CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Blair A. Ruble

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Blair A. Ruble conducted by George Gavrilis on June 6, 2013. This interview is part of the Carnegie Corporation of New York 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.

3PM | Session One

Interviewee: Blair Ruble | Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: George Gavrilis | Date: June 6, 2013

Q: This is George Gavrilis. It's June 6, 2013. I'm at Carnegie Corporation of New York headquarters, with Blair Ruble. Blair Ruble is the Director of the Wilson Center's Program on Global Sustainability and Resilience, long-time serving director of the Kennan Institute. We have a lot to talk about. Good afternoon, almost.

Ruble: Yes, thank you.

Q: Thank you for doing this. One of the things that I warned you I would do in this session is to delve a little bit into your expertise on cities, particularly post-Soviet cities. I was recently in Saint Petersburg [Russia]. I asked a couple people a question about the city and the nature of the city. Nobody could answer it. Somebody there, though, said, we know who could answer it, Blair Ruble. So I'm now going to post this question to you.

Ruble: This sets the bar very high.

Q: We'll see. So one of the things that's very striking about Saint Petersburg, Russia, is that the city is incredibly well-preserved. These old parts of the city go on for stretches and stretches and stretches. It's a very large, well-preserved old city. At the same time, the city was under siege

for, I think, just under three years, a very nasty World War II siege, where there was a lot of destruction. My question to you is the following. Why is the city so well-preserved, given that? And why did the communists, after World War II, rebuild the city faithfully instead of building more Soviet-style architecture in its place?

Ruble: I think the critical moment comes right at the end of the war. There had been plans and buildings were built, but, basically to build a new, grander Saint Petersburg in the direction of Moscow [Russia], south of the city. That's what is Moskovskii Prospekt, and you see the big, Stalinist buildings. There was a party leadership, coming out of the blockade, that identified with the city and very much understood that a lot of people had died for the old, historic city, what in their mind, was Saint Petersburg. There was a moment, right after the war, when there was grave concern about the future of the city. They were building off the identity of the blockade, and that identity was tied up with the historic city. A second reason is there wasn't a lot of money. [Iosif V.] Stalin was directing resources for rebuilding other cities. The fact that Saint Petersburg actually was frowned on by Moscow probably helped save it, because there weren't enough resources to tear it down and build a new city. For those reasons, they started rebuilding what was there, and the destruction was real. But it wasn't as massive as it had been in other Soviet cities where the front actually passed through. The human toll was horrific, but the toll on the built environment wasn't as bad as one might think.

The planners responsible for rebuilding of the city made a commitment to rebuild the historic city. Then you get down to 1948, 1949, the Leningrad Party Affair, where Stalin throws out—he doesn't just throw out, he kills—a major segment of the local party elite for being local patriots,

for doing exactly this. Those people were gone, but by that point, there weren't the resources, there wasn't the will to build a new Saint Petersburg. Stalin, also, always kind of looked down on Saint Petersburg, so for the planners in Moscow, using what resources there were to rebuild Kiev or rebuild Volgograd [Russia] was just much more important. So the irony is that, because of neglect, Saint Petersburg survives. I think that's probably the basic story. I'm sure, when people go through the archives, there'll be variations on this.

Q: This is interesting, because when I asked the question, I either got no answer or got a very different answer.

Ruble: What was the answer? I'm curious.

Q: The answer was that, even the Soviets recognized the historical grandeur of the city and that they had no choice but to restore it, faithfully, according the Tsarist architecture.

Ruble: I don't think that was the case. Undoubtedly, there were Soviet officials, some place, who may have recognized the grandeur. But they didn't really upgrade or seriously renovate. They made the buildings usable. In the prewar period, there was an effort, which again, had been started to abandon the city, to build it south. So I don't think that was a major factor. I think a couple things begin to happen. Local, sort of, patriots began to use the fact that [Vladimir I.] Lenin was so many places to preserve certain parts of the city as Lenin places, and that helped. Then when you get into the '60s, the whole city planning debate changes. Then there were

people who understood the grandeur of the city, but in the initial postwar period, I may be wrong, but I don't really think that was a major factor.

Q: Thank you for answering this question.

Ruble: Hopefully, somebody will actually go to the archives and figure this one out.

Q: I appreciate it, because like I said, I did not get satisfaction on the ground in Saint Petersburg. I got it here, in New York [U.S.]. Incidentally, how was it that you developed an interest in urban history?

Ruble: It was quite accidental. My whole career has been one of serendipity. I wrote my dissertation on Soviet trade unions and I landed my first job, by chance, at the Kennan Institute. [Stephen Frederick] Fred Starr had just founded the Kennan Institute and he was writing a book at the time about the architect, [Konstantin S.] Melnikov. I was talking to Fred and I explained that my dissertation topic is about something that really is unimportant, Soviet trade unions, and I want to do something a little bit more compelling for my next project. He said, well, you ought to think about writing about cities. It was just at that level when he suggested it, because if you go back through the architectural and planning journals, there are real debates and discussions about what's happening in the West. There are materials you can get at by approaching the Soviet Union through the built environment and that was rolling around in my mind. It was when I was living in Washington [D.C.], really for the first time, I began to become interested in the issue of national capitals. I was thinking about, maybe I'll write a book about Moscow.

Then as luck had it, Tim [Timothy J.] Colton, who the subsequently became the long-time director of the Davis Center up at Harvard [University], told me that he was writing a book about Moscow, which he did. He wrote a great book about Moscow. He had just been invited to write a book about Leningrad [Russia], and since I had lived in Leningrad, maybe I should write that book. That's how it all kind of happened, so it all happened through the back door. When I started writing the book about Leningrad, I decided, I can't write about Leningrad unless I know about cities. So that's how I began to expand my circle of urban interests, and eventually they take over.

Q: Wonderful. Let's backtrack a little, to where it all began. Tell us about where you grew up.

Ruble: I grew up in a suburb of New York, Dobbs Ferry, which was on the Hudson River in Westchester County, about twenty miles north of Times Square [New York City]. I was actually born in Beacon, New York, which at the time, was a failed, little industrial city mid-way up the Hudson River. It's become quite artsy now, but back then it was not a very nice place. My parents moved to be closer to the city, so I grew up in Dobbs Ferry and went through public schools. My parents and my grandmother were always very oriented towards what was happening New York City, so I felt as if I was part of New York City, even though we were living in what was really a small town. I stayed there until I went off to college.

Q: You went to college in North Carolina, the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, I believe.

Ruble: Yes. My father had been there. It was a kind of family school. My brother went there. I had thought about going other places, but at the end of the day, it seemed like the best option. So I went down to North Carolina, which was good for a kid from New York. It broadened my horizons a lot. It was the late ‘60s, early ‘70s, so it was the end of the Civil Rights movement and approaching the height of the anti-war movement, which made a place like Chapel Hill very interesting.

Q: How so?

Ruble: Chapel Hill, particularly then, was a kind of liberal island in a very conservative state. We would rush back to the dorm after dinner, to catch Jesse [A.] Helms doing his TV commentary. I also had an uncle, who was a long-time Deputy Attorney General of the State of North Carolina, a defender of segregation. This one time he tried a case before the Supreme Court to argue against search warrants [McGalliard, Harry W.]. There was Uncle Harry, who was this old-time Southern pol. At the time, he was a little bit legendary, because after one election where a liberal lost the Democratic primary, he stood up and gave a toast. "Thank God power is out of the hands of the people and back in the hands of the bosses, where it belongs." Uncle Harry was a very colorful character, and he really represented, I think, what most of North Carolina was at that point. So Chapel Hill— I’d come from New York and had pretty liberal ideas about a lot of things, and I had to defend them. That’s always a good thing.

Q: You majored in political science. Why political science?

Ruble: I was interested in politics. When I'd been in high school, I had done some volunteer work and interned with a local congressman. My father was a local elected official, a Republican official, a Rockefeller Republican. I grew up with politics around, and I thought, I would say, now, wrongly, that political science was a way to understand politics. But that's a different conversation, the way that discipline has evolved.

Q: That might be a conversation worth having as well. When you were studying political science, though, were you focused on American politics or was it comparative, global?

Ruble: I was always interested in comparative politics. When I was searching for a major, actually, I became interested in Russia, or the Soviet Union. In Chapel Hill, I had to take an undergraduate history course my sophomore year, and it had to be international. I'm looking at a catalogue, and I'm thinking British history sounds boring. What's this Russian history? There was a great, young professor. He never published a lot, but he's a great, great teacher, [E.] Willis Brooks. I took his class and he took me under his wing. I started studying Russian, which went together with comparative politics. I wrote a senior honors thesis on Soviet family law, so even before I went to graduate school, I knew I had an interest shading towards the legal side of Soviet studies.

Q: Were you functional in Russian at that point?

Ruble: Not really. This is actually one difference between my generation of Soviet specialists and the people who came after us. There weren't a lot of opportunities to study Russian growing

up. I took those Russian history courses my sophomore year and I enrolled in the summer intensive language course at Columbia the summer of 1969. That was where I started studying Russian. It almost killed me, but I hung on. I wasn't driven away from it, and when I was in graduate school, I took summer programs. I went to Middlebury [College, Vermont] one year, but it wasn't until I was living in the Soviet Union that the Russian really came under control.

Q: Subsequently, you went to University of Toronto [Toronto, Ontario, Canada] for your Ph.D. You told us a little bit earlier about the thesis that you worked on, on Russian labor unions, so the question that I have for you is the following. What did the Soviet Union look like on your first visit? What are your memories from your first visit?

Ruble: My first visit was in May, 1971, and I hadn't actually, at that point, been in Europe. I was interested in the law, and one of my professors arranged for me to go to the Soviet Union with an Ohio State [University] law professor, John [B.] Quigley. He had a program—I guess there were somewhere around ten of us, maybe eight or nine of us plus John, who went on a Soviet law tour. I remember the first night in Helsinki [Finland] was sort of on the verge of white nights—and this is Europe. Then we took the train in. We took the train to Moscow across the Finnish border, and as the guards were going through the train, there were little Russian kids playing outside. I guess they were the custom guards' kids, and they were playing. I remember John say, oh, look at the little communists. That somehow always stuck with me, how you see very human, human beings, and at this juncture, between how, from a distance, we all thought about what the place was about and what it was really about. That first moment really stuck with me. So we went. We spent—I don't know—ten days in Moscow, something like that, interviewing Quigley's law

school chums. A couple of us went to Leningrad for a day. Then we went to Tbilisi [Georgia] and then to Kiev [Ukraine] and stopped in Prague [Czech Republic]. That was my first introduction to that part of the world. This would have been ‘71. One of the really striking memories of that trip is that Prague was the place that felt repressed, and it was dirty and grungy and people wouldn’t talk to you. It was only a couple of years after 1968. It was a pretty grim experience, where the Soviet Union, in comparison, seemed dynamic.

