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, and one of its most prominent researchers, Alexander Baykov, made his way to Britain and to Birmingham.

After the war Baykov, having failed to get on with the head of the Russian department in the Faculty of Arts, set up a small Department of Economics and Institutions of the USSR in the Faculty of Commerce, He strongly believed that the study of a country must combine knowledge of the language with a thorough grounding in one or more of the social sciences, history or geography, and launched a B.Com. in Russian Studies based on this principle. These arrangements fitted in well with the thinking of the Hayter committee, and their existence played a major part in the decision to base CREES in Birmingham.

Professor Baykov also trained a number of research students who were also social scientists with a good knowledge of Russian. In 1963/4 our postgraduates included Donald Male, who published a book on Russian peasant organisation before collectivisation, and Teodor Shanin. Donald eventually decided that humanity would be better served if he became a probation officer, but he retained an active interest in Soviet studies (he came to see me last year). Teodor Shanin founded and since 1995 has been Rector of the Moscow Institute of Social and Economic Studies.

Baykov died in March 1963 while the university was already preparing for the establishment of CREES. During the summer the nature of the future centre was the subject of much argument. The plan to base it firmly on the social sciences was opposed by some senior members of the Faculty of Arts - at a meeting of the Faculty board the Professor of Theology declared that his Faculty had been ‘caught with its pants down’. A university committee decided that it would be inappropriate for CREES and its brother Centre of West African Studies to belong to a particular Faculty, and established them as inter-faculty organisations attached directly to the Senate.

The old Department of Economics and Institutions of the USSR was incorporated into CREES. The department had four members. Elisabeth Koutaissoff taught Russian to social scientists, was trained as a chemist, and specialised in Soviet education. Elisabeth was a polite and learned former aristocrat, considerably older than the rest of us. We saw the shrewd side of her immediately after Baykov’s death. We told her we were proposing to cancel lectures for a week in his memory. ‘Oh no you don’t’, she said firmly ‘You’ve got to show you can carry on without him. Take over his lectures, and start tomorrow.’ We obeyed, and persuaded the Faculty to name our library after him the following Friday.

The other three original members of CREES had all been in the forces during the war, and had graduated after demobilisation. Geoffrey Barker was an economist with a strong interest in social problems. R. E. F. Smith (Bob Smith) was an historian specialising in mediaeval history, and also worked in the department on the contemporary Soviet economy. I am an economic historian, originally from SSEES. I completed a PhD in 1954 under Baykov on the Soviet budgetary system and after a couple of years in Glasgow returned to Birmingham in 1956.

After CREES was established, in its first year David Lane, formerly a Birmingham undergraduate, was appointed to a lectureship in Soviet politics, and of course became a leading figure in the field. Tom Kronsjo, a brilliant and eccentric econometrician from Sweden, was appointed to a lectureship concerned with the application of computers and mathematical economics to central planning. T. J. Grayson (John Grayson), a practising engineer, was awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship in Soviet production engineering. We were soon joined by Ronald Amann and Michael Berry, who worked with me on Soviet science policy, a project financed by the OECD. So the initial CREES group was firmly grounded in the social sciences, and concentrated on research into aspects of the Soviet Union which had previously been largely ignored in the West, from mediaeval economic history to contemporary science and engineering.

The Hayter grants facilitated our travel to the Soviet Union, which was in process of opening up to visitors. In 1963-4, Bob Smith, Elisabeth Koutaissoff and I each spent two-three months there. It was Elisabeth’s first visit since she emigrated during the Civil War. Bob Smith and I were well-received by the Institute of History. It was on this visit that I met Viktor Danilov, the historian of the peasantry, and we established a life-long friendship in good times and bad. I was able to establish what proved to be long-lasting relationships between CREES and the Soviet economic research institutes, notably the newly-established TsEMI (the Central Mathematical Economics Institute). This was made easier because Academician Nemchinov, one of the founders of TsEMI, came to Birmingham in the summer of 1963, and received an honorary D. Soc. Sci. (he had been sponsored by Baykov, who unfortunately did not live to see his visit). He was accompanied by several of his colleagues, including Academician Fedorenko, director of TsEMI. They stayed with us in our homes, a truly remarkable sign in those days of improving relations with the Soviet Union.

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