



# UnSSEESing

THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE FROM SSEES

*Featuring...*

*SSEES alumni at the  
Foreign and Commonwealth  
Office, more on the first SSEES  
women graduates, memorial  
lectures and elephants, Alumni  
news, area studies and ...  
pandemics*

SUMMER 2020 PANDEMIC DOUBLE ISSUE

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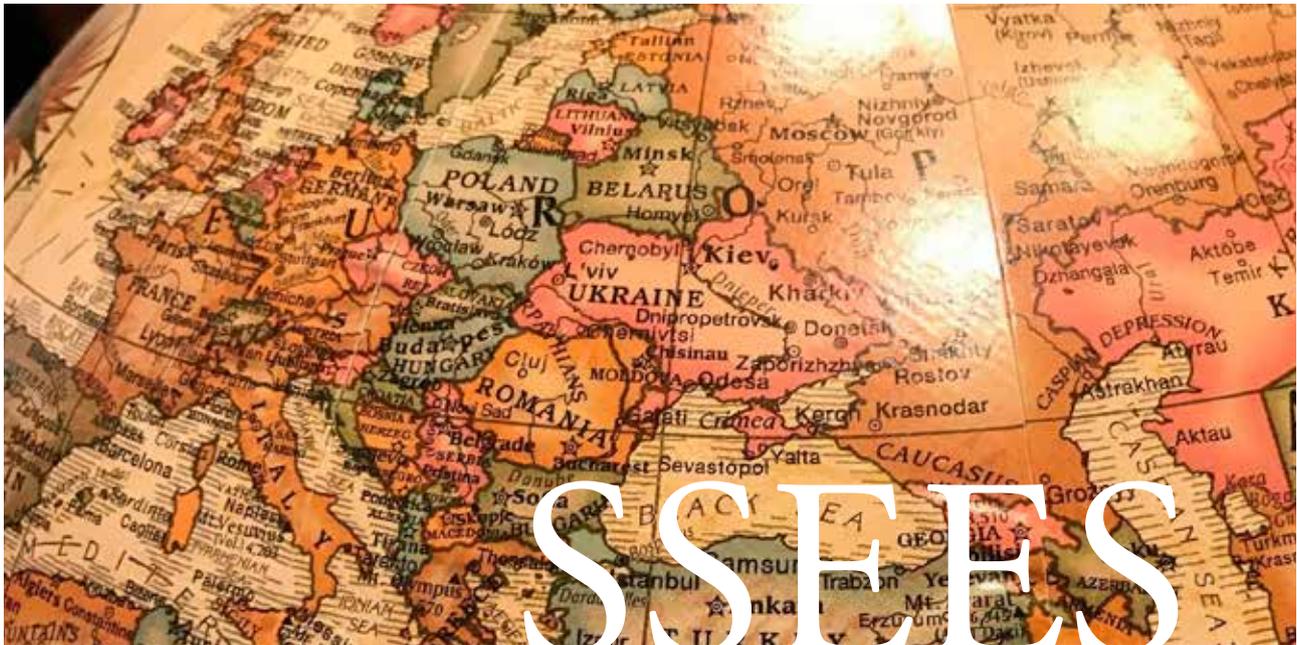
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## Welcome



*In this bumper issue we mark, among other things, a special centenary in the alumni network – it is exactly 100 years since the first two SSEES graduates got their degrees. **Lesley Pitman** explores the studies and careers of these two female students of Russian; **Professor David Kirby** recounts a Cold War tale with reference to Finland; **Professor Eric Gordy** analyses the double whammy of Brexit and coronavirus; **Thea McNeish** remembers her time at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO); **Katya Kocourek** talks to Deborah Bronnert CMG, the UK’s Ambassador to the Russian Federation; and we end with the latest SSEES Alumni News.*

### **Dr Katya Kocourek**

This edition has been edited by SSEES alumna, Dr Katya Kocourek, with invaluable help and support from Professor Faith Wigzell and Angela Garrett. Newsletter designed by UCL Digital Media.

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## Interview with *Deborah Bronnert CMG, Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Russian Federation*



**Interview with Deborah Bronnert CMG, Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Russian Federation from January 2020\***

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**Ms Bronnert completed her MA at UCL SSEES in 2006**

### **By way of background, what brought you to SSEES for graduate studies?**

I got to know Russia well during my first time at the British Embassy as the Economic and Trade Counsellor from 2002 to 2005. I had also visited in the 1990s. I hugely enjoyed living in Russia and travelled extensively in Russia and the region. I found the politics and history fascinating too. When I lived there last, Vladimir Putin was still a new President (in his first term). It was a time of significant economic reform, for example the introduction of land reform and UK/Russia relations were quite close – then British Prime Minister Tony Blair was a regular visitor and President Putin made a State Visit to the UK. But there were signs of things to come as well – for example, the arrest of the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the break-up of his oil company Yukos.

During my posting to Russia, I decided that I wanted to take some time to deepen my understanding of Russia and the region and