Q: Could you give us a little bit of the context of U.S.-Soviet relations of the time?

Ruble: This would have been [Richard M.] Nixon-[Leonid I.] Brezhnev. I think, when I was an undergraduate, [Lyndon B.] Johnson met with [Alexei N.] Kosygin at Glassboro [New Jersey, U.S.]. This was the height of the Cold War. It was clear the relationship was an important one. It was clear that we had to make it work or basically, human life on the planet was going to end. The stakes were high. The situation was tense. I don’t think it was as tense as it became later on, when you got into the [Ronald W.] Reagan years. I think there was an effort, on all sides, to try to figure out some way to manage the relationship. Nixon, obviously, that was the central point of his foreign policy.

Q: At some point, you move to Leningrad and you live there for a spell. Can you tell us about that?

Ruble: Yes, I was on the American Graduate Student Exchange, run by an organization called IREX, the International Research and Exchanges Board. I’ll put in a plug for IREX, because they

had given me grants for the second and third year of graduate study. There was an effort to promote social scientists studying the Soviet Union and I was on that exchange. I was doing dissertation research on Soviet trade unions. It was actually ‘74-’75, and the exchanges had expanded from forty to fifty Americans, and the additional ten were all social scientists. I thought I’d be going to Moscow, but I was sent to Leningrad at the last minute. It was virtually impossible to do any meaningful research in Leningrad, but eventually I got to Moscow and things opened up.

[Laughs]

The one irony of that, as it turns out, I was at the juridical faculty of Leningrad State University [Saint Petersburg, Russia] when [Vladimir V.] Putin was a student, but to my knowledge, I never met him.

Q: How much time did you spend in Leningrad and Moscow?

Ruble: It was eight months in Leningrad, two months in Moscow.

Q: How does one, at that point in time, move into Leningrad, find a place to live?

Ruble: That was all determined by the agreements. There was a dormitory for capitalist graduate students, and we were there.

Q: I'm sorry, did you say capitalist graduate students?

Ruble: Yes.

Q: Was that your official title?

Ruble: No, the Kapstrana. Yes, we were capitalist graduate students. Of course the irony is, we were less capitalistic than some of the Soviet students, but that's neither here nor there. I don't know. It's a funny story. As I said, we thought we were going to Moscow. Sally and I got married that summer and she had no interest in going to the Soviet Union, but basically, we decided if the relationship was going to last, we would get married before we went. We're driving up to Toronto for both of us to start taking some language courses, and we're going to get married in the middle of that. We stopped in New York to pick up the visa. Carly Rogers, who worked at IREX said, "Oh Blair, I have news for you. You're going to Leningrad. You're not going to Moscow. But it's all right, they have hot water six days a week now. They only had it two days a week, before this year." I guess it was the largest number at the time, of graduate students in Leningrad. It was about fifteen to twenty. They collected us in Helsinki. We all went in on the same plane. No one had bothered to tell the university officials that I was coming, so they scrounged around and gave us the worst room in the dormitory, seven feet by ten feet. That's where we lived, except for the two months in the middle when we finally made it to Moscow. Sally has never been back. She was a trooper, but that was it for her.

Q: At the time, did you have the opportunity to have deep interactions with Russian students?

Ruble: It was very, very difficult. Different Americans had different strategies. We took the attitude that we would be friends with people there we would be friends with here, so we didn't collect a lot of Russian friends. There were a couple of people whom we met, that it was just clear they were meeting us because they were going to write reports about us. I did befriend the librarian at the juridical faculty, and she now is in Chicago [Illinois, U.S.]. Here we are, I don't know, thirty-eight, thirty-nine years later, still friends. But I think Tanya [Schtonova] was probably the only real friend that we made at that time. There were a couple acquaintances. There were people, there were law specialists I kept up with. One of the things that was good about the fact that I started out with an interest in law instead of political science, when it became clear I was going to get no information about actual workers, I was able to understand that I should find out what I could about Soviet labor legislation. That, in effect, became how I was able to write a dissertation. It was around an institutional study of the trade unions.

Q: How did your Russian improve during this time?

Ruble: It went from mediocre to passable. The big changes came a little bit later on and I could function. It was funny, Sally had virtually no Russian, but she was out every day. She took Russian lessons in the morning and she looked for food in the afternoon. She actually ended up communicating better than I did at the end, because I was worried about being grammatically correct and she was worried about, how on earth am I going to get meat? It's a little bit more of a primal instruction.

Q: Let me ask you about that. One of the things that would pop into my mind, when I was growing up in the States and thinking about the Soviet Union, without ever having been there, is this eternal image of people waiting in lines to buy food. When you said that Sally had to go out and figure out where she was going to find food, that's rather striking to me. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Ruble: We were living on the Soviet economy, the local economy. The stipend was one hundred and fifty rubles, which was, for a student, a lot of money. It would have been a university professor's wage. But the difference was that Soviets, as we quickly discovered, had an informal economy of barter and exchange where everything had value, but we really were excluded from that because we were Americans. We didn't want to get set up, and nobody wanted to be set up. Some other Americans played the grey market a little more than we did, but fundamentally, we were on the official market. It was tough. Sally literally would go all over Leningrad looking for food. She learned to spot good lines and she would jump off of street cars. One day, she came back with a supply of Hungarian green beans. This was just before the November 7 holiday, so they were putting food out. She brought back so many that we still had some left over when we left in May. So she really mastered the supply system. We would return the bottles. The bottle return line culture—the drunks would come up, and you could buy extra bottles from the drunks. I think you got three kopeks for certain kind of bottles and five kopeks for another.

She became part of that whole culture. There was a dorm for African students, nearby, and she befriended some of the Africans standing in the bottle line. This kind of epitomized Leningrad, at that moment, for me. The local bottle return point was in a rundown basement, but it had this

spectacular imperial chandelier in it. That seemed to capture what the city was about. The other thing she learned was all meat costs the same. I want to say it was 2.50 [rubles] a kilo, but that could be way off base. It didn't matter what the cut was. She discovered that they would start hacking at one end of the cow and just keep hacking and she could time about the time they would be getting to the best cuts. She really knew how the economy worked in ways in which silly political scientists reading Soviet labor law didn't have a clue.

Q: I really appreciate the very vivid picture that you've painted for us through that example. Afterwards, you went to Moscow. What was Moscow like compared to Saint Petersburg?

Ruble: Two things happened. We went right after New Year's. It was about January 15, or so, right after the holidays. For the first month, the ministry put us up in the ministry hotel. We actually got a quite nice room, because I think word had been passed around that we had this horrible room. They were being nice to us. Then we were able to exchange rooms with an American in Moscow University. Basically, it was called a blok? But it was two rooms, the size we had in Leningrad, plus a shower and a decent closet, in the big, high rise building. A couple of things really stand out. The first was the size of Moscow. This was a time when all the Soviet maps were distorted. It was really freezing. It was like our second day there. We went out to explore the city and like an idiot, I believed the Soviet map. We were stranded, trudging along for what seemed like eternity, along the Moscow River before we came to any mode of transportation. I remember that. I remember that same day, we were walking around, near the Kremlin, and there was a meat store that had a Yugoslav canned ham in the window. After being in Leningrad, where there wasn't food, we just stood and looked at that canned ham. We became

very angry at how Moscow had it so much better than Leningrad, which offered kind an interesting insight into how that all worked.

But the big change for me was—I already commented on my career is serendipity—one of the serendipitous moments is that there was a man named John Reuther, who was Victor [G.] Reuther's son, the American labor leader, Walter [P.] Reuther of the UAW's [United Automobile Workers] nephew. John had spent a year studying Soviet labor law, as a guest of Soviet trade unions, when my dissertation adviser, Peter [H.] Solomon, was an exchange student. I guess that would have been in '68, '69. When I was going over, Peter got in touch with John, who I think, then, was working for the Ford Motor Company, which says a lot about how American Society evolved. John wrote a letter of introduction and when I got to Moscow, I literally went over to the headquarters of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions and presented this letter from John Reuther, and I was ushered into the international department. This was a time when the AFL [American Federation of Labor]–CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] banned contacts with Soviet trade unions.

So they were looking for any contact with Americans. I had a letter from this great American trade union leader's kid, and that letter opened up doors. I was assigned to a young, just starting out, international affairs specialist in the trade unions, named Igor [Y.] Yurgens. He was a leading advisor to [Dmitry A.] Medvedev and he's a major political figure. Igor and I were just starting out and one of his first assignments was to set up interviews for me. Suddenly, I started having all the interviews that I couldn't get in Leningrad. Then, again, this was a little window on how the Soviet Union worked. When I went back to Leningrad and told my academic advisor

there that Soviet trade union hierarchy was helping me, his whole attitude towards me changed. Then Yurgens called him up one day, and after that, I started getting interviews in Leningrad, too. Up until then, I would say there was no academic benefit from having gone, but once I made it to Moscow, the whole thing opened up.

Q: How does one approach interviews in authoritarian societies?

Ruble: This was interesting. The questions had to be submitted in writing, so I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what the questions would be. I never actually met workers. I only met trade union officials. I tried to pose questions that would get at deeper issues but would be framed in some kind of comfortable semi-official context. We could talk about labor turnover, which was a hot issue but had a legal dimension to it. Talked a lot about what would go into a labor contract. Factories had labor contracts and the officials I was meeting would be very proud of, I don't know, negotiating for some free soap or something. There were insights, but it was difficult. I never actually got an answer to anything like strikes or what are workers really upset about or what are the actual grievances, but I did get a sense of how trade union officials were partners of management. They viewed themselves as management, on the one hand. On the other hand, there was a certain pride in somehow stretching the space for workers. The interviews, I think, I ended up with about thirty of them at different levels. It humanized the project for me in ways that never would have happened if I hadn't had them, but I don't know that I learned anything. There were no deep, dark secrets—that's for sure.

Q: You said, strikes. Were there strikes in the Soviet Union?

Ruble: Yes, there were. There were major strikes in Ukraine, out east. We now know, there were minor strikes—not miner as in coal miners, but minor as in small—sort of flash incidents. There was the Soviet practice of storming where all the work would be done at the last minute, before planning norms had to be fulfilled. Basically, what happened is nobody did any work in the beginning of the period, so as you got closer to the actual planning deadline, workers were able to get some concessions out of management on what, in the Soviet context, were meaningful. The point I made in the dissertation, which became the book, was that without the right to strike, workers are ultimately subordinate. But there was a much bigger space for negotiation than we generally thought possible.

Q: You went back to Toronto, at some point. What was it like coming back?

