

EXCERPT

IVP Academic

Opening the Red Door *The Inside Story of Russia's First Christian Liberal Arts University*

September 17, 2019 | \$30, 260 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-5261-1

After the Berlin Wall fell, a group of Christian colleges in the US seized the opportunity to help build a faith-based university in Moscow. Told by the school's founder and president, this is the story of the rise and fall of the first accredited Christian liberal arts university in Russia's history, offering unique insight into Russia's post-Communist transition and the construction of a cultural-educational bridge between the two superpowers.

The Red Door Slowly Opens

Rapid-fire political and cultural changes set the context for Western educational leaders who wanted to participate in the reform of Russian higher education. Gaining an understanding the traumatic changes in the USSR was essential in terms of explaining both the opportunities and the challenges for faculty and administrators who decided to take advantage of the possibilities for educational exchanges. Gorbachev and his successor, Boris Yeltsin, attempted to reshape a nation that was struggling to survive. Its top-down autocratic leadership was being tested, and the drive to remake Russia into a normal country proved to be a difficult task.

One sign of the changing, tumultuous times took place on the evening of December 31, 1989. A longstanding Soviet custom called for the leader of the Communist Party to address the nation just before the stroke of midnight and the start of the New Year. Unlike previous speeches, which usually were self-congratulatory, Gorbachev acknowledged that 1989 had been "the most difficult year of *perestroika*," and he admitted that his economic reforms had encountered "heavy weather." He ended his speech by pleading for "reason and kindness, patience and tolerance."

For the first time, Lenin's name was not mentioned in the traditional address; Lenin was out, and religion was in. One of the principal television channels featured a roundtable of clergymen discussing the human values of faith and a sermon by a metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church. As US Ambassador Jack Matlock noted, the contrast with the past was striking because previously the mass media only mentioned religion to attack it. A week later, when the Russian Orthodox Church observed Christmas according to the Gregorian calendar, the entire three-hour service in one of Leningrad's cathedrals was televised. Changes within the USSR in politics, economics, and religion marched ahead, while outside the borders of the USSR, Eastern European members of the Warsaw Pact were declaring their independence.

When the wall came down in Berlin, a number of member institutions of the Christian College Coalition (CCC) asked the coalition staff to organize a strategy session to discuss opportunities for faculty and student exchanges with Soviet universities. The coalition was established in 1976 by thirty-eight faith-based liberal arts colleges and universities and grew to seventy-six institutions by 1990. This initiative, the first of its kind for the CCC, was launched with a sense of urgency, since no one knew for sure how long this window of opportunity would last. In response, coalition President Myron Augsburger agreed that the coalition would host a strategy session on "Initiatives in the Soviet Union" in Washington, DC, on December 21, 1989. Delegates from nine coalition colleges and universities attended the session, along with leaders from other evangelical student ministries engaged in educational exchanges.

The consensus of the participants called for the coalition to take the lead in setting up a study program in the Soviet Union that would be available to students from schools that were too small to organize their own program, and also for the coalition to serve as a coordinator for member institutions committed to starting their own "sister" relationships with



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"Although the Russian-American Christian University has now closed, its history as told by its president John Bernbaum is both important and fascinating—and a riveting read. The university's twenty-five-year existence is a story of Russia's fraught transition out of communism and of extraordinary feats of international cooperation, a nearly unbelievable record of perseverance through official roadblocks and of unanticipated achievement by Russian students, and a moving account of deep person-to-person friendships."

Mark Noll, author of *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*

Soviet universities. By serving as a networker, the coalition could collect information on existing exchange programs and share lessons learned from their experiences.

No one knew what lay ahead. In my years of work with the CCC, dating back to 1976, I had the growing conviction that Christian colleges were not considered major players in the world of higher education in America, but now we were being given an opportunity to engage in educational exchanges with America's Cold War rival, the Soviet Union.

Because many coalition schools had graduates working with various mission agencies and student ministries in Eastern Europe and the USSR and therefore had relations with church leaders in this region, we had advantages in terms of building networks with contacts in this part of the world. While we did not know what would happen in terms of political and economic changes, we could sense that extraordinary opportunities were opening up, and we had a passion to pursue them.

—Taken from chapter one, *"The Red Door Slowly Opens"*

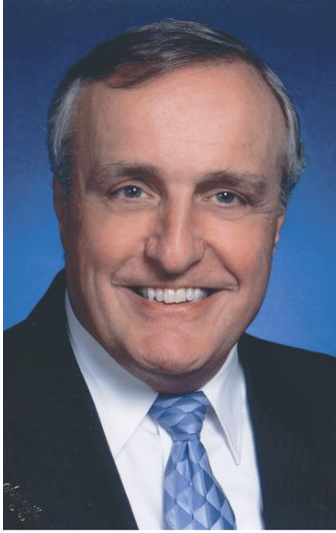


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John A. Bernbaum (PhD, University of Maryland) worked for the US Department of State from 1972 to 1976 and then spent nearly two decades with the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities in Washington, DC, where he founded and directed the American Studies Program, served as CCCU executive vice president, and developed the Russian Studies Program. He also served as president and CEO of the Russian-American Christian University (RACU) in Moscow, from 1996 to 2011. He is the author of *Why Work?* and *Perspectives on Peacemaking*. Bernbaum is also president and CEO of BEAM Inc., where he searches for ministry partners in the post-Communist world (who are committed to raising the next generation of young Christian leaders), creates networks between them, and recommends grants to BEAM's board of trustees. He lives in Rockville, Maryland.