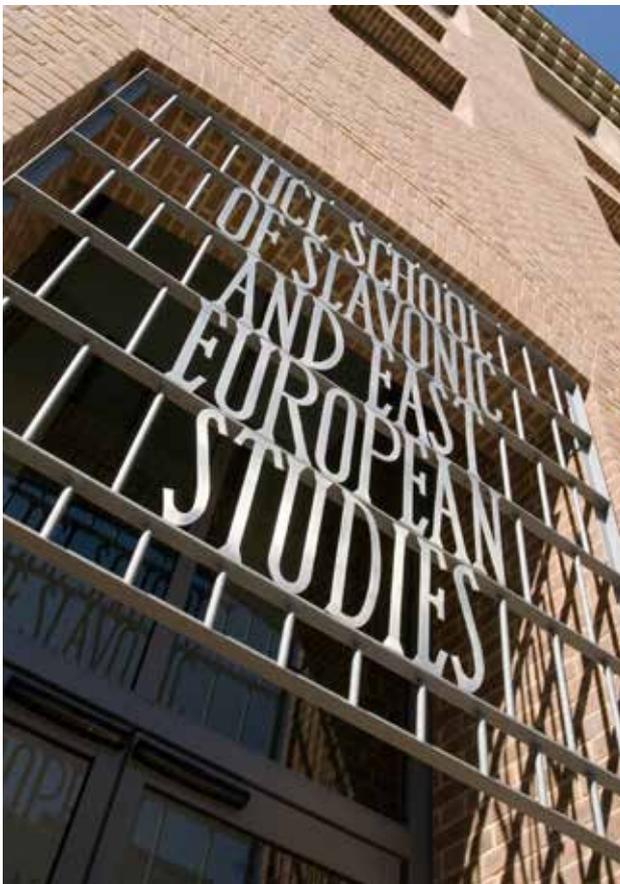
further build on my language skills. We're very fortunate in the UK to have great expertise in our universities and I contacted SSEES to ask about spending a year there after my posting. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) encourages diplomats to develop their skills and expertise throughout their careers and agreed to my having a year-long sabbatical to study at SSEES. In 2005, I was able to undertake an MA in the Political Economies of Russia and Eastern Europe at the School.

### **What did you most like about the MA and your time at the School?**

The School had some superb academics and the MA had built in flexibility to allow a wide range of topics. In the MA course I followed, I combined Advanced Russian, Soviet and Russian history courses, as well as the use of quantitative methods to analyse the impact of reform and changing technologies on the political economies of the region. This prospect of studying methodologies in detail, looking at

the broad sweep of history and enhancing my Russian language skills, which I did with Dr Svetlana McMillin, was a fantastic combination.

I had studied Mathematics as an undergraduate and so taking courses with Professor Slavo Radosevic and others at the mathematical end of economics was great. The MA also gave me a chance to learn from world-renowned historians like Professor Geoffrey Hosking. I really enjoyed learning about Soviet and Russian history from multiple perspectives, and this provided a deeper understanding of the region and different policy areas. My MA dissertation was about Gazprom and its role in foreign policy and drew on my experiences in Russia when I'd worked closely with many executives from the energy sector and knew senior Gazprom leaders as well as the resources at SSEES.



| Image above: UCL SSEES, Taviton Street

### What are your impressions of modern-day Russia and how has it changed?

I returned to Russia fairly recently, and haven't had the chance to do much travel yet. My sense of Moscow upon my return was that of a clean, modern European city. Lots of other things have changed since I was last here: the UK-Russia relationship is much worse compared to the early-to-mid 2000s. The illegal annexation of Crimea, conflict in the Donbass and the Salisbury attack in March 2018 have contributed to this. The individual freedoms Russians enjoy are still much greater than during the Soviet period. The big state companies are dominant, but there are still some private companies.

And now the Covid-19 epidemic has changed all our lives. We've seen a terrible impact on people with tragic loss of life in many countries. It has also been a time when governments are working together to help repatriate their nationals. President Putin sent his best wishes to Prime Minister Boris Johnson after he was admitted to hospital in early April. The seventy-fifth anniversary Victory Day Parade due on 9 May was cancelled as the impact of the virus became clearer (it was rescheduled to 24 June 2020).

The economic consequences are likely to be very serious, and the Russian government has started to grapple with these. We are wishing everybody well in the UK and Russia. The crisis highlighted the fragility of humanity, but also our strengths. Look at Captain Tom Moore and the butterfly rainbow artwork by children for the NHS! These are anxious and unprecedented times, but there are grounds for optimism.

*\*Interview conducted on 17 April 2020.*

## Tracing the History of the first SSEES graduates – Part II\*

### *Lesley Pitman*

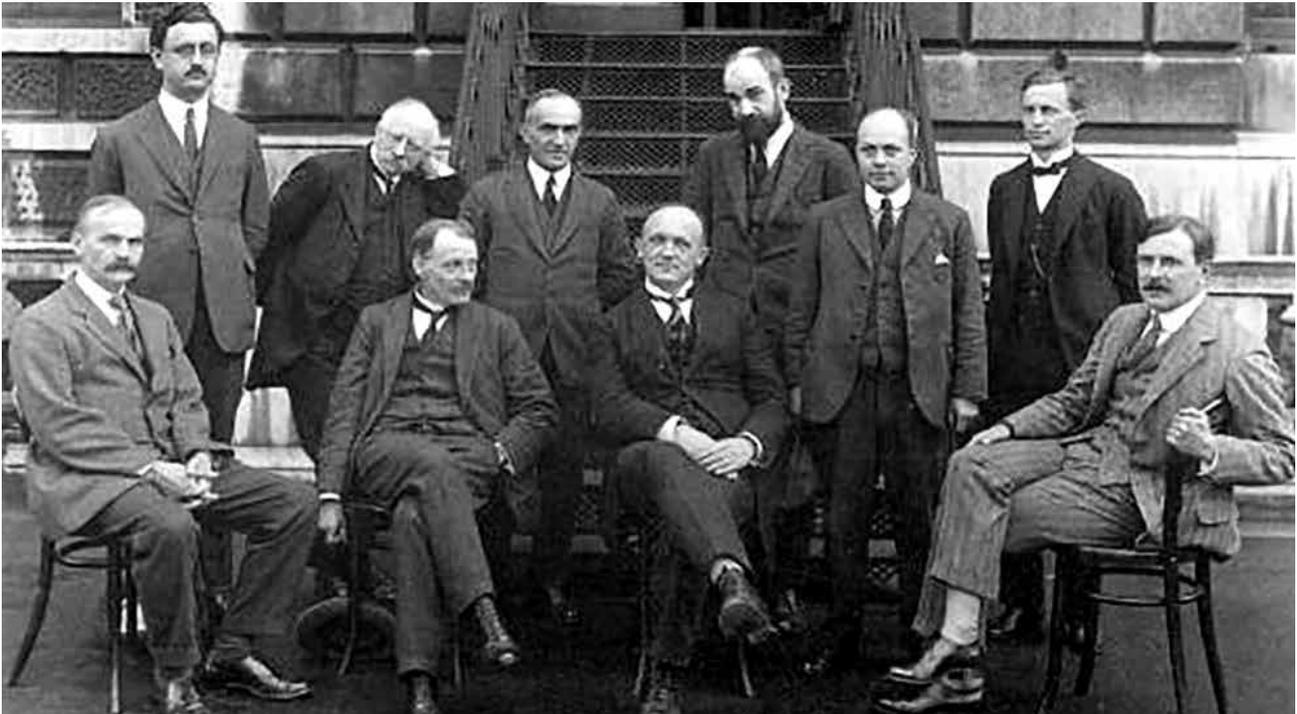
**2020 marks 100 years since the first cohort of students graduated from SSEES. In its annual report for 1919/20, the Delegacy of King's College London stated that two students had presented themselves for the honours examination in Russian at the end of the session. Both were women. Their names were Cecily Ryder and Mary Leben.**