Ruble: Sally had a job in Washington before we got married, and we ended up in a strange limbo with Canadian immigration. So she said, I'm going back to Washington where I can work. I went and for two years, I worked at the Library of Congress and would go back and forth to Toronto, once a month or so. It was interesting coming back. In some ways, the United States—after I had been in graduate school, in Toronto, in Canada, we'd been in the Soviet Union—the United States was strange. We went through culture shock. The most amusing is we didn't have a lot of money, so we rented a little room in Washington, which was maybe twice as big as the room in Leningrad. No American couple would have lived there, but it was nice. It was fine for us. But that was when I began to discover that my training at Toronto had been very heavy on political

theory. I had an unusual cast of professors. I guess, the one who became most widely known was Alan [D.] Bloom, who wrote a book called *The Closing of the American Mind*. I took classical political—actually, it was modern political thought. It was Plato and Thucydides. That says a lot. Bloom was a Straussian [Leo Strauss]. There were liberal political theorists at Toronto, so I had a really heavy dose of political theory. In comparison with American training, I was underexposed to quantitative political science, so part of coming back to the U.S. after all this was the discovery that political science was something different than I thought it was.

Yes, there were a lot of adjustments, but I had a great two years sitting in the Library of Congress, in the stacks, trying to figure out how I could find material to build around what I'd brought back with me, to get something that looked like a serious dissertation out of it. There was a group of us up in the stacks of the Library of Congress. This would have been '75, '76, '77. I'm still friends with those people. They were from all over. I don't think it really happens quite the same way anymore, but this was when you had carols in the stacks on D-deck. All of us became friends and formed a cohort.

Q: Right when we started, and you mentioned political science, you had said that you followed political science to get a better understanding of the world, but it didn't quite work out that way. You made another reference to the methodology of political science. Maybe now's a good moment for you to reflect on that.

Ruble: Yes, I think many North American and now international social science disciplines strive for and value a level of abstraction, which has value in and of itself, but in terms of

understanding actual political processes, is not as revealing as I think the discipline thinks it is. There is a disjuncture between abstract political science models in Russian experience. We had great models of democratization. They were applied in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, and you get all sorts of pernicious outcomes because they really bleached out a lot of context. For somebody like me, who was trying to figure out how things worked, for all the power of those methods, and they are very powerful, they came up short. They're very revealing if you want to predict outcomes within a relatively stable, enclosed system, but for the kind of society I was studying, it wasn't all that helpful. In fact, I think most people think I'm an historian. I found that I really was a contemporary historian and I've been very comfortable with that. Another one of the turning points is I didn't get an academic job in a political science department. My first job was with Fred Starr at the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center. I discovered you can have a really broad, rich, engaging intellectual life not getting closed in by discipline.

Q: What year did you join the Kennan Institute with Fred Starr?

Ruble: '77. He'd wanted to do a conference on industrial labor in the Soviet Union and he'd interviewed me for the IREX grant. He called up my advisor, Peter Solomon, said whatever happened to Blair? Peter said, he's living in Washington. So Fred called me up and I went in to talk to him. We worked on a conference. It ended up being the first edited volume I was involved in, *Industrial Labor in the U.S.SR*. I worked with a really wonderful economic historian, Arcadius Kahan, who was a Holocaust survivor.

That's how I ended up, the first time, at the Kennan Institute. Then Fred got a big grant to do a directory to the Soviet Academy of Sciences. I was there, so he hired me to do that. That's how I got my first job.

Q: You subsequently came back to Kennan in 1989, I think—

Ruble: Yes.

Q: —it was. What did you do in the interim?

Ruble: I'd been at the Kennan for about four a half years. Fred left and he was replaced by [Abbott] Tom Gleason, who taught at Brown [University]. Tom left and basically, the leadership of the Wilson Center let it be known that I'd gotten about as much as I was going to get out of the Wilson Center. The next job I went to, I was Deputy Director of something called the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. That organization lasted a long time, too, but it was a small group that had been set up by a number of university presidents to take funding from the intelligence community and run it through academic review processes. There were two components. There were competitive research contracts, all unclassified. It was the mechanism for supporting a major interview project with Soviet emigres living in the United States, so I did that for a couple years. Then the Soviet East European Research and Training Act of 1985 passed, so-called Title VIII. And that pumped in, initially, $5 million a year into the field. That amount grew to over $10 million, and now it's down to under $3 million. But since 1985—1983, actually, I think—it was supporting pass-through organizations, the National

Council, where I was, Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, IREX, Kennan Institute. When that passed, the Social Science Research Council here in New York was gearing up. It just seemed to be a bigger place, so there was chance to come back to New York, so I took it and came up to New York.

Q: What year was that?

Ruble: I came here in ‘85 . The act was passed in ‘83. It took that long for the money to get out the door.

Q: Tell me about your time with SSRC [Social Science Research Council].

Ruble: It was a great job. I was hired by a man named Ken [Kenneth] Prewitt. He eventually ran the census. I guess it was the 2000 census. He hired me and at the first staff meeting, he announced that he was leaving. I was at SSRC for a little over three years—or four years, basically. I think we had four presidents, so it was a revolving door. Ken had pulled together the most remarkable group of staff people I’ve ever worked with, who went on to be leaders of major institutions around the world. The European Parliament’s ombudsman was a colleague. A woman, who worked for the Ford Foundation, designed one of the major international fellowship programs. It was really just a remarkable group of staff people and even though Ken left, this group stayed. I ran the Russia program. Then the person who ran the Japan program, who now is a chaired professor at Harvard, Ted [C.] Bestor, and they asked me to babysit the Japan and Korea programs. That opened up Asia to me in a way that was startling and eventually I was able

to do some writing about Japan because of the contacts I made through SSRC. It was just a remarkable experience.

Q: How did it open up Asia to you?

Ruble: At the time, the programs were structured around research committees. The little Korea program had a committee of half dozen people. But the Japan committee was a major group of distinguished specialists, including some top Japanese social scientists. One in particular, Michio Muramatsu, was the dean of the Kyoto University Law School. Ted Bestor took me to Japan, which was absolutely the best introduction one could have. I went back and Muramatsu supported me as a protégé. He encouraged me to write what became the third of a book focusing on Osaka. He used his position to get me invitations to go to Kyoto. It was part of the world I didn't really know much at all and suddenly, I'm being introduced to it by these really remarkable, knowledgeable people. It really changed my life.

Q: How did your trips to Japan, for example, compare to your time in the Soviet Union?

Ruble: Going to the Soviet Union was very controlled. Just prior going to SSRC, I'd been the object of, what I think can best be called, a KGB [Soviet Union security agency] sting operation in Leningrad.

Q: Tell us about that.

Ruble: Well, it was when I was doing the Leningrad book, I was working at the National Council and I'd gotten an IREX grant. It was the usual story that, no, he can't come. He can't come and then IREX would negotiate. What was supposed to be, I think initially, six months got whittled down to a month. When I arrived in Leningrad in 1984, it was the height of a wave of anti-Americanism. It was pretty clear I wasn't wanted and it was pretty clear that I wasn't going to get any information about how Leningrad worked.

But the critical moment came. I was assigned a research assistant, who was with me all the time. Before I came, somebody I'd met my first time in Leningrad, who had emigrated to the States, went on to have a distinguished career in the U.S. after earning a Columbia University Ph.D. in sociology. His mother was still living in Leningrad and he had no way to communicate with her. She was sick and she needed some medicine, so he asked me to take [her] some medicine. I arrived in the middle of February and the second day, I arranged to meet this guy's mom and deliver the medicine on the street, the typical kind of story. Then, about two weeks later, my research assistant invited me to go to a banya, a bath house. And all sorts of alarms should've gone off. but anyway, it turned out that the banya wasn't just a normal banya. It was in an Intourist hotel, which should have raised other signals. It's all kind of shoddy stuff. He started plying me with alcohol and he said, I have a proposition for you. He said, I know you really need this secret data to write your book and I'll give you the secret data, if you tell—and he mentioned my friend in the States whose mother I'd seen—him he has to publish something I'm going to send back with you.

I stayed awake all night and went right to the American consulate the next morning. I still had ten days left. I never saw that assistant again. I got some interviews. There was a very dramatic moment where I was invited to lecture about American cities and I lectured about yuppies. It was a new concept then. It was the Institute of Socioeconomic Problems. I would go in and I wouldn't see anybody, but for that lecture, the room was packed. It was clearly a kind of moment. When it came time to leave, somebody from the academy said, well, your flight is at something like eleven o'clock in the morning. We'll pick you up at 7:00. Why? Remember, this is Leningrad. There's no traffic. When I got to the airport it was clear. They just ripped everything apart and I'd brought some xeroxes in from the Leningrad newspaper, the Leningradskaya Pravda, that I subscribed to at home. They were confiscated. Then the U.S. government filed a protest. I was one of three incidents that caused a travel advisory to be placed against Leningrad . So I had all of that and then later, I was told by a Soviet diplomat that maybe I shouldn't go back to Leningrad, but I could go to Moscow. So to go to Japan, which was an open, free society. I mean—culturally, obviously, very different. But it was such a pleasure compared to what would happen when I'd go to Leningrad or go to Russia, where I had to be really conscious of everybody I spoke to.

By the way, a footnote on that. I won't mention the name, but there was a woman, who became a rather prominent Soviet, post-Soviet politician, who admitted to me that her husband had worked at that institute and had been given a file about me and asked to figure out if I was a spy or not. Of course, there could only be one answer in so far as the authorities were concerned.

Q: Well, very much appreciate that story. You're at a SSRC, now. I believe, when we were talking earlier, one of the things that you had mentioned to me was that that is when you met Deana Arsenian [Carnegie Corporation of New York Vice President, International Program and Program Director, Russia and Eurasia].

Ruble: Yes.

Q: You worked on a project together.

Ruble: I've tried to reconstruct the exact sequence of events and I don't have it quite right. I know she was a graduate student at Columbia and she was starting to work at Carnegie. I had finished the book, *Leningrad* [*Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City*]. I finished the research, but it hadn't been published yet. A group of us, Tim Colton—who I've already mentioned—from Harvard [University], Jeff [W.] Hahn from Villanova [University], Jerry [F.] Hough from Duke [University], we were talking about— Perestroika [political movement] was beginning—wouldn't it be really interesting to do and in-depth study of a Russian provincial city, a kind of *Who Governs*, the famous [Robert A.] Dahl book. Hahn was spending time at the juridical faculty in Moscow. He met a number of people and he raised the idea with them. This produced what became a four to five year study of the city of Yaroslavl [Russia] and it was funded by Carnegie. The first meetings were in 1990 so we actually tracked the city through the Soviet collapse. One of the really smart things about the project—Hahn did a lot of public opinion surveys. Jerry Hough did a lot of work on managers. I ended up doing work on city planning. But we were able to bring in a number of graduate students, who were writing dissertations.

There's probably a bookcase full of books that came out of that project, in some cases dissertations, in other cases books we wrote. It was a comprehensive project.

Q: What year did the project start?

Ruble: I think the idea emerged in '89, but it really started in '90 and continued to '94, '95, something like that. Then there was a research team, from Moscow State [University], that came to the States to study American local government.

Q: Why Yaroslavl?