The Story of Russia's First Christian Liberal Arts University

What led to the writing of *Opening the Red Door*?

John A. Bernbaum: The extraordinary Soviet government invitation in 1990 to establish a Christian liberal arts university in Moscow led to a long adventure in faith for both the Americans and Russians involved. The university's board of trustees encouraged me to record not only the factual history but also how people-to-people relationships overcame decades of animosity between the Cold War rivals and how we learned that spiritual renewal and education "through the eyes of faith" are foundational in rebuilding broken societies. Being a historian by training and passion, I readily agreed.

What vital components had to come together to build the first Christian liberal arts university in Russia?

John: The goal of the Russian-American partnership in building the first Christian liberal arts university in the country was to equip bright Russian students for future leadership roles in their communities, churches, and nation after decades of marginalization because of their Christian faith. Planting seeds of a just, peaceful, and vibrant new Russia following the collapse of Communism required both vision and cultural compromise by staff, faculty, and volunteers from both countries. We worked together to rebuild educational and spiritual foundations—including rediscovery by the Russian people of their own rich spiritual heritage—and to instill hope in the future.

What are the top three contributions your book makes to the scholarly community?

John:

1. The book offers a ground-level view of life during the tumultuous years of Russia's transition from Communism and helps explain the unprecedented trauma that Russians experienced after the seventy-year rule of the Communist Party. It describes the social and moral strain that affected the lives of ordinary people as well as the political and economic pressures commonly described by journalists.
2. *Opening the Red Door* assesses the role of Western advisors and governments who frequently misdiagnosed the crisis in Russia. The secularism of Westerners and many in Russian leadership circles did little to assist the people living through the trauma of five radical transitions (political, economic, military/imperial, social, and moral/spiritual). Lessons can be learned from resulting failed policies that convinced most Russians that democracy meant corruption and impoverishment.
3. The power of voluntary people-to-people diplomacy stands out in this story as individuals on their own initiative achieved great results by working in the private sector, building nonprofit organizations and related networks that brought healing and restoration.

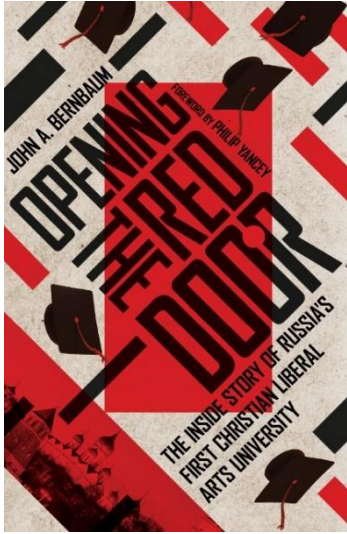


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"The history of establishing a university could be dry and boring. However, in light of the upheavals taking place in Russia during that time, a word such as boring does not apply to this book. Opening the Red Door reads more like a spy thriller."

From the foreword by **Philip Yancey**

How is this an extension of your previous work as a scholar and teacher?

John: My previous work as a scholar and teacher focused on equipping university students and young professionals to be faithful disciples of Jesus in their work, to see their careers as ministry opportunities using insights shaped by God's Word. After twenty years of challenging students to be "change agents," I felt called to leave the classroom and put my faith to work in post-Communist Russia.

What do you hope readers learn from *Opening the Red Door*?

John:

- Christian leaders who have a vision for impacting the world in the name of Jesus and who want to learn from the experiences of those who have engaged in frontline ministry, especially in difficult authoritarian settings.
- Christian educators who want to see faith-based schools and universities created to train the laity to serve God in their countries.
- People of faith who understand that their deep convictions can make a difference in our broken world and will be encouraged by stories of ministries that made important inroads.
- Scholars who are interested in seeing how religion impacts international relations and how secularism fails to explain the realities of a world that is increasingly religious, not becoming less so.
- People who are interested in the history of Russia and the Soviet Union and interested in how Communism collapsed in America's Cold War rival.
- People involved in missions who want to hear how dynamic ministries can be created and energized to take on significant tasks, despite what appears to be overwhelming obstacles. And how the original plans for a ministry can take on surprising new forms, often not what the original participants expected.
- Church youth leaders and university ministry staff who want their students to read stories to expand their vision for how they could use their lives in service.



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