The two women could not have been more different in their backgrounds. Cecily was rooted in the British establishment. Born in 1893, she was the daughter of the Rector of Maresfield in Sussex and related through both her parents to the aristocracy; on her father's side to the Earl of Harrowby, and on her mother's to Lord Granville Somerset and the Duke of Beaufort. She was presented at court in 1914 by the Countess of Harrowby. Her male relatives were prominent in politics and banking, and her mother had been active in politics before her marriage.

Cecily and her four sisters were educated at home by German governesses, while her two brothers went to Eton. She was musical, performed at local concerts, and helped her father host events for his parishioners. Nothing could have been more conventional, but, at the age of twenty-five, she registered at King's College for Women for a BA (Hons) in Russian with philosophy. Her formal education had started only in 1915, when she had joined Bedford College for Women, where she matriculated and then studied Greek, English, German and Russian.



| **Image above:** *Cecily (far right) with her family*



**Image above:** *SSEES academics outside King's College, 1923*

The mention of Russian is interesting, as the only place in the University of London where it was taught at the time was at the School. This indicates that she was almost certainly studying there before she transferred officially in 1918. She was taught initially by Michael Trofimov, who left in 1919 to become Professor at Manchester, and then by Bernard Pares. Trofimov said of her that her knowledge of Russian 'would qualify her to speak or write on the country with the weight of an authority', while Pares described her as having 'quickness of mind and intelligent industry... and a sympathetic appreciation of the problems which have confronted the Russian people'.

The details of Mary Leben's life are harder to discern. She was born in 1897 in Łódź, then part of the Russian Empire. British naturalisation papers from the early 1930s for her and her brother held in the National Archives state that she was Polish. She came to the UK with her parents Henryk Zyskind and Hendla Leben, and her brother Jakub.

Mary studied at the Victoria Lyceum in Berlin, an institution founded for the purpose of educating women, before joining King's College for Women in 1916, at the age of nineteen. How she came to travel as a child from Łódź to Berlin to London is revealed by newspaper articles about her father published when he filed for bankruptcy in the British courts in 1925. Described as a Russian, he had been active in the textile industry. His factories in Łódź and Warsaw were destroyed by fire in 1904. He then moved to Germany and earned his living as an export merchant. The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 meant that his property was confiscated, and he moved to England, although he continued to manage a branch of his export business in Moscow.

By 1918, while Mary was studying in London, her father was in prison in Moscow. Later that year he escaped to Odessa, where he set up yet another business. In April 1919 it was confiscated. Finally, he set up business in London with a partner, but by 1925 it had failed, and he was bankrupted, despite the half a million pounds of claims he and his partner had lodged against the Soviet government.



**Image above:** *Cecily (centre) with her sister Philippa and her father the Reverend Algernon Ryder, all ice skating in Sussex in the early 1930s*

Both women continued to study at King's after they graduated. Mary qualified as a language teacher, but Cecily is once again a pioneer. In 1920, she joined the first university course in journalism to be established in the UK, based at King's and only in its second year.

Mary's story becomes hard to follow once she leaves King's. During the 1920s and 1930s she lives in Wimbledon and works as a language teacher. By 1939 she is living with her widowed mother in Doncaster, still working as a teacher, and she dies there in 1976.

By contrast, Cecily spreads her wings. She goes to Paris, from where she offers articles on the French theatre to the *Saturday Westminster Gazette*. These are rejected, but articles on various aspects of Russian culture are accepted and published, including a piece to mark the centenary of Dostoevsky's birth. In May 1922, while still living in Paris, she gets a post at the newly established Anglo-Czechoslovakian Bank in Prague.

Here family connections certainly came in useful, as her interviewer, Michael Spencer-Smith, was not only Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, but also married to her cousin. Her post at the bank in Prague gives her enough free time to continue her journalism, and in 1924 she is appointed Prague Correspondent of the *Morning Post*.

While she was still working at the bank, her articles on Czech and Slovak politics, religion and culture are published, although she complains in a letter to her father that she worries about offending her Czech hosts while writing about the Slovak cause.

She travels widely through the region, sending back despatches, but resolves never to set foot in the Soviet Union, travelling no closer than the easternmost tip of present-day Slovakia, just to look over the border into Ukraine.

She interviews several major figures, including Andrej Hlinka, the Slovak religious leader, and Karel Capek, the Czech writer. In 1926 she goes to the United States, where she works with Gladys and Stringfellow Barr, the leading educationalists, and writes weekly articles for a newspaper in Richmond Virginia on all aspects of art and culture. At the end of 1928 she comes home and returns to the Rectory.

In 1933, she marries Charles Piggott, later Chief Education Officer for the City of Oxford, and settles with him in Oxfordshire, going on to have two children. Throughout her life she retains her interest in the region, maintaining lifelong friendships with a circle of White Russian émigré friends with whom she enjoys practising the language.