Ruble: It was chosen for us by the Central Committee [administrative body of communist parties]. Again, the classic story, we go out there and nobody really bothered to tell them we were coming till the day before we arrived. We had asked for a typical, medium sized, provincial city, within reasonable distance of Moscow.

It turned out a very good choice. But later, one of the reasons why we found out it was chosen is, first, it was an open city. It was easily accessible from Moscow. But it also had a relatively diverse economy so it didn't have a lot of secret industries. It was a more open place. I think it was, actually, a very good choice, but it was made for us by authorities in Moscow.

Q: What was Deana's role in that project?

Ruble: She became the program officer, here, for it. The grant, eventually, was run through Villanova. Because I was at SSRC down the street, I worked with Deana on a lot of the details of the reporting and so on.

Q: What were some of the outcomes of the project?

Ruble: I think the biggest outcome would have been the scholarly output. I wrote a book. Hahn wrote a book. A number of dissertations, Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, Beth [A.] Mitchneck, Susan Lehmann, Laura Jewett all had major components of their dissertations focusing on Yaroslavl, different aspects. All that came out. There were other projects as well. Then the Russians, actually, used it as an opportunity to do some writing about American local government. So it was the academic output, I think, that was the most important.

Q: Now, one of the other things that you've worked on, in a very major way, as far as I can tell, that is also a Carnegie funded project, are the CASEs [Council for Advancement and Support of Education].

Ruble: Right.

Q: Which ended up being part of the HEFSU program, the Higher Education in the Former Soviet Union. We're going to talk in depth, in our next session about that, but I thought that this would also be a good opportunity for us to get a sense of some of the intricacies of the CASEs,

the evolution, the challenges, the successes and so on. It's an open-ended question to you that you can take where you like.

Ruble: It was an enormous undertaking and with any undertaking of that scale and ambition, it evolved over time. It, I think, had demonstrable successes and probably there are aspects that could have been done better. I think we're going to get into greater detail, how it came about. The original conception that several of us had was very similar to the Social Science Research Council model of creating intermediaries among existing institutions, because it had become clear that there weren't a lot of horizontal ties among Russian social scientists. Our original notion evolved into more of a support program for institutions of higher education. That was one change, and then there was a change within that, over time. There had been a lot of research support for individual scholars in the early part of the program that eventually evolved into a series of more integrated joint research projects. I think the whole enterprise—and this was its strength. It responded to the changes in the Russian environment. In '99, when we first started talking about it, was right after the financial collapse of '98. It was clear just getting money to Russian scholars was important. By the time the project ended—well, I guess officially it ended in 2013, this year, or at the end of 2012—Russian universities had become wealthy. What could be done and what should be done changed dramatically—the whole landscape was dramatically different by the end. I think the project had to struggle with balancing different institutional interests, different conceptions about what should happen, plus the evolving reality on the ground in Russia, and the changes in U.S.-Russian relations. It was all quite dynamic.

Q: There are a lot of pieces in this quite important program. As far as I understand it, one of the things that you did, with a couple colleagues at Kennan Institute, was to write one of the concept papers or evaluations that would lead into this. I think MacArthur [Foundation] funded it—

Ruble: Right.

Q: —if I'm correct.

Ruble: MacArthur and Carnegie may have completely different recollections. But my recollection is that MacArthur had taken a lead on a program supporting laboratories at Russian universities in the natural sciences. There was an interest in having a parallel project in the social sciences. Because MacArthur wanted Carnegie involvement in that project, they agreed to have Carnegie take the lead in the social science project side of this. But in the initial conversations, they weren't quite sure how to do it, so they asked Susan Bronson, who was, at the time, at the Social Research Council, and me to do a needs assessment. Obviously, they thought of me not just because it wasn't just that I had been at Kennan. I think the whole SSRC connection was important too. I don't know how much of this detail you want me to get into now.

Q: It's entirely up to you. As much as you think is important.

Ruble: Basically, the initial plan was Susan and I were going to do the assessment. I think, maybe, initially, the money for that was going to go through SSRC. But Susan left SSRC, and we had a planning meeting in Chicago, and would not be available to travel to Russia. As Susan

wasn't going to be going to Russia and the Ukraine, I asked my then deputy director at Kennan, Nancy [E.] Popson to join our team. The three of us sat down and I would say, in the space of an afternoon in Washington, sketched out what we thought should happen. Again, the model we all had in our minds was some version of an SSRC program, of intermediate councils that would provide a horizontal network for scholars. Then Nancy and I and John [W.] Slocum, from MacArthur, and a couple people from here went off on trips around the Soviet Union, interviewing Russian social scientists, asking them what they thought was necessary. We hired somebody from Indiana University to go travel about Central Asia and talk to people in there. All these factors were fed into the report that we eventually presented to both foundations.

There were the interviews. There was a presentation of our concept here at Carnegie, before a pretty distinguished group of people who had been funded by MacArthur and Carnegie over the years. Nancy and I provided a lot of the material and Susan did a lot of the drafting of the report. We turned that report in, in, I want to say, 1999. What we concluded is that there was a middle ground between the national policies and local institutional policies, there was a middle ground for the post-Soviet social scientists to interact with one another, and that there was a need to create these kinds of middle institutions. We proposed that that could be done through councils, through journals, through associations. It could be done around thematic-based centers. But we didn't really specify where they would be.

At some point, Deana started speaking with Andrey [V.] Kortunov. And they came up with the notion of basing these at Russian universities. There would be another, slightly different effort, a spin off effort in the Caucasus. And the western CASE ended up being associated with a

Belorussian university. Our basic concept was organizations such as the Wilson Center, SSRC, the American Council on Learned Societies [ACLS], in very fragmented, intellectual, institutional environments provide the net that binds people together and that those transmission institutions didn't really exist in the post-Soviet space.

Q: How challenging was this to set up in the first couple of years?

Ruble: Oh, it was a huge, huge project. A number of decisions were made along the way, but the biggest one was the decision that Carnegie made that the project should be done in cooperation with this Ministry of Education. There is a school of thought that the CASE project was a failure, because it didn't focus on individual scholars, but became tied into the Ministry of Education. I would argue just the opposite—that the connection with the Ministry gave institutional legitimacy and sustainability that a lot of the other programs haven't had. There were very long, intense discussions about how to select the universities, once it was decided universities would be the base. We ended up having three competitions among Russian institutions and my recollection is there was an international board that was set up, that Kennan was the secretariat for and was funded by MacArthur and Carnegie. Early on, Ford had been involved and the operator was, first, the Moscow Public Science Foundation and then the ISE Center, which was an NGO [Non-Governmental Organization] in Russia. Andrey Kortunov as the central Russian figure in the program throughout. There were lots of really intense conversations, discussions. We had board meetings. We'd vote. The board was always divided on specific outcomes.

Q: How so? What's a good example of that?

Ruble: Well, the biggest division I think is actually interesting. It's interesting, because the division was not between Russians and Americans. It was really over philosophy. Once we got to the point that we knew that these were going to be competitive grants and we opened it up, and I don't remember the exact numbers, but there were a couple dozen applications or more from Russian universities. We met to decide. There ended up being nine, and I think we gave out five and then three and then one in the different competitions. The basic division was between those who argued—you had to bet on the strong. The centers had to end up at well-established, resource-rich institutions, so that they could be sustained. Versus those—and this was the side I was on—who were arguing, you had to take a look at the intellectual energy of a given proposal. You should look for surprises out there and not just at the established schools. In the end, we had one surprise institution that got a grant, really, on the intellectual power of the proposal. I have to say, it was not the most successful CASE, because they didn't have the institutional resources to really carry it forward. I recall at least one major Russian university that did not get funded, because the proposal really wasn't very good, but most were a mix.

Q: The first one that you mentioned, the one that was unusual, very interesting, which one was that?

Ruble: It was Novgorod [Russia].

Q: Novgorod.

Ruble: We had very intense discussions and we voted. The board voted and it was a divided vote on our selections. It was a real philosophical difference and it was, again, there were Russians and Americans on both sides, which was what made it interesting. It was the classic dilemma of do you bet on the strong on do bet on the interesting?

Q: How did that argument fall? Did that cut across the Russian and American lines?

Ruble: Yes, I think the ministry, in particular, wanted to bet on strong institutions. The board, there was a representative from MacArthur. There was a representative from Carnegie. There was a representative of, what was then, the Moscow Public Science Foundation. Then there were one or two academics from both countries, and the Kennan Institute. The two primary funders divided on this. One came out one way. One came out another way. The Russians divided and in the end, I think the general predisposition of the group was to bet on the strong, but there was this one exception that was made.

Q: I read somewhere that Kennan Institute, as the switchboard of sorts of the program, had to do a lot of footwork in the first couple of years to make sure that these things got up and running. Do you have any stories from that time period?

Ruble: There was just a lot of work. How to get the money transferred, the accounting. We had lots of board meetings. We tried to, more or less, to alternate them between Russia and the U.S. There was one meeting in London and I think there may have been another meeting there.

Basically, we went back and forth and there was lot of detail in this sort of work, a lot of reporting. Not very interesting, just a slog.

Q: One of the other things that I've come across, in talking to people about the CASE program and then also doing a lot of research into them, is the following. Correct me if I'm wrong. There seem to have been different methodologies or phases in their evolutions where, in certain periods, they would work on things that they were, as CASEs, in a particular university, city, and region, more interested in. Other times, when they'd get embedded in so-called network projects, where they'd all work together, in coordination with the ISE Center in Moscow—ISE stands for Information, Science, Education Center. Could you speak to that evolution?

Ruble: My suspicion is we all had several different concepts of what this would be. My concept was that these would become hubs for regional networks. In reality—and this is not to criticize Russian universities, the same thing would have happened in American universities—the universities and their faculties, where these were centered, basically, used it, first and foremost, to do work that they were doing anyway. I think some made more efforts than others to reach out to broaden networks. There was academic tribalism at work, as became obvious fairly early on. One of the first efforts to break it down was a very ambitious program that ISE Center ran of individual research grants. In the first couple of years, a lot of good scholars were supported, but I think it was ultimately unsatisfying, in part, because by then, the Russian economy had turned around. There was a sense that there was enough money around for researchers, in part because the researchers weren't really connecting to the institutions of the CASEs. It was decided to try to build some integrative, broad scale, joint research projects that would bring the CASEs

together. That went on for a while, too. Then, towards the end, there was a sorting out. It was clear that, say, Novgorod had failed. To my mind, the most successful was the Yekaterinburg [Russia] and the Center on Tolerance.

The people running that center had established themselves as European thought leaders on issues of tolerance, so there exactly what I thought should happen did. Then there was a range in between. I think, in the end, it became even harder—although Andrey Kortunov is really doing this part of it—for Andrey's team do to keep the network projects going. It went through ebbs and cycles.

Q: How do you balance in something like this, given that it has this really interesting structure? It's got an American secretariat. It's got the ISE Center, which is overseeing certain things. The CASEs have their own interests and dynamics. How do you keep it democratic but have it work at the same time?

