

## **Rockefeller Philanthropies in Revolutionary Russia**

*by Thomas E. Rosenbaum*

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As the new Rockefeller philanthropies of the 1910s and 1920s sought to meet their general goal of improving the well-being of mankind, they soon faced the challenge of how best to help people in Soviet Russia, a nation experiencing serious social and political upheaval. As foundation officers examined and discussed the needs of Soviet society, they wrote about its political organization and ideology - a departure from an evolving approach to philanthropic administration devoid of overt political calculation.

The reaction of the Rockefeller philanthropies to the Soviet Union suggests that decisive political events posed a challenge for Rockefeller philanthropic officers. Such events proved troublesome partly because the philanthropies had initially chosen programs which focused on training an academic elite who would promote long-term social change, while the rhetoric of the Soviet revolution emphasized immediate social needs, only some of which called for academic activity. The Rockefeller Foundation and the International Education Board reacted with caution to the needs of early Soviet society and with misgivings and hostility to the politics.

Rockefeller Foundation (RF) files show that the early requests for aid to Soviet institutions were declined. These requests included appeals from a relief committee to assist with combatting a typhus epidemic, from the Bacteriological Institute of the Moscow School of Medicine, and from and on behalf of scientists seeking support to emigrate from the USSR to positions abroad. Richard M. Pearce, the Foundation's Director of Medical Education, reported and endorsed the observation of a representative of the National Information Bureau to the effect that it was more important to assist scientists who had remained in the Soviet Union, who also tended to be the better scientists.

On the other hand, relief for Russian exiles and for those seen as victims within the country was forthcoming from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM) on a relatively large scale, primarily in the 1923-1924 period, just prior to the time when the Memorial brought its own program into focus. LSRM support, part of a broader program of international emergency relief, was given through the Red Cross to assist refugees in Constantinople, and, through the American Relief Administration and Student Friendship Fund, to help defray the costs of shipping medical supplies, and to provide food for Russian professionals, intellectuals, and students.

By August of 1921, the RF had formulated a policy with respect to the Soviet Union. As expressed in a letter from RF President George Vincent to RF Chairman John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the Foundation would not assist relief efforts for a "crisis so vast that only government aid in generous amounts can cope." Rather, Vincent wrote, the RF expected "to render fundamental service to Russia by aiding in the rehabilitation of medical schools, training of public health officials . . . [and] establishing training centers." Speculating that the RF might be well advised to announce such intentions,

Vincent also noted "political complications" in the "Russian problem." The Soviet government would likely try to accept "credit" for improvements and the United States government and its allies would seek "to undermine the Soviet influence."

The anti-Soviet thinking of Western governments was shared by philanthropic officers. Alan Gregg, director of medical sciences for the RF, visited the USSR and wrote in 1927 of a Soviet government and society struggling gamely to improve medical care, reform agriculture, increase production, and improve literacy. Gregg mingled a tone of respect for these efforts and the devastation to be overcome with remarks that "Communism is a fanatic creed," and that "non-communists are too terrified and weary to . . . stage a counter-revolution." Gregg confessed a lack of objectivity, writing in conclusion, "Liberty is a strong instinct in many and is too precious an ideal to be abandoned even when one considers great advances made in its complete absence . . . A liberal . . . benevolent society still appeals to me as the best method of government yet devised." Selskar Gunn, RF vice-president, reflected a similar outlook in 1936. After a visit to the Soviet Union, he "left . . . with a general adverse opinion despite the fact that there are so many activities being undertaken in the Soviet Union which present admirable aspects and call for praise." Gunn admired work in science and health care and observed a very "restricted" atmosphere for the social sciences and, in a general vein, a "tremendous price paid in terms of human life and suffering."

In the context of these reservations, the International Education Board (IEB) gradually developed a program of fellowships for Soviet scientists, and the RF began to award grants for sending medical literature and small items of equipment to Soviet institutions. In discussing the IEB program in 1926, IEB director Wickliffe Rose commented that funding of science fellows had been rewarding, that the sciences were firmly established and "much more simple to deal with." Rose wrote, "The promotion of agricultural science in Russia is going to be an important field of activity for the Board. For the present, however, I think we need not try to go into it."

During World War II, when the Soviet Union and the United States had joined as allies, the Foundation's assistance, as represented in one grant, came to encompass an additional opening in the form of funding for a visit by Soviet public health observers, who saw such American institutions as the "Army Medical School, Bayne Jones' typhus group in the surgeon General's office, and the National Research Council."

The advent of the Cold War saw the Foundation extending support to American universities, such as Harvard and Columbia, for Russian Studies programs. The Foundation's postwar approach to the Soviet revolution reflected both an academic approach to areas of concern and American society's reluctance to maintain contact with Soviet society.

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