Cecily's story is not quite over. When war breaks out in 1939, she joins the Foreign Research and Press Service in Oxford, led by Arnold Toynbee,

where she reads and reports on the German press, moving with it to London when it becomes the Foreign Office Research Department.

After the war she works as a language teacher in Oxford. Her diaries record an intense schedule of teaching, tutoring and examining in French, German and Russian, punctuated by adventurous motoring holidays in which she delights introducing her young family to a Europe still emerging from the ravages of war. Cecily died in 1962, leaving two children with very fond memories of her visionary and pioneering spirit.

**Image right:** *Cecily in her garden at home in Oxfordshire, probably around 1961*



\* The author is very grateful to Cecily's children, Carola and Crispian Piggott, for access to her archive and their generosity in sharing their memories of her. The staff at King's College London Archives were very helpful in providing access to College records and interpreting them.

\*\* All photos are reproduced by kind permission of the Piggott family.

SSEES ON  
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<https://twitter.com/UCLSSEES>



## My Time in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (1966–77 and 1998–2011), *Thea McNeish*

**Throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s SSEES benefited from mature students on BA courses. These were people with the most varied life experience and committed to developing or expanding their understanding of the subjects taught at SSEES, in particular Russian.**

Understandably, they were highly motivated, which often made them rewarding classmates and engaging to teach. University fees (£1,000 from 1998, £3,000 from 2006 and £9,000 from 2012) gradually made it financially impossible for them. Fortunately, the current SSEES MA, which admits those with degrees in a different discipline, has opened the door to some.

One of the many mature students who came to SSEES was Thea McNeish (1993–97). Here she explains how, armed with a Russian degree from SSEES, she was able to return to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in a more rewarding role.



“

It was during the 1960s whilst travelling and working in the United States of America as a locally engaged member of staff at the British Consulates-General in Detroit and San Francisco, that I first heard about the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London.

I was encouraged to join the Diplomatic Service on my eventual return to England, which I did. I later discovered that the reference of Sir James Easton, the then Consul-General in Detroit, helped me get into the FCO.

Having been away from London for two years, I wanted to know how the FCO worked. The FCO at that time was divided into two separate buildings within the courtyard shared between the Foreign Office and Commonwealth Office in King Charles Street with close contact and easy access to 10 Downing Street, once you got to know where all the corridors led to.

As a junior member of staff, working in both Private Offices of the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office, it was an excellent education into the workings of Government and the Diplomatic Service.

I liked it so much that I volunteered for weekend duties as well as working throughout the week. Having left school at the age of fifteen without any qualifications, this was the much-needed education that I wanted.

Eventually, I accepted an offer of a posting to our Embassy in Ankara, Turkey. I had to look it up on a map as I had no idea where it was. It proved to be a wonderful first posting overseas. After two years, I returned to the FCO in London and later accepted a posting to Singapore, which could not have been more different with its hot and steamy climate and huge spiders, which were not to my liking. But I did meet my future husband there who was serving with his Regiment, The Royal Highland Fusiliers. At that time, single girls in the Diplomatic Service had to resign on marriage.

After a long absence and gaining a degree in Russian Language and Literature as a mature student at SSEES, in 1993–97, I was able to re-enter the FCO in London as a married woman, serving as an Accompanying Officer in the Visits Section of the Protocol and Conference Department.

This was the ideal job for me with Foreign and Commonwealth countries sending their Diplomats and Officials as Guests of our Government to see how we did things in the UK. I often had to be firm in keeping them to their Official Programme. After thirteen years, I had to finally retire at the age of sixty-seven. And so ended my time in the FCO.



**Image above:** 21/22 Russell Square  
Image credit: Professor Faith Wiggzell

## SSEES ON INSTAGRAM



<https://www.instagram.com/uclssees>

## Area studies, Brexit, and pandemics

*Eric Gordy, Professor of Political and Cultural Sociology*

**The word “university” originates as a shortened version of the Latin *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* (community of masters and scholars), which itself derives from the Latin *universitas*, signifying the world, the aggregate or the whole. The joint invitations to community and openness are not coincidental; they resonate with the core goals of the institution.**

When I was a child in Seattle, a graffito on a wall outside the entrance to the University of Washington declared, ‘Welcome to the Universe City’. At its best, the university is a place where people are invited to look into the world, and outside themselves.

For an area studies school like SSEES, the obligation imposed by this mission is especially important. We are here to communicate with, investigate facts about, and engage in exchange with people in the part of the world to which we are dedicated.



**Image above:** *Professor Eric Gordy wearing a face mask*

When, at a low point in British diplomacy, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain described Nazi Germany’s territorial claim against Czechoslovakia as a ‘quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing,’ SSEES was there to compensate. Not only did people at SSEES know plenty about Czechoslovakia, it had been opened in 1915 with a ceremonial lecture by Czechoslovakia’s first President, T.G. Masaryk, after whom the room where we hold our receptions and public events is still named.

During the long Cold War, SSEES continued upholding its place in the universe of scholarship, maintaining contact and communication with parts of the world that many people did not care about, to which they did not have access, and which they did not know well enough. The institutional folklore tells us there may have been a little bit of cloak and dagger stuff involved, too.

Our role as the point of contact with the Slavic world (and parts of the non-Slavic world too, but that is another story) means that openness and exchange are our oxygen. Without these things we have nothing to do. It also means that intense and constant contact with Europe, and beyond, is central to our existence.

Our students and staff come in large measure from both EU and non-EU parts of Europe, European institutions fund many of our large research projects and receive our advice in return,

and our main research and educational partners are housed at universities and other institutions across the continent.

The purpose of institutions like universities has always been, in large measure, to bring people into contact with the world. Area studies institutions like ours have a more specific purpose, to sustain global engagement with a particular part of the world.