Ruble: Well, I don't know. It's hard. I think one decision we made at Kennan is that Russians were running the project. Our job was to coordinate the oversight, by the funders and by the international governing board, but, fundamentally, on a day in and day out basis, this was going to be a Russian project, to be run by Russians and ISE Center was going to run it. We focused attention on being sure the reporting procedures were followed. There were lots of audits and all that kind of stuff, but we made the decision that we weren't going to be running anything on a daily basis. I would like to think that that was important because it meant that there really was just one operational center for the project, which was ISE Center. Now, they had their own

relationship with the Ministry of Education. I'm sure there were balancing acts that I don't even know about between ISE Center and the Russian Ministry and the universities. The project couldn't have worked if too many of the participants thought that they were operationally in charge. There had to be one player in charge, and then we would all help, review, provide oversight, encouragement. It had to become Andrey's show, and I think that's pretty much how it was run.

Q: Why did Novgorod fail, in your estimation?

Ruble: It was a weak university, which had just been formed. The people who wrote the intellectually stimulating proposal left pretty early in the game. There wasn't anybody else really committed to taking it on. I think, in the end, I don't think the people in Novgorod really valued the program as an opportunity to establish themselves internationally. My sense is they saw it as a pot of money, but they never really capitalized on the opportunity that was given to them. I'm sure there's a leadership dimension here, but I think it was also, in part, that the university was too new. It didn't have a major library. It didn't have a lot of the resources that one would have needed. And ultimately, it didn't have enough scholars to carry it through. I think the more successful examples, again, Yekaterinburg, you had a number of different, significant scholars involved, who—they kind of traded off running the program. One went and taught in Italy for a while and came back. But there were others—It was more than just the pet project of one person. I think Novgorod just didn't have that institutional strength.

Q: What did you, personally, learn from, I suppose, twelve years of this project?

Ruble: A lot. It gave me a respect for anybody who accomplishes anything, quite frankly. It also made me understand how easy it is for people on the outside to criticize ventures because there are critics out there. The money should've gone to individual scholars, they argued. All this money was wasted because it went to institutions, which had to be corrupted because they were part of the official system. So the money would have been much better spent just supporting individual scholars.

Q: Was this criticism public or was it from stakeholders?

Ruble: It was from stakeholders. It was also public. Stephen Kotkin at Princeton, wrote a highly critical report, I think. Steve [L.] Solnick and others, who were then at the Ford Foundation, and others were very critical of the project. Some people at ACLS. I guess the biggest lesson I learned is, when you're dealing with solving a complex problem, there are different approaches. And each of those approaches is valid in a different kind of way. They were thinking about, how do we intellectually transform Russian social science? This project was really more, how do you provide institutional support structure to allow those people, who are going to transform Russian social science, to do so? I think, depending on how you approach it, you end up with very different evaluation on whether or not supporting Russian universities through the Ministry of Education was a good thing or not. That's the fundamental division. What I learned is, yes, there's no clear cut answer in a project this scale. Was it a success or not?

Q: What discussions did you, at Kennan Institute or with Carnegie Corporation, have about the public criticisms?

Ruble: We provided a platform, at Kennan, for Kotkin to give his report. I think we were aware of it and all the major players just assumed that this was something that was going to happen. It happened and we looked at it, and there were smart people who were leveling the criticism. I don't know how Andrey or Deana would answer this. For me it was, that's nice, but that's not what we were trying to do. As I said, we gave a platform for Kotkin and Solnick to speak. It's out there. I think these are the kinds of things that people can honestly disagree about, because I think they actually were rooted in fundamentally different conceptions of how you bring about change.

Q: This will be my last question for this session, and it's perhaps too difficult, but I'll ask it anyway. I can ask it again in the second session if you feel that it's a fair question. Can you envision what a world without the CASEs would be like? In their context, I mean.

Ruble: I think another way of thinking about the question is, what did the CASEs accomplish? I think what the CASEs accomplished was that they introduced a way of thinking about institutions of higher learning, in which universities are tied to research. There's a value placed on interdisciplinarity, and there's a value placed on cooperation. Those three dimensions were advanced by the CASE project. There is ministerial support for the notion of this kind of collaborative research. Russian universities are stumbling towards a deeper commitment to research and that research needs to be collaborative. There were two kinds of successes. There were the Kaliningrads [Russia] and the Vladivostoks [Russia] where, I think, the universities

became more open than they ever had been to regional networks. There is the very strong case of Yekaterinburg, which the CASEs helped the university position itself to become one of the major federal research universities. It wasn't all, but I think they definitely advanced possibilities and the prospects for the social sciences and humanities at this new federal university, not just to be an add-on to the natural sciences but actually have some stature and capacity of their own. I think we need a lot more time to figure out what's going to happen, but I think those would the successes.

Q: That that's a good point to close this session. We'll pick up on the CASEs and get much more into their history and evolution as well as a number of other issues about Russia, today. Russia, today, as in the calendar day today, not the—

Ruble: Right.

Q: [Laughs] Thank you, very much. We'll pick up a little bit later, today.

Ruble: Okay.

[END OF SESSION]

3PM | Session Two (video)

Interviewee: Blair Ruble | Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: George Gavrilis | Date: June 6, 2013

Q: This is George Gavrilis, and I'm here with Blair Ruble for the Carnegie Corporation of New York Oral History Project. Good afternoon, Blair.

Ruble: Good afternoon.

Q: Thank you for sitting down with us for this session, as well. We met earlier today. And we covered a number of subjects. One of the things that I neglected to ask you about was the story of how you came to be director of the Kennan Institute. So please, go ahead and tell us that story.

Ruble: I had been working at the Social Science Research Council in New York and my first postdoctoral job was at the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center. I was there for four and a half years and left. We moved to New York for me to take the SSRC job and never thought we'd go back to Washington. Then the directorship of the Kennan Institute became vacant. A couple people urged me to apply and I did. This was in 1988 into 1989. It was the time of Perestroika, and [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev was at the height of his power and authority. The sense was that there was a new generation coming to power in the Soviet Union, and maybe, the Kennan Institution should have a director who was a little bit younger than the previous directors

had been, so as to reflect a generational change. So I went through all the interviews and got the job. It was something I never expected.

Q: What were your first few years like there?

Ruble: It was incredible. Being director of the Kennan Institute at that particular moment may have been the best job in the world for anybody in my field. Every day was a headline day. All sorts of opportunities for collaboration opened up that we never thought were possible before. In retrospect, I'm very proud of the way I was able to integrate Soviets and Russians and later, Ukrainians, into the programming on an equal basis. It started out by integrating speakers from the Soviet Union, then the scholars program dramatically expanded. Our philosophy was that every scholar was the same. This was a time when a lot of American interaction was trying to give fraternal assistance to Russians and Ukrainians on how to make it into our league, as it were. We just operated under the assumption that the people who were coming were our equals. Within a couple years, we had established an atmosphere in which everybody at the institution at a given moment—we had scholars rotating in and out—everyone felt as if they were equal. I think that that probably is my greatest achievement, making that happen.

Q: We're going to talk towards the later part of this interview about Russia and the current situation there—politics and everything. Give us a sense of what Russia was like in those initial years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Ruble: I think trying to figure out—how to explain what Russia is like is really perilous, because everybody has different memories. It was very chaotic. It was poor. It was violent. It was a place that was stumbling towards trying to figure out who it was. Russians were very proud of the fact that they had been a great superpower and had made, from their point of view, the democratic transition happen. You had Americans who felt we had won the Cold War and we had everything to do with what happened and the Russians had little to do. There were two moments—at the time, I was involved in a multi-year project examining politics in the provincial city of Yaroslavl. There were two moments which have stuck with me.

One would have been sometime probably in 1992. I went in to see a pretty senior local political figure and he said, you know, Blair, I just had a twenty five year-old American in here telling me how I should do my job—and this person, again, was a senior official. He had run a major factory. He said, “It’s as if I’m in kindergarten, and I actually know how to do things.” That misfit between the missionary zeal of the West and the sense of being denigrated that the Russians felt—I think that became important dynamic which is still with us today. It was not very well understood here. The other moment was about the same time—I was taking a train back from Yaroslavl to Moscow. It was a very early morning train and I climbed up on the upper bunk and I stayed there for the entire trip. There were a couple of local people down below. It was, from what I could discern, a woman who was a schoolteacher and a man who worked in the factory with her husband. And they were just talking about how things worked. How was it that this train was still running? What I got out of that—I guess they were aware I was there, but they just ignored me. The experience was a window on what happens when societies collapse. The biggest lesson I took out of that was that there’s a great deal of inertia—that people keep doing

things because they've always done them—and out of that inertia, the trains run. The society moves on. There was a sense of frustration, of anger, of incomprehension. You had a sense that somehow, we all had to make this work together.

I remember the schoolteacher saying, well, they haven't paid me for months. But I go to school, because what else am I supposed to do? And it was an insight, I think, into traumatic social change-- that people can't imagine that the world has come to an end, so they keep acting as if it still is there. So those are two things I remember which cast a little bit a light on your question, I think—what was Russia like?

Q: The story you just told about the woman wondering how things work is interesting and it makes me want to ask you a question. Why do the escalators not work on the D.C. Metro, but they seem to work in the metro systems in the former Soviet Union?

Ruble: The issue of non-working escalators in Washington has to do with many factors. Primarily, I think, it's the American public policy pattern of trying to do too much on the cheap and then not spending the money on maintenance. The escalators work in Russian metro systems even though these are escalators from the middle part of the twentieth century, because technologically, they're pretty basic. There are not a lot of bells and whistles, so there are fewer things that can go wrong. There are emergency teams that are dispatched to fix escalators. They spend money on maintenance and they spend money on being sure that they work. The irony, of course, is we pride ourselves on how we care about how things work. It's the Russians who don't care about their citizens. But in fact, if you compare the escalators in the Washington and

Moscow metro, it's just the opposite. The people running the Moscow metro system want those escalators to work, because it's important for the passengers, and the people running the Washington ones just don't care.

Q: I threw you a bit of a curve ball with that question. Thank you for catching it. I want to shift gears just a little bit and talk about the other aspect of the Kennan Institute, which is to inform policymakers in Washington, as well, and to have that connection with them. Could you give us a sense in the way that you just gave us a sense of what Russia was like, what was Washington like at the time? What were your discussions and connections with policymakers like on Russia and the former Soviet Union in the 1990s?

Ruble: When I first went down from New York to Washington, Bush [George Herbert Walker Bush] was president, Gorbachev was president—Bush the elder was president. The discussion over whether or not Gorbachev was for real, and how much do we have to back Gorbachev? There were great discussions about this and we bet on Gorbachev for a long time—maybe too long. But in fairness to the decision makers, the issue had to do with the nuclear weapons and who's going to control them. If Gorbachev doesn't control them, is there anybody to control them? I think it was a moment of passionate differences of opinion that seemed to matter. There were decision makers in the State Department, and Congress periodically would call in the local experts. Maybe it was too much the usual suspects. There were numbers of briefings. There were a number of opportunities to talk to decision makers. Who knows? Maybe they even listened to some extent.

