INTRODUCTION

Is it possible to look out over the Ural Mountains and see Appalachia? To find the character of the American West in the vast open space of Siberia? To smell the citrus and feel the warm sun of the Black Sea coast and be struck with a sense of Florida?

This book is based on just such an idea: that we can look beyond our borders and discover fundamental realities about places that transcend differences of culture, language, and politics. Five American and four Russian geographers wrote this book to provide glimpses of understanding about the United States and Russia. Despite the size and power of our two nations and more than seventy years of cold war, we seem to have a meager comprehension of each other, perhaps because each country is so often viewed as a monolith and we emphasize our differences, rather than similarities.

The authors of this book worked together in the hopes of overcoming some misimpressions of the past. Beyond Borders became an experiment - an attempt to compare the United States and Russia by pairing up and analyzing eleven regions. We have therefore taken the rather risky step of suggesting similarities between New England and Novgorod, between Odessa and New Orleans, between Moscow and New York. But perhaps the time has never been more appropriate for such a new approach to geography because so many people seem adrift on the changing world.
map. In an era when established states are breaking up, new alliances are forming, and the very idea of state sovereignty is being transformed, we may begin to question whether all these lines on the map actually mean anything to people. Is there an underlying “real” geography which can provide an anchor?

We believe that our regional scheme is somewhat like the well-trodden paths on our campuses. People have an innate sense of the best routes, even when architects lay out concrete sidewalks to the contrary. In writing our book, we have tried to reveal the long trampled footpaths of real borders and regions, not the paved political boundaries that often have little meaning for the lives and fates of human beings.

While we do not try to minimize the differences between Russia and America, we observed that people in the two countries have many similarities in the way they spread across the continents, adapted to various environments, conquered or absorbed indigenous people, and molded their respective geographies into a set of regions. But how should that set be defined since the delineation of regions is in part dependent on the criteria selected?

We decided to take a particular historic and cultural viewpoint in selecting the eleven region-pairs of Beyond Borders. We began with the realization that the majority groups in both Russian and American society were offspring of European parents whose seed was transplanted into a North and South hearth in each country. But between these two seedbed regions, something new was born: a Core area which was to become all that one could define as uniquely American or Russian. American democracy was as alien to Europe as Russian autocracy, yet for all their differences, these two Core regions were similar in the creation of two novel cultures on the map.

As the new Russian and American societies burst out into the interiors of their respective continents, a series of regions was formed, remarkably similar in their

Letter written to a friend April 26, 1935:

You say, “Russia is not just a state...she is a super-state, an ocean, elements as yet unformed, not yet pulled to its destined shore. [She has] not yet begun to sparkle in a sharp and limited understanding of her own uniqueness, as the gemstone begins to glitter within the rough diamond. She is still in anticipation, restlessness, endless desire, and endless organic possibilities. Russia is an ocean of land which has swept up a whole one-sixth of the earth, holding both East and West together by the touch of her open wings. ~ N.K. Rerikh, The Elected, Moscow, Sovetskaya Rossiya publ., 1979, p. 303; transl. by K. Braden
function and characteristics: the Heartlands of industrial muscle, the food-supplying Breadbaskets, the orphaned no-man's-land Crossroads, the eerie Old Mountains, the Tropical South playgrounds, the arid “Mexistans”, and the vast expanses of Land Ocean that were the American West and Siberia. The waves of conquest and settlement moved east and west respectively and finally met up at the Pacific Edge along a touchstone called Alaska.

Could such an exercise be carried out for any two states on earth? Probably not, because we believe that the United States and Russia are unique in their historic and spatial parallels. Even the geographic changes in what was the USSR have confirmed some of the principles the authors foresaw at the beginning of this project. Many of the republics which made up the USSR never really belonged in Russia as a wider cultural realm, but were more like colonies. At the same time, beneath the arbitrarily drawn boundaries of the republics, there was an underlying but hidden “real” geography which may yet emerge politically into something more than Russia, perhaps a recognition of the term “Rossiya”, loosely translated as “All Russia”. Rossiya includes areas (such as North Kazakhstan) which have large Russia populations and where the cultures and histories of local people were well intertwined with that of Russia. Our scheme in this book, therefore, goes beyond the current political borders to focus on a larger geography - on Rossiya.

At the same time, NAFTA, or the North American Free Trade Agreement, as well as separatist movements in Canada, hint that the North American map itself may not be beyond a redefining of political boundaries in the future. The experiment of Beyond Borders suggests that the printed lines on paper maps shift and reform constantly to reflect realities of human society.

In designing our scheme, the authors found that some geographic entities have no regional analogs. Thus, California is largely excluded from our book. By way of
apology, the authors can only state with reverence that there is probably no counterpart to California anywhere on the entire globe. While our book emphasizes similarities between the two countries, we should note that the differences between Russian and American outlooks that surfaced during the book writing were much more serious than mere matters of politics or geographic style. If you asked one of our American authors to discuss a region (“what is the Heartland all about”?), he began by describing now. If you asked one of the Russian team, “what is the South all about?”, he usually started in the 9th century and eventually worked his way up to modern times. For the Russian authors, the joint work of the two geography teams quite validated Henry Ford’s argument that to Americans, the only history worth a damn is that which we make today. In their view it is the relatively young nature of American society that makes the present the only relevant tense. In turn, the American authors began to appreciate how deeply Russian identity is grounded in time, almost as if Russia lives in the past and the future and cares little about the present. This contrast in the perception of history is only one example of how in attempting to create understanding of counterpart regions in America and Russia, we learned much more about ourselves in each country than we had expected.

But perhaps we should not have been surprised. After all, our idea in writing Beyond Borders was to open up windows to each other’s countries, but the glass that lets us look through to another place often reflects back as well. One of our Russian authors said it best, “you can’t see yourself, without holding up a mirror.”