These basic purposes could be thought of as constituting the value of institutions like ours to the wider society. But they are challenged now by two facts: 1) a set of political events, culminating in Brexit, which will separate institutions in the UK from their colleagues and partners in Europe, and 2) a global pandemic that is closing public spaces and separating everyone from everyone else everywhere.

There is not a lot of doubt that Brexit hits UK universities hard, and it hits SSEES especially hard. It is also clear that the suspension of physical contact on and off campus hits us hard. The principle is simple: anything that promotes isolation is bad for science, bad for education, bad for research, and bad for knowledge.



| **Image above:** *Bust of T.G. Masaryk (from SSEES)*

Some of these consequences we are able to deal with, a little. The sudden and forced move of teaching activity online has been a mixed bag at best. We know that however good our efforts, we are not able to reach all students equally, we cannot provide the same level of access to scholarly resources, and online meetings make a poor substitute for conversational engagement and discussion.

For all the ambitious talk of providing online learning environments, we are able, at most, to improvise partial solutions to a crisis that affects people unequally and intensifies the inequality that already existed.

There are some consequences, though, that could serve us well, in the long term, if we are able to understand them. It turns out that a lot of meetings and monitoring that take time away from research and teaching always were, as we suspected, unnecessary.

The enormous monitoring exercises and ‘excellence frameworks’ that draw resources away from research and teaching, like the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), have been ‘indefinitely suspended’ and will, if there is any good sense, never be seen or heard from again. We have a chance, by eliminating activity that is wasteful and useless, to refocus on the useful and important parts of our work.

Isolation has also concentrated attention on the effects of the university funding reform of 2010, which shifted the income base from government grants to fees (which were, graduates will remember, massively increased), and encouraged universities to increase in size and look toward overseas students as a type of tuition farming. The change was controversial when it was adopted, and widely opposed by both academic staff and students.



| **Image above:** *Professor Eric Gordy*

Growing dependence on high fees proved hugely profitable in the short term, and contributed to major expansion: UCL, for example, doubled in size and embarked on a large building construction programme. The change also transformed universities into profit-generating businesses, encouraging them to view themselves as in competition with one another for lucrative enrolments, and seeking unlimited growth.

In the long term, of course, the shift was always going to be unsustainable. The ballooning enrolments outpaced the universities' capacity for absorption, and it was clear that at some point the supply of students would dry up, either because the countries that sent them would expand their own capacity, or because of a sudden crisis. As it turned out, the bubble burst because of a sudden crisis.

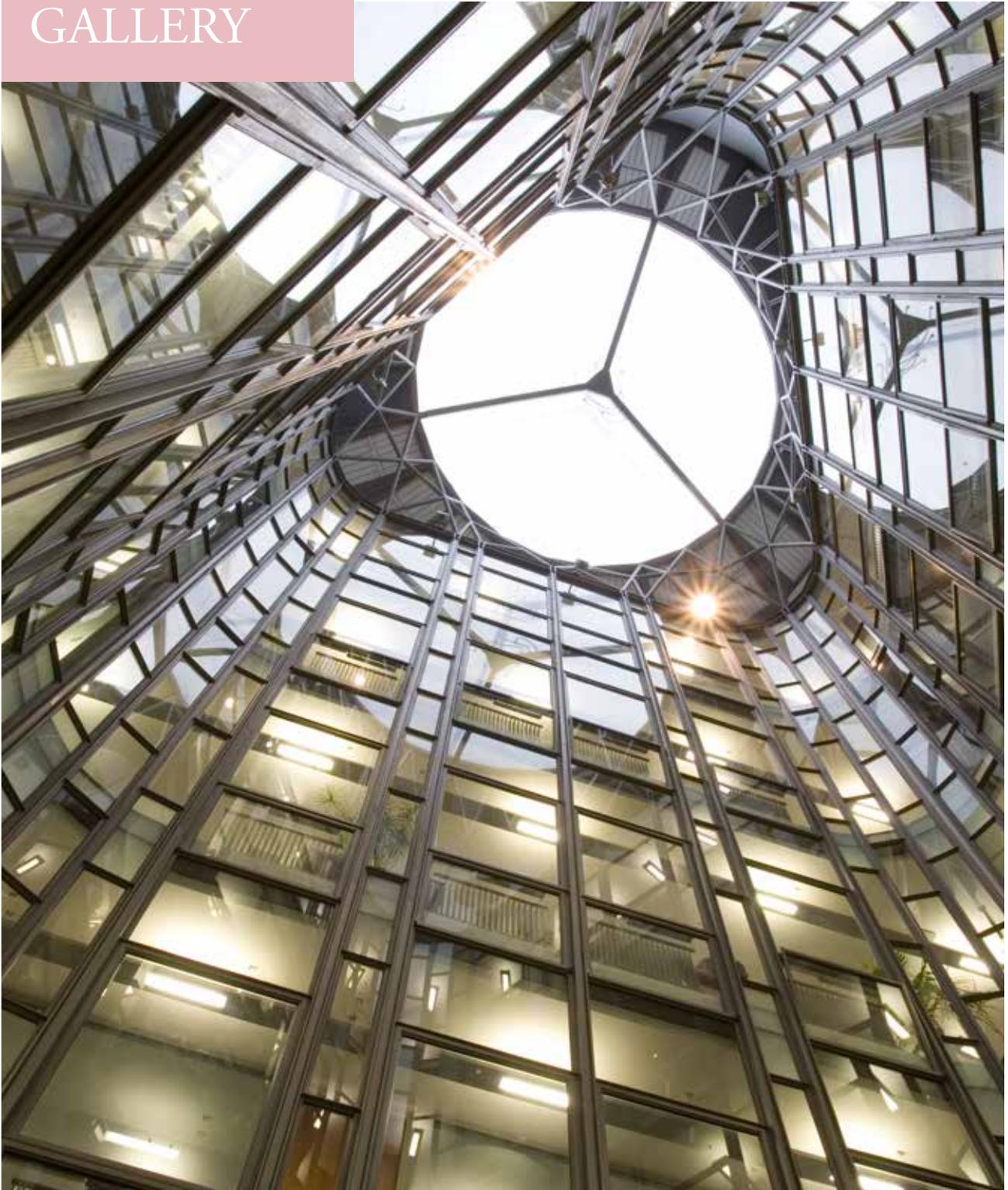
An immediate response has been for universities to seek loans and bailouts, aware that it will not be possible for them to operate as planned. Over the next year or so some kind of bridging strategy might compensate for the effects of the problems that became glaringly apparent in March of this year. But they will not address the structural problems leading our universities into isolation and pushing them away from their basic goals of research and teaching.