I think what happened once the Soviet Union collapsed, it was a different time. It was a different administration. It was the Clinton administration, which acted with great certainty that they knew what was best for Russia. I remember a series of discussions about NATO expansion and a number of Russian specialists in town said, this isn't going to sit well with Russians. Basically, people stopped being invited for consultations. I think that was the first moment I noticed what became a pattern, which is that more and more policymakers in Washington know what they know and they don't want to bother to talk to people who might disagree with them. I think there's been an impoverishment of American public policy. I first noticed it around '92, '93. And I guess the pivotal moment came with the October '93 shootout at the Russian parliament, when within a few weeks, I started talking to Russian visitors, all of whom complained and said, how would you like it if tanks rolled down shot up Congress? Yet, everybody in Washington was absolutely convinced that this was the best thing that happened—that it created the opportunity for a major breakthrough. There was no awareness of the bitterness that those events caused among a lot of people who were actually pro-democratic. No one wanted to hear an alternative point of view. That pattern of not listening to people you disagree with has just become more and more entrenched.

Q: That leads up to the late '90s, which is when one of the things that the Kennan Institute did while you were director was to collaborate with the Carnegie Corporation and the MacArthur Foundation on what came to be known as the CASEs under the auspices of the Higher Education in the Former Soviet Union Program. One of the things that we'd very much like to have you do in this interview is to tell us about the making of the CASEs and the story of the CASEs. So it's an open ended invitation.

Ruble: Well, to tie it to what we were just talking about, there were a number of U.S. government programs engaging Russia. But the Carnegie Corporation and the MacArthur Foundation were interested in trying to engage with the Russian academic community. I think this was driven in part by Vartan Gregorian's commitment to the Russian intelligentsia, and in part by Vic [Victor] Rabinowitch, who was the vice president at MacArthur—his deep commitment to Russian science. You had important philanthropic leaders who had resources and they wanted to engage this new Russia on Russia's terms, in their own terms, outside of the government structure. So the question became how can you do that in a way that would advance the Soviet intelligentsia, the Russian intelligentsia, post-Soviet intelligentsia, and advance Russian science? I'm not sure how independently, but at some point, they came together with the notion of supporting research at Russian universities. MacArthur had taken the lead in the natural sciences and Carnegie became the primary mover in the social sciences. That was the point at which a couple of us were invited to do a needs assessment, which eventually led to the specific program of the CASEs. The story really begins with Vartan and with Victor in these philanthropic organizations—people with a commitment and the resources to engage Russia in a different way than had been the case before.

Q: Kennan Institute was asked to do a needs assessment, I believe. Can you tell me about that?

Ruble: Yes. I'd done some work with Carnegie Corporation on the project I mentioned briefly, about Yaroslavl and therefore, I knew the people here. Both MacArthur and Carnegie knew me and knew others who had been at the Social Science Research Council, especially Susan

Bronson. They invited Susan and me to conduct a needs assessment. I remember very vividly, because there was the first planning meeting in Chicago and I hadn't seen Susan in a while. I see her and we sit down. She explained that she could not travel. We needed the additional work of someone who could travel. So I invited Nancy Popson, who was my deputy director at Kennan, to be involved. Nancy and I did a lot of the field interviews in Russia and the Ukraine. We hired another specialist to go to Central Asia.

Susan really wrote the report. It was a very rich and very interesting time. We did some interviews with—I remember John Slocum from MacArthur participating in the interviews, particularly in the Ukraine. Based on Susan's contacts and our contacts and the interviews, we tried to come up with a model moving forward. That model, in fact, can be thought of as either mini-Kennan Institute or Social Science Research Council Project. The idea was to try to create an institution that wouldn't bleed resources, but would enhance lateral contact and cooperation among Russian social scientists. The idea was to preserve a middle ground which would encourage cross disciplinary, cross institutional contacts. Eventually, we submitted the report. Carnegie and MacArthur came up with a more institutionally oriented CASE program.

Q: Now, the needs assessment that you did is a public document, so listeners can certainly access that and read that.

Ruble: Absolutely.

Q: But do give us—

Ruble: If they do, I think the report is about twenty, twenty-five pages of a 400 page document—the really rich material is found in the interviews we conducted with a remarkable range of social scientists in the region. Listeners who are interested in this project should go spend time with those interviews.

Q: Give us a sense, since you've brought it up, of what some of the atmospherics of the interviews were like. How challenging was the situation you were facing in the higher education and research sector?

Ruble: The problems were challenging, but the interviews weren't really challenging at all. This was '99 coming out of the financial crisis in Russia and the spillover effects in the Ukraine. I didn't do the Central Asian interviews, so maybe I won't comment on those. I think among the three of us—Nancy, Susan, myself—plus Deana Arsenian here at Carnegie, John Slocum at MacArthur, Tatiana Zhdanova [phonetic], who ran the Moscow office at MacArthur—we were able to put together a pretty impressive list of forty, fifty people to be interviewed representing different disciplines, different institutional positions, different ideological positions, different academic orientations. This was a time when people just wanted to talk, because they had been hurt so badly by the financial collapse of 1998. People were full of ideas. The interviews turned into conversations. I remember in Ukraine, they were a more structured. We had an hour, and people came into the Kennan Institute office in Kiev. We conducted interviews over two days. John Slocum, Nancy Popson and I did most of the Moscow, Saint Petersburg interviews, and they were much more conversational. But people wanted to say what they needed and they

wanted to try to tell an American that you can't keep doing it the way you were doing it earlier in the '90s, so the interviews weren't difficult at all. The concept—once it became clear that what people were talking about had to do with their own professional isolation, then given the fact that Susan and I had worked at SSRC, that kind of model immediately came to mind—of creating bridging mechanisms. As I recall, Susan, Nancy, and I sat down for an afternoon and sketched out the general form of what the CASEs became. In that sense—conceptually—it wasn't difficult. It was all in the execution.

Q: What is a bridging mechanism, exactly?

Ruble: We had thought about associations, multi-disciplinary research groups, which could be international or wouldn't be. We talked about journals. We talked about discussion clubs. Interestingly, for what happened, we didn't really think about interdisciplinary centers in universities. We talked to a lot of people in the academies of sciences and we were talking about ways in which you get university people and academy people to work. So mechanisms that encourage people to cooperate in a focused way—those were the kinds of things we were looking at.

Q: What happened after the needs assessment?

Ruble: We turned it in and there was a period of—well, for us, it was silent. So clearly, MacArthur and Carnegie were working on it. A few months passed—maybe as much as a half year and we were approached by Deana Arsenian here at Carnegie Corporation. They had taken

the idea of the bridging function and translated it into interdisciplinary topical centers at provincial Russian universities. This parallelled the initiative of the national sciences that MacArthur was running supported labs. Essentially, they wanted to create social science labs. They had agreed that the initiative should be run through the Ministry of Education, which put the Academy of Science scholars off the table—and that they would focus first on Russia, on Russia outside of Moscow. Eventually, there was a CASE for the Caucasus region and a CASE for the Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus. It was housed in Belarus, but that was a little bit down the road. So the Foundations came back to us with this notion of these interdisciplinary centers at universities.

Q: What was your role or the Kennan Institute's role in the first couple years?

Ruble: The way the structure evolved, we were a kind of international secretariat. We were the home of an international advisory board. We not only got the money to the Russian operator, which was first the Moscow Public Science Foundation, and then it became, ISE Center, an NGO. We had the administrative oversight for the project, which was our main activity for the first couple years, until our collective decisions took effect. The international advisory board was very active and we were the organizer of what they did.

Q: What were some of the first CASEs that were set up?

Ruble: The first thing that happened is that we agreed there had to be inter-regional competitions in Russia, so the first effort was to design open competition. My recollection may not be precisely correct on this, but my sense was in the first competition, we had somewhere around forty, fifty applications. It was very inspiring, because there were lots of really creative applications. We picked the first five, I think, but there were eventually nine. Then the second competition, we picked another two or three. Then there was a third competition where we picked one. The selection process was very competitive. There was a fundamental philosophical divide within the advisory council between betting on the strong—betting on established institutions, as opposed to betting on the newcomers, which had perhaps a more innovative proposal. We went back and forth about that and in the end, there was one innovative proposal from a lesser known university in particular that got funded, Novgorod. Not every one of the usual suspects got funded. It was a process. The Ministry of Education was very much involved. They were on the committee. The rector of Saint Petersburg University was on the committee—representatives of the funders, a couple of American academics. But what was interesting is that philosophical divide wasn't Russian versus American, there were Russian and American members on both sides of that discussion.

Q: What was your view?

Ruble: I was very much of the opinion that we had to go by the file that came in and look for the most interesting proposals. In retrospect, how it played out, I was probably naive about that, but I still feel there should be openness in this process for newcomers to get to the table.

Q: You mentioned that the one interesting case that had a very innovative proposal but was not one of the strongest universities was Novgorod. For somebody that's listening to this interview that may not know much about higher education in Russia, what should they know about the university?

Ruble: Novgorod was a new university. They had been a pedagogical university—a small, so-called classical humanities university. There had been a couple of technical schools. At the time, there was a very innovative regional administration in Novgorod that was trying to position Novgorod—and for a while, it was the darling of the Western technical assistance community—position it as a Western-oriented region. The amalgamation of the university was part of Governor [Mikhail] Prusak's vision, but there were some structural problems. One, it was a new university, so it didn't really have a lot of resources. It was very much in the shadow of Saint Petersburg. It's not very far from Saint Petersburg. My recollection—and I may not be completely accurate on this—but my recollections is that the people who submitted the proposal had moved on to Saint Petersburg or someplace else even before the CASE was up and running. It turned out to be weak institution and those weaknesses eventually undercut its ability to live up to the goals of the program.

Q: Of those early first batch applications, do you recall some of the ideas that didn't make it through?

Ruble: I don't remember the specific ideas but what I do remember—here we were. This would already have been about 2000, 2001, so we're a decade out from the collapse of the Soviet

Union. Here were a group of proposals from all sorts of institutions—small, isolated institutions, almost every one of which was organized around scholars who spent time in the West and were fully conversant with Western social science methodologies and discourse. I thought that was impressive and remarkable—that in such a short time, Russia had produced this cadre of people who really could hold their own internationally. What I remember about a lot of the proposals is that there would be one or two people who had been some place in the U.S. or in Europe, had gone back to regional city X at the University and wanted to try to build upon their international experience.

Part of the story of Russian higher education is as you moved into the Putin years, there was less and less space for these kinds of people, particularly at smaller universities, and they ended up being shunned to the side. This was a moment when they were full of enthusiasm and it was impressive. What I remember more than anything was just how, in the most remote institutions, in the most remote regions, there were proposals coming in from people who had mastered Western social science. I don't remember the specifics of the proposals in terms of topic areas, but they would have been the kinds of things that were more or less fashionable in social science at the time.

Q: What does a CASE look like, physically or institutionally?

Ruble: Physically the ones that I visited were contained in a set of rooms. There was a place, an office, which had a library, because part of the initial concept was to build a library with a reading room that scholars within a given region would come and use. Across Russia, the hope

was that the Yekaterinburg Center on Tolerance would become a center for all of Russia on tolerance studies, for example, so there was a physical place with a library with the director and an assistant. That was the core package. Then they were supposed to work on activities which promoted research on a thematic area, such as tolerance or, in the case of Vladivostok, Russia in the Far East; in the case of Kaliningrad, Russia in Europe. These were big subjects which were given to interdisciplinary study and the CASEs were supposed to become the centers linking together scholars. I think in the very beginning, we hoped that scholars from across Russia might get grants and come and travel and be at these places. I don't think it worked out that way, but that was the conception—that there would be a place, and the place would have a set of activities that would link people together.

Q: Tell me about the ISE Center and its role.

Ruble: The ISE Center was a spin-off of the Moscow Public Science Foundation. Andrey Kortunov probably figured out that he needed a program that was focused solely on the CASEs. He moved the grant to a new NGO which had the administrative responsibility for running the program. The American side was oversight, consultation, general direction. The actual operation of the program was carried out through ISE Center and the Ministry.

Q: The ministry that you mention also played a really interesting role throughout the program, as I understand it.

Ruble: Yes. I think this is the most interesting part of the program, in many ways—in some ways, the most controversial. The Ministry is basically the Ministry of Education, but it changed. It was reformed. It was at one point the Ministry of Higher Education and Science. Then it was the Ministry of Education. There was the Ministry of Higher Education again. It kept evolving, but this was a time when Russian universities were trying to come to terms with integrating research into universities. Universities had been almost solely teaching institutions before, and they're very interested in Vartan Gregorian's experience at Brown, for example. The Ministry viewed both the CASEs and their parallel institutions in the natural sciences as mechanisms that would allow the promotion of research in universities. So they endorsed it. They promoted it. I think they have, with the Western funding gone, they continued it and they view the process, the CASE structure, as something to be replicated. I think there are two reasons for their role. One, it fit nicely into their agenda of focusing on research. Secondly, they were always equal partners in the project. They were partial funders. They were equal decision makers. For critics of the program, this became a problem, because from a Western point of view, the Russian Ministry of Education isn't always the most enlightened institution. I think it also added some institutional capacity that would not have been there were they not involved.

[Interruption]

Q: Sure

Ruble: Okay.

Q: Tell us a little bit more about the Ministry's evolution as a ministry over the past ten, fifteen years.

Ruble: I'm probably not the best person to answer this, but we were dealing with a deputy minister at the deputy ministerial level. People came in and came out, but that function remained the same. Basically, there were questions about how much there were institutional recalibrations of the role of science. Was it just about education? Or was it about science and education? There was adding on responsibilities, taking off responsibilities. The Ministry became noticeably wealthier with the passage of time, as oil revenues began to come in. One of the disjunctures in the program had to do with our trying to empower the CASEs and the universities and a more hierarchical authority structure between the universities and the Ministry. But we managed, for the most part, to find balances.

Q: Can you can think of examples where you had such a challenge in striking a balance?

Ruble: There was one CASE in particular where it should have been the most successful CASE. It degenerated into a conflict between the CASE director and the university rector. There were philosophical differences between the Ministry and the Western partners about how to handle it. Basically, our position was we really don't know enough to figure out who's right and who's wrong in this. This is something that has to be worked out within the university. I think the Ministry was more inclined to be very directive about who was right and who was wrong. That conflict continued for several years and ultimately, the CASE was destroyed by it. But I think

that was an example of the difference between the role of the Ministry's vision of its role in our vision of our role.

Q: This is the Saratov [Russia] CASE, I believe.

Ruble: Yes.

Q: Could you give us an example of one or two CASEs that you consider to have been particularly successful?

Ruble: I think intellectually, the Yekaterinburg, the Ural State [University] CASE basically knocked it out of the park. It focused on issues of tolerance. The people who ran it became internationally recognized figures, particularly in Europe, on tolerance issues. The CASE is still there. Many other leaders are now in senior positions within the university. It promoted students. It engaged in discussions about how to think about tolerance at a high analytical and theoretical level. I think that that was the greatest success. There were a number of institutions that were very good at organizing scholarship and meetings and publications. Voronezh [Russia] was very active in publications. Kaliningrad was very active in organizing conferences and convening groups of scholars, which was one of the goals we had set for the CASEs at the beginning. So I think that they were successful. Rostov [Russia]-Tomsk [Russia] probably fit in that category, too. So I think there's a range of success. But my sense is the most lasting, positive CASE will be the Tomsk CASE.

Q: The Tomsk CASE?

Ruble: I'm sorry—the Yekaterinburg.

Q: Yekaterinburg—and we'll come back to that, because you bring up the very interesting issue of the subject of tolerance that they were working on, because that has all sorts of implications for what's happening in Russia today. So we'll come back to that. Could you, however—there's one issue that I find fascinating about the CASEs. That's something that I suppose philanthropic organizations have to be aware from the get go on that. It's their role as funders, particularly if they are the sole funders or the most important funders. How did you think about, in your partnership with Carnegie and in your work with Carnegie, about the issue that the CASEs were largely funded by Carnegie and that they were reliant on this stream of funding?

Ruble: A very interesting set of developments occurred in part because this program was embedded with other programs. The first thing to be said is that there was the partnership with MacArthur. While most of the money for the social sciences came from Carnegie, it was partnered with the natural sciences program, where most of the money came from MacArthur. MacArthur always was a serious funder, maybe at a level beyond the actual dollar amount. The Ministry of Education put up meaningful money. The program could not have worked without the Ministry's commitment, because these were institutions housed at universities which were funded by the Ministry, for the most part. They paid faculty salaries and so on and so forth, so I think the funding was equal among the major partners. It was binational. I think all of us—this was something I think Carnegie felt—but all of us believed it was important that this be a private

initiative. It was not a government initiative—I mean the American government. It was not technical assistance. It was partnership. Over time, indeed, what does happen is the bulk of the funding shifts to the Russian side.

I think all of us on the American side were very concerned about not trampling on Russian decision making about Russian choices. We wanted the universities to make a lot of substantive decisions, but we were much more sticklers about process—for example, insisting that there be open, free, fair competitions. I'm not sure that that would have happened had it been just left to the Russian Ministry, so I think there was a balance throughout.

Q: What has changed? Or what has been accomplished that stands out in your mind as a result of the CASEs?

Ruble: In the first few years, there were individual grants, which provided invaluable support at a time of financial hardship to literally hundreds of Russian social scientists. Secondly, I think it provided the Russians with a model for thinking about how to integrate research into universities. It's a model which is continuing, the Russians are building upon. I think that it established networks of researchers working on similar subjects. Towards the end of the project, there were network research efforts mobilizing scholars from different CASEs. I think those networks have remained. Maybe in the future, in some distant future, it'll provide a model of how American private money can engage with Russian money on an equal basis.

Q: The program has come to a conclusion, as I understand it. How do you end a program like that that's gone on for a little over ten years and has had so much impact in so many places?

Ruble: It basically was handed over to the Russian Ministry, the Russian universities, and responsibility for the CASEs were transferred to Russian institutions. The American money slowly, steadily ran out. The money from the Kennan Institute, the money for convening staffing of the board wound down. For the Russians, I think the money slowly ran down too. There were some supports for these network projects in the end, but it was a gradual process over a couple years.

Q: Was there any resistance or regret on the part of the universities that had CASEs that the Carnegie side of it was drawing down?

Ruble: By then, the general attitude was we don't need your money. This project began at a moment when there was virtually no money for social sciences and humanities, and even Russian universities more generally. It ended at a moment of the return of Putin and the emphasis upon state funding, which drew quite heavily on oil profits. So I think by the time we got two thirds of the way through the project, the Carnegie and MacArthur money wasn't enough to be meaningful for a lot of university administrators. That actually probably helped wind the project down in an orderly manner, as well. It just wasn't as important for the universities as it was in the beginning.

Q: Had the program continued, given what's currently going on with new laws on the books in Russia on foreign money and registering organizations as foreign agents, would that have at all affected the program had it—

Ruble: Oh, I'm sure it would. This is a kind of program that—it's very difficult to understand how it could survive in the current climate.

Q: Okay. We'll come back to this. I do want to ask you about your involvement in other Carnegie projects and initiatives. I do believe that you had mentioned to me that you were, at some point and perhaps recently, working on a Carnegie initiative on the future of U.S.-Russian relations.

Ruble: Actually, I haven't been involved in that.

Q: You haven't been? Oh, Okay.

Ruble: I haven't been. Yes.

Q: Are there any other Carnegie initiatives that you've been involved in?

Ruble: Earlier, when I was at SSRC, we launched a project on local government in first the Soviet Union, but obviously, it became Russia. It was an initiative that lasted four or five years that focused on Yaroslavl in partnership between a team of American researchers and Moscow

State University and local scholars in Yaroslavl. Carnegie funded that effort. At the time, it was a very innovative project and it was really trying to get a handle on politics outside of Moscow. The project involved some fairly senior American specialists—Jerry Hough, Tim Colton, Jeff Hahn did a lot of public opinion polling in partnership with the Russian scholars. It supported a number of graduate students who conducted research for their dissertations. This obviously was not on the scale of the CASEs. But it was a pretty ambitious project that ran from ‘89, ‘90 to ‘93, ‘94—a very interesting period to be looking at local government.

Q: Shall we talk about what’s happening in Russia currently?

Ruble: Sure.

Q: All right. It’s hard to know what people will know or won’t know down the road when they’re listening to this interview, so it might be useful if you could give them some of your expert context of what’s been happening the past several months in Russia.

Ruble: We’re at the moment when Putin’s come back and he is systematically cracking down on people who had demonstrated against him. The authorities—pretty much the FSB, or the old KGB, is leaning very heavily on opposition groups. And the inspection of Western-supported NGOs is mid-course. So we really don’t know how any of that will turn out, but right now, it’s a pretty gloomy moment for anybody who’s thinking seriously about civil society or Russian integration into the West or the kinds of programs we were just talking about. You’re right. We

don’t know what people will know when they hear this, but at the moment, it’s very hard to see a way in which projects like the two we just mentioned can happen at all.

Q: What’s driving this?