It is possible, however, that recent events have forced a shift in consciousness. For at least some observers, the UK's comparatively weak response to the pandemic, resulting in the highest number of deaths in Europe, has called Brexit into question and highlighted the dangers of attempting to go it alone.

Meanwhile government spokespeople have moved away from the Brexit campaign line dismissing research, embodied in Michael Gove's 'people in this country have had enough of experts,' to repeated claims to be 'following the science.' To the degree that there is science to be followed, 'the science' does not reside exclusively in any one country, or at any one university in a country. It is a project carried jointly by institutions, researchers, teachers, students, and the broader society.

There is nothing good about epidemics or Brexit, of course. But in the reshaped world that follows these crises, we might, if we keep in mind what institutions are for, learn some of the lessons that constraint is teaching us. This could help us to see a way toward moving closer to the ideal of the university that is implied by its name.

## SSEES GALLERY



**Image above:** *Interior lightwell of the UCL SSEES building. Designed by architects Short and Associates, SSEES moved to new premises in Taverton Street in October 2005. The school encompasses the four departments of East European Languages & Culture, History, Russian and Social Sciences.*

## The Elephant and Finland: A Cold War Tale

*David Kirby, Emeritus Professor of Modern History*

**This article is an abbreviated version of a special memorial lecture dedicated to Professor Michael Arthur Branch, which was delivered at SSEES on Thursday 6 February 2020. Professor Branch CMG (1940–2019) was Director of SSEES from 1980 to 2001 and Professor of Finnish.**

The elephant and Finland is by way of being a Finnish academic joke of the standard three nationalities variety. A Frenchman, a German and a Finn are each asked to propose a research topic on the subject of the elephant. The Frenchman comes up with *'la vie amoureuse des elephants* [the love life of elephants]'. The German proposes *'Ein kurzer Bericht über dem Elefant, in drei Bände* [a short report on the elephant in three parts]'. And the Finn? Of course, *'norsu ja Suomi* [the elephant and Finland]'.

All nations have the right to be introspective, and the Finnish people had perhaps more rights than most in the twentieth century. But to the outsider, this intense concern with Finland and more particularly, Finnishness, in the world was at times a puzzle, at times intensely irritating, but always challenging. I think it was this that drew together a small band of non-Finnish researchers in the late 1960s to form a research group that met three or four times a year, in England and in Finland, drawing in a much larger number of Finnish scholars and creating a network that proved to be mutually beneficial over many years thereafter. With his enthusiasm and drive, Michael Branch was the linchpin of this endeavour.

Finnish sensitivities and introspection were if anything heightened by the events and outcomes of the Second World War. The one external country from which many of the impulses and influences that drove Finnish intellectual, religious and cultural life, from evangelical



| **Image above:** *Professor Michael Branch*

Lutheranism to *Schlagermusik*, came to grief in the 1940s. The seeming reassertion of the old subservient relationship with Russia that followed was a severe test to Finnish intellectual life. 'Fear and a silent uncertainty' dominated the mood of what the author and commentator Matti Kurjensaari in his 1948 essay collection *Taistelu huomispäivästä* (The Struggle for Tomorrow), entitled the 'second republic'.

In his musings about the future for Finland at a time when the prospect of being inextricably tied to the Soviet juggernaut seemed highly likely, Kurjensaari argued that the nation had gone through two wars (Winter and Continuation)

as if its misfortunes were somehow predetermined by fate. Fatalism, he claimed, was peculiar to small and primitive peoples. The only way out was with the aid of *sivistys*, that crucial Finnish concept that is so hard to render adequately into English – ‘culture’ is the best I can offer here. The more developed culturally a nation, the more resilient it becomes in dealing with events. ‘A cultural people strives to be master of its fate. True *sivistys* does not bind, it liberates.’

At the same time as persons in public and intellectual life in Finland were seeking to find some acceptable way to accommodate the nation to the new geopolitical circumstances in which it found itself, there arose a much greater interest than heretofore in the country amongst British scholars. Finland’s plight at the beginning of the twentieth century had roused public sympathy in Britain, but did not seemingly inspire anyone to further, more thorough study of the Russo-Finnish relationship. Pretty well the only book written in English (as opposed to translated from Finnish) that was at all worth reading was J Hampden Jackson’s *Finland*, a well-balanced review of the country’s history up to the 1930s, that appeared in 1940.

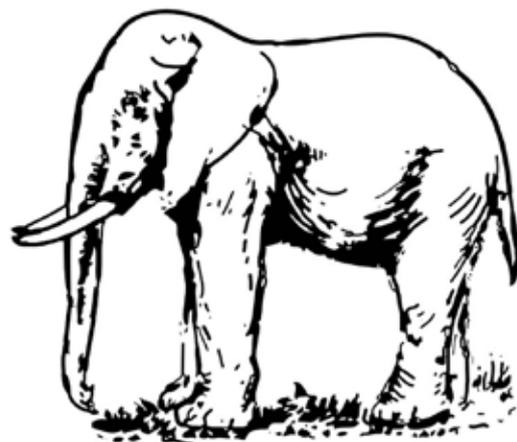
What changed? Without wishing to suggest that we were in some way superior beings, I think I can say that the unprecedented numbers of young scholars who engaged in studies of the culture, history and politics of European countries during the expansion of higher education in the 1960s were in part reacting to a perceived insularity in British education and thought, were quite willing, even eager to learn foreign languages, and were, at least in the case of eastern Europe, actually encouraged financially and professionally by the authorities.

The Cold War was the context. It is no coincidence that it was the Russo-Finnish relationship that lay at the heart of the work of the members of the

Finnish Research Group. Fortunately, we were able to work amicably and I would say fruitfully with our colleagues in Finland, who were in no way constrained as were researchers in those eastern European countries within the Soviet bloc.

But, if there were no Marxist dogmatics or bourgeois fabrications to strew obstacles in the way of cooperation, there were inevitably differences of a more subtle nature. The most immediately obvious, but the most difficult to fathom, are what we might call cultural assumptions. One’s own cultural and historical experience inevitably shapes perspective, from initial approach to conclusions.

I can perhaps best illustrate this by taking the Second World War as an example. The Finnish experience was very different from the British, and indeed, was unique in Europe. Finland fought three distinct wars, losing two of them (but coming a gallant second to the mighty Soviet Union, as a character in that classic Finnish novel, *Tuntematon sotilas* (The Unknown Soldier), cheerily observes) and managing to drive out the former comrades-in-arms, the Germans, in the third. Alone of all the combatants on the continent of Europe, Finland was never occupied. It lost territory and had to conclude a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance with the Soviet Union, which placed constraints upon its relationships with the rest of the world. But it retained all its institutions and full independence.



Coming to terms with the wartime experience was never going to be easy, especially for many Finnish historians, who had grown to maturity during the first decades of independence and had imbibed the spirit of intense nationalism and hatred of all things Russian. The heroics of the Winter War were a sweet and necessary consolation, a welcome coming together of a nation bitterly divided at its birth by civil war; but what followed was far less easy to absorb into the national story. As we have seen, Kurjensaari had already indicated as early as 1948 the likely interpretation of events - that the great powers had rolled the dice, and little Finland was swept along like a floating log in the flood of war. This held, more or less, for a decade.

Then in 1957, there appeared *Finland in the Second World War*, written by an American, C. Leonard Lundin. Lundin's mildly critical view of the way in which Finland re-entered the war in 1941 aroused some disquiet in Finland, but was as nothing compared with the furore created by the appearance in 1964 of *Finland in Crisis 1940–41*. Antony Upton was not the first historian to use German archives, but he did come to rather different conclusions to Finnish historians, in that he argued that the wartime leadership willingly entered into a relationship with Nazi Germany to engage in war with the Soviet Union.

Upton's book appeared at a time when the Soviet-Finnish relationship was coming under real tension. Sensitive to the precarious nature of their country's independence, it is understandable that the generation that had experienced at first-hand the tumults of the 1940s reacted so sharply to Upton's conclusions. For them, the enemy was Russia, the former imperial power from which Finland had but recently escaped. That enemy was still a threat. Those politicians who had led Finland into the so-called Continuation War were now in the shadows. The re-emergence of one of

their number, the social democratic ex-foreign minister Väinö Tanner, was sufficient to provoke a minor crisis with the Soviet Union. And there remained the communist party, which harvested a quarter of the votes cast in the elections of 1958, a constant reminder of a still unresolved past.



**Image above:** Modern map of Finland (Copyright: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Mysid>)

Contrast this with where Upton was coming from – a former imperial power that had created its own mythology of turning defeat into victory over an evil opponent, that had been prepared to form an alliance with another devil to defeat Hitler, and that still imagined itself to be a great player on the chessboard of international politics. This is not to say that Upton's world-view was shaped by this – the fact that he argued that Finland did have a choice in 1940–41 would

suggest that he was far from seeing the country as a helpless pawn in the game of great power politics – but it was certainly present in the subsequent debate about his book.

The twentieth century is replete with painful histories, and outsiders who have ventured into national tragedies have rarely been welcomed. Outsiders are less likely to be hampered by national myths and conventions, and more able to take up and discuss sensitive issues, though this does not free them entirely from their own preconceptions and prejudices. And all are affected by the intellectual, cultural and political climate prevailing at the time of their research.

This was especially so in Finland during the 1960s and 1970s. That Upton's major work, *The Finnish Revolution 1917–18*, which appeared in 1980, was rather positively received in Finland is an indication of how far the national dial had shifted. Whilst the reintegration of the left into the national discourse can be attributed to political developments and the part played by President Kekkonen, much of the bitterness and bile of the civil war and its aftermath was drained by the painstaking and patient research of Finnish historians.

There had always been a desire to understand and to seek reconciliation, even immediately after the civil war. The rhetoric of foreign bayonets and evil Bolshevik intentions was never able to mask the tragic fact that it was the people, in whom Finnish nationalists placed their hopes, who had in large measure taken up arms in a chaotic and economically desperate situation. But it took the passage of time, and the emergence of a new form of national consolidation, and perhaps a new generation of scholars more sympathetic to the methods of sociological research, for a new and more balanced account of a national tragedy to emerge.

The controversy over the interim peace of 1940–41 demonstrates where an outside observer can be of value in opening up debate by asking questions that either do not occur so readily or apparently in the native discourse, or cannot be asked, for one reason or another. It goes without saying that the outsider must be well equipped to carry out the task. A thorough knowledge not only of the language(s) but also the culture has to be allied with an ability to restrain one's own cultural preferences/inclinations/pre-conceptions. There has to be a basic empathy and understanding, and definitely no preconceived notions. A comparative perspective, on the other hand, is very useful, though it should never be overplayed.