Ruble: What’s driving this? I think that there are a number of complicating factors that’s driving it. It’s enabled by oil revenue and the fact that there’s money. Putin—this could well be Putin’s personal view, but I think he’s also playing to a notion that the whole collapse of the Soviet Union was a mistake, and if we could turn the clock back to 1984 and start over again, we’d get it right this time, without any recognition that the world has fundamentally changed and the position of Russia in the world has changed. There’s a generation of security people—army and police officials—who are roughly Putin’s age, in their sixties, who, when all this started, they were in their forties. Suddenly, the great careers they thought they had in front of them were destroyed. They’re trying to rebuild the world in which those careers could happen. I think they’re trying to punish the people who, in their mind, made it so that those careers couldn’t happen.

I think that there’s a general view that from Gorbachev on has just been a mistake, so they’re trying to turn the clock back. They’re relying on methods that they knew or networks that they’ve had. For me, it was very telling—one project I was involved in that was in recent years focused on the receipt of immigrants in Russian cities. We were looking at three cities, one of which was Yekaterinburg. I was conducting interviews with local officials. Somebody said, well, you should talk to the leader of United Russia, which is Putin’s party. It was a little unclear to me

why I should talk to the leader of United Russia, but I did. A couple things became apparent. One was that the United Russia Party was giving out benefits to immigrants, the way the old Communist Party would give out favors. The idea was, if you're an immigrant in Yekaterinburg and you come to us and later on you support us, we can make all sorts of things happen for you. So they had open hours for immigrants to come in with their problems about this, that, or the other thing. That's old style, big boss politics but it was interesting that that was run not through the government, but through the United Russia Party. The more interesting part was that the person I was talking to had been a leading police official in Central Asia when the Soviet Union collapsed, had been a supporter of the coup against Gorbachev. When the Soviet Union collapsed, he went into business. I think he was selling marble to Italians from Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, but he kept in touch with all of his old friends from the old days. Eventually he said, they called me up and said, well, you should come back to Russia. You can have this position. He described United Russia being a network of all these old police officials, so I think this was a moment when they saw their opportunity to try to recreate world that no longer existed. By the time somebody listens to this tape, we'll know how successful or not they were, but I think that's what's driving what's going on.

Q: When you speak about the United Russia offering these services and benefits and perks to immigrants, what kind of immigrants are we talking about?

Ruble: Mainly from Central Asia—mainly Tajiks and Turkmens are going to Yekaterinburg. They have all sorts of issues about legalization and receiving appropriate documentation. They

need housing. They have troubles with employers—such as being cheated out of money. They need somebody to go to bat for them. So they're very typical immigrant kinds of things.

Q: This is an interesting issue, because on the one hand, there is this political process of perks for the party. But on the other hand, I've heard that there are tremendously high intolerance levels towards immigrants in Russia.

Ruble: Oh. This is—yes. But I think what's important and what our work showed—there's a project directed by Cindy [Cynthia J.] Buckley, who's now at the University of Illinois. It focused on three cities. It was funded by NSF [Nation Science Foundation], and it looked at Krasnodar [Russia], Nizhny Novgorod [Russia],, and Yekaterinburg. What we found were very different local variations. In a place like Yekaterinburg, where there are labor shortages, local officials were trying to create a more tolerant atmosphere. In places like Krasnodar, where there would be much more competition for jobs, it was just the opposite. Indeed, Krasnodar has a rather nasty reputation. I do think that much of how we think about these issues are driven by what was going on in Moscow under Mayor [Yury M.] Luzhkov, which was very hostile to immigrants. When you get out of Moscow, it's probably a more variegated situation. But this is happening against a general backdrop of intolerance, I think.

Q: How does that compare to attitudes to immigrants here in the United States?

Ruble: One of the lessons that we learned in that research is that there are powerful parallels between the United States. The Wilson Center's Mexico Institute did a major study on reception

of Hispanic immigrants in a dozen U.S. cities. It was cities with longer histories of receiving immigrants actually created structures that were easier for recent immigrants to integrate into local life. Tolerance levels vary tremendously from place to place. When you're dealing with big countries like Russia and the United States, there are powerful similarities in some of these kinds of public policy issues. The tragedy of the current moment is there's undoubtedly a conversation we could have that would benefit both countries that won't take place in this political climate.

Q: Tell me, when it comes to Ural State, Yekaterinburg, and the fact that they focus on issues of tolerance, what are the prospects that those kinds of programs can ultimately survive in this kind of a climate?

Ruble: In Yekaterinburg, the prospects are probably rather high. It's very much embedded in the university. The people who first applied for the CASE grants are now at the top of the university hierarchy. The local economy is highly dependent upon migrant labor, and therefore, has an inclination to be more tolerant. The leading scholars there have international reputations. I think there may be some pushing and shoving around the edges, but I would suspect that by the time everybody listens to this tape, there will still be a Center for Tolerance at Yekaterinburg. Also, it was very much driven by philosophers, so it is a kind of intellectual exploration of the meaning and importance of tolerance. It's not directed towards interfering with political processes.

Q: Currently, one of the things that's very much in discussion, both in Russian and outside of Russia, is the Foreign Agents Law that affects NGOs. Can you give us a little bit of the background and the context of that?

Ruble: When Putin came to power, the Russian Federation passed legislation on NGOs which basically seemed to take the harshest measures of any number of other countries and put them all in one bill. So it's true when they say that France does this and the United States does that, but the cumulative effect is really something that is uniquely Russian. It is an effort to brand NGOs which receive foreign money as being foreign agents, which in the Russian context, is a highly emotionally-charged term. We're speaking at a moment when the process of review of NGOs is still ongoing. But there have been a couple of major human rights oriented organizations that have been branded foreign agents. It's hard to see anything good coming of this. It is true that foreign agents in the United States have register and so on and so forth, but the politically-charged context we're dealing with now, it's hard not to see this as political retribution by Putin against his enemies.

Q: How much does this law and these measures potentially affect the work that the Kennan Institute does, or the Carnegie Corporation?

Ruble: This is a very difficult moment, because the Kennan office in Moscow is under review as a Russian NGO. In the worst case, it could be shut down. In the worst case, very few Russian scholars would want to work with the Kennan Institute. We would be back to where we were before I showed up, which was basically an institution for supporting Western scholars who study the Soviet Union, without participation from Russians themselves. I think that that is a real possibility. What you and I don't know at this particular moment in history is will there be push back? There's a pathological aspect of the anti-Americanism at the moment. Does that begin to

get toned down? At this particular moment, it doesn't seem to be the case, but people who will be listening to this will know the answer.

Q: Has the Kennan Institute started creating a contingency plan for what if?

Ruble: Yes. Absolutely. The primary concern has to do with the fact that we have five employees in Moscow. We want to be sure that whatever happens, they're not hurt. I think any organization that is engaged in Russia should be thinking about contingency plans. At one level, the Kennan Institute is going to exist. It'll exist in Washington. It can do programming in Washington. It can work with European and Asian scholars, and there will be subjects to study. At one level, the Kennan Institute can be what it was before this whole process started. But we're very concerned about scholars—we have had somewhere around 1,000 Russian scholars who've been through the Institute. Does their affiliation with us become a problem for them? Does it become a problem for our employees? Yes. It's an issue of great concern. At this point, the outcome isn't known. It is conceivable that the Kennan Institute would be asked to maybe change its charter a little bit, make some changes in its organization, we will live happily ever after. But the outcome is not known at this point.

Q: You mentioned that the law is largely in its early implementation stages. Given that it has so many bits and pieces, like you described, that are very aggressive and expensive, how implementable is it? How fully implementable is it?

Ruble: If Russian authorities want to label people as foreign agents and have them pay tens of thousands of dollars, if not more, in fines, it will destroy any semblance of the civil society in Russia. That they can do. There really isn't anything to stop them. What happens then becomes an interesting question, because most NGOs in Russia, they're like most NGOs in a lot of places. They're carrying out and implementing government social policy and educational policy. I spoke earlier about people wanting to turn the clock back to [Yuri V.] Andropov. I think for them, that's the way it should work. The government should do everything. But of course, the history of the Russian state is it's overly ambitious and incapable of fulfilling its ambitions. In terms of shutting things down, the Russian history would indicate that they can certainly do that.

Q: What scenarios, what three or four scenarios do you see potentially playing out?

Ruble: The worst case scenario is basically what I just described—that they shut down civil society, more or less completely. They destroy the institutional support and funding for civil society. The state becomes much more expansive in its role, going back to the Soviet period. As long as oil revenues are up, it can keep papering over the holes that will be developing in the Russian system. But I firmly believe that if they go that way in the kind of world we live in, eventually, the money runs out and the economy collapses. I don't think it'll be very pretty, so I think that that's the worst case. The best case is that there's some constant negotiation and renegotiation. A couple of NGOs are made examples. Others have to somehow reconfigure what they do, but they're given a pathway to continuing to work. U.S.-Russian relations improve. The space grows a little bit for programs like the CASE program to operate. Given the mindset of what we see with President Putin, I don't know how that happens. But that possibility exists.

Q: Does this make it more difficult to continue to maintain your professional focus on Russia?

Ruble: Personally, I've moved on in different directions, because yes, the kinds of research that I was just talking about on immigrants certainly isn't possible right now, even though that project ended a year ago. So I'm going to pursue research interests that are open to me. Probably, they'll be outside of Russia, but I think that there are people who are committed to Russian studies who will remain committed to Russian studies and will find things to do. The field will be there, and Russia is an interesting place that stimulates thought about how the world works. Some of those scholars will produce works that'll be of lasting value. But for me, personally, I'm moving in a different direction.

Q: How do you see the role of Washington policymakers who work on foreign policy coping with the situation? Is there anything that they can do to do more than cope, and perhaps to push for alternatives?

Ruble: Just as context, we're six or eight weeks out from the bombing at the Boston Marathon. I think Washington is divided between those who think we should just deal with the Russians on anti-terrorism and not worry about human rights and those who care about human rights. Once again, what we see in Washington is an inability to hold two contrasting thoughts in one's head at the same time and to think about how you can pursue shared interests while demonstrating a serious commitment to human rights. But we're talking on a day when it became public knowledge that the U.S. government was collecting information on everybody's cell phone calls.

For the Russians, they just look at that and say, what are you talking about, human rights? You don't care about human rights. What has to happen in Washington is that there has to be some serious thought about how what we do is perceived by the outside world. I don't see that happening in the short run.

Q: It's a rather pessimistic note that we're ending on.

Ruble: It is a pessimistic note, but let me end on an optimistic note.

Q: Sure.

Ruble: Russia always surprises. So in this case, everything I just said is pessimistic, which means, perhaps, buried in this will be new energy that nobody ever thought possible. That's what makes Russia an interesting place.

Q: Let's hope. Let's hope. This is a good point to conclude our session.

Ruble: Okay.

Q: Thank you very much.

Ruble: Thank you.

Q: It's been wonderful talking to you. This is George Gavrilis, having spoken with Blair Ruble on June 6 for the Carnegie Corporation of New York Oral History Project, which is being implemented by the Columbia Center for Oral History.

[END OF INTERVIEW]