**Image above:** *The flag of Finland*

There is a good case for comparing Finland and Ireland; both experienced difficult births as independent states, and both have had to define their relationship with an imperial power on the doorstep. By focusing on the more abstract questions, rather than specific circumstances (for example, the range of options available to a small state within the geopolitical ambit of a large one), some interesting but tentative conclusions might be reached. One might also ask why, of the 'new states' of the period 1917–22, Finland (and perhaps Ireland) managed to remain a democracy

and was able to develop a successful economy and a stable society. A very tight rein must be kept on speculation, but this is one area of research in which the non-native can profitably engage.

I want now to look at another case in which outsiders looked at Finland without the knowledge or the ability to restrain their own prejudices. The concept of ‘finlandisation’ that emerged in the 1970s still buzzes around the body politic in Finland like an annoying fly. There was a very evident desire to discard this label by becoming a fully integrated member of the European Union in the debate over membership in the 1990s.

Although regarded as pejorative and demeaning, the term does still pop up in Finnish politics, as in the 2014 debate over the decision to approve a Russian-built nuclear plant. More recently, ‘finlandisation’ has been proposed and opposed as a model for future Russian-Ukraine relations. The Danish scholar Hans Mouritzen has argued that in a multipolar world with weak institutions, and where the alternative can be chaos and war, finlandisation is better than its reputation. Roger Cohen has even spoken of the finlandisation of America under Donald Trump (*New York Times*, July 2018)<sup>1</sup>.

The point is, ‘finlandisation’ is a term invented by Cold Warriors for political purposes. It should have no more relevance to research than does the term ‘Dunkirk spirit’. Its continued use hampers serious efforts to evaluate a crucial period not just in Finland’s political, but also social, cultural and economic history. And it is an example of the ways in which foreigners ignorant and uncaring about the ostensible subject of their critique can cause major damage.

Continuity, it seems to me, has been very important to Finns and their development as a state and nation. One of the themes beloved of political scientists, historians and publicists during the years in which I was actively involved in Finnish studies was that of ‘long lines’, strands of political thought and action that could be traced back to the emergence of an identifiable and distinct state, and even beyond.

The two dominant determinants were a constitutionalism rooted in the inheritance from eighteenth-century Sweden, and a kind of pragmatic realism derived from the experience of preserving autonomous statehood under the Russian Empire. It was the second strand that prevailed after 1944. In a way, the re-evaluation of the Russo-Finnish relationship of the nineteenth century in a more positive light was part and parcel of the foreign policy that so dominated Finnish political life in the 1960s and 1970s.

With the ending of the Cold War, the adoption of a new constitution in 1999, and Finland’s entry into the European Union, much has changed. Climate change, an ageing population, globalisation and the impact of immigration on Finnish society and identity are new elephants for Finns to consider. What of non-Finnish researchers? The overwhelming domination of English, plus the decline in language teaching in this country, has certainly made it more difficult to persuade British students to take a real interest in research involving other European languages. Let us hope that Michael Branch’s sheer determination to learn and his abiding enthusiasm, which firmly established Finnish studies at SSEES, can act as an inspiration.

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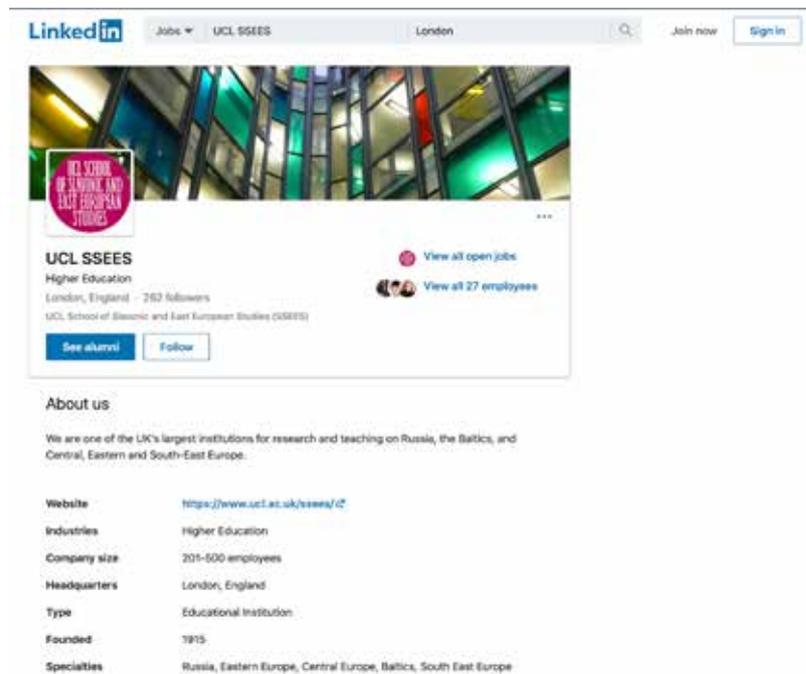
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/09/opinion/trump-nato-summit-europe.html>

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# UPDATES, EVENTS & NEWS

## Coronavirus update:

For details about the upcoming academic year, please refer to the UCL FAQ, which is being constantly updated.



## SSEES Alumni Events:

**26 Nov 2020, 6.30pm in Taviton Street**

*Technology upgrading of Eastern Europe:  
A talk by Professor Slavo Radosevic*

Our usual food and drink get-together will take place afterwards. Further information will follow. We look forward to seeing many of you in November.

## SAVE THE DATE!



## SSEES Alumni News:

We were very sad to learn of the death of Trevor I. V. Thomas on 30 May 2020 at the age of eighty-six. Trevor was an undergraduate and postgraduate at the School during the late 1950s and early 1960s and a hugely popular member of the SSEES community.

Please read Professor Martyn Rady's obituary of Trevor:

**<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/news/2020/jun/obituary-trevor-thomas-1934-2020>**

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### **SSEES Alumni Association**

#### **Committee Members:**

Peter Duncan, Angela Garrett, Hugo Allen,  
Irena Maryniak and Katya Kocourek

Our invaluable admin support: Claudia Roland  
and Lisa Walters

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