ROBERT ALLEN KOPACK, Ph.D.

Senior Faculty Instructor, Department of Geography, University of South Carolina
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EDUCATION

2020 Ph.D., Geography, University of Toronto
Dissertation: The Afterlives of Soviet Secret Cities: Environment and Political Economy in Defense Industry Sites in Kazakhstan after 1991
Supervisors: Robert Lewis and Matthew Farish; Committee: Lynne Viola and Rajyashree Narayanareddy

2013 M.S., Geography, Michigan State University
Thesis: Monuments and Memory in the Landscapes of Kazakhstan
Supervisor: Kyle Evered

2006 B.A., University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado. Double Major: History; Russian Studies (with Honors)

THEORETICAL AND RESEARCH INTERESTS

Human-environment relations; political economy of ruination, abandonment, and post-industrial decline; defense-industrial landscapes, secret cities, and the security state; toxic legacies; commercial space development and the political geography of outer space; historical geography and public land policy; science, technology and society studies; urban restructuring; landscape, memory, and place. Regions: Kazakhstan and the former Soviet Union; the United States; the Global South.

LANGUAGES

English (Native); Russian (Fluent); Polish (Fluent); German (Beginner); Turkish (Beginner); Kazakh (Beginner)

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

2026- **Senior Faculty Instructor**
Department of Geography, University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina

2020-26 **Faculty Instructor**
Department of Geography, University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina

2017 **Visiting Scholar**
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of Geography, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

2013-16 **Research and Teaching Assistant**
University of Toronto Department of Geography and Planning. Toronto, Canada.

Administrative Appointments

2022-2026 **Transfer Credit Coordinator**
Division of Enrollment Management, Office of the Registrar. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina

2021 **Dean's Advisor, Undergraduate Student Affairs and Advising**
McCausland College of Arts and Sciences Office of the Dean. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina

Affiliations

2021- **Faculty Associate**
Walker Institute, University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina

PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

Book in Progress

Kopack, Robert. *The Perfect Little City: The Salvage Frontier of the Cold War in Kazakhstan.* In preparation for the University of Toronto Press (manuscript solicited).

Edited Special Issue

2021 Androus, Zachary, Magdalena Stawkowski, and **Robert Kopack**, eds. *Theorizing Special Territorial Status and Extraterritoriality.* Special Issue *Culture, Theory and Critique* 62(1-2). Includes co-authored introduction (pp. 1-6). Co-edited 7 articles through peer-review.

Articles

2026 **Kopack, Robert** and Magdalena Stawkowski**.** "Governing by Fragments: Soviet Ruins and the Architecture of Unaccountability." *Journal of Disaster Studies* 3(1): 113-142.

2025 **Kopack, Robert.** "Monotown Futures: Toxic Waste, Civic Protest, and Governance Struggles in Stepnogorsk, Kazakhstan." *Central Asian Survey*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2025.2542266

- Flagship journal of Central Asia area studies

2021 **Kopack, Robert.** "Baikonur 2.0: "Inland-Offshore" Space Economies in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 62(1-2): 96-112. https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2021.1929363

2019 **Kopack, Robert.** "Rocket Wastelands in Kazakhstan: Authoritarian Governance and the Baikonur Cosmodrome." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers.* 109(2): 556-567, special issue "Environmental Governance in Authoritarian and Populist Regimes." https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2018.1507817

- Flagship journal of the American Association of Geographers
- Reprinted in James McCarthy, ed., *Environmental Governance in an Authoritarian/Populist Era* (New York: Routledge, 2020)

PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP AND WRITING

2025 **Kopack, Robert.** "The Starbase Rocket Testing Facility is Permanently Changing the Landscape of Southern Texas." *The Conversation*, January 17.

- 23,809 reads as of August 29, 2026

2023 **Kopack, Robert.** "Colonizing the Earth or Colonizing Mars? A Reflection on Landscape and SpaceX in Texas." *Engagement*, August 10. (the online publication of the Anthropology and Environment Society, a section of the American Anthropological Association)

ACTIVE RESEARCH STREAMS AND FIELDWORK

1) Kazakhstan. Defense industrial site closure projects and urban political-economic restructuring.
Locations: Baikonur Cosmodrome, Stepnogorsk, Sary Shagan. (2015-present)
Role: Principal Investigator

2) United States. Commercial space development and US land use policy, in comparative frame with post-Soviet defense-industrial sites.
Locations: Boca Chica, Texas; Cocoa Beach, Florida. (2022-present)
Role: Principal Investigator

GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Internal – University of South Carolina

2025-26 *McCausland College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Research Initiative*. University of South Carolina. "The Starbase Paradox: High-Tech Futures and Left-Behind Communities in South Texas." $10,000. Awarded.

2024 *Walker Institute of International and Area Studies. Faculty Research Grant*. University of South Carolina. "Beyond the Cosmos: The Baikonur Cosmodrome and Global Governance of the Commercial Space Industry." PI. $4000. Awarded.

External

2012 *International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), Individual Advanced Research Opportunity (IARO).* Four-month thesis fieldwork and archival research in Kazakhstan. PI. $10,500. Awarded.

2012 *Foreign Language Areas Studies* (FLAS) Academic Year Fellowship, Turkish. Michigan State University. PI. $33,500. Awarded.

2011 *Museums, Community, and Collaborations Abroad Educational Grant.* "Nuclear Weapons Legacy: The Tale of Two Cultures." Atomic Testing Museum (Nevada) and the Karaganda EcoMuseum (Kazakhstan). Co-PI. $120,000. Awarded.

2011 Northern Eurasian Earth Science Partnership Initiative (NEESPI). Irkutsk. *Land Use Change on Nuclear Ground: The Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site as Research Laboratory and Traditional Pastureland.* $6,000. Awarded; declined in lieu of other funding.

External – Submitted, Not Funded

2025 *Wenner Gren Foundation. Post-PhD Research Grant.* "Coastal Community Responses to Commercial Space Development in Texas." $25,000. (submitted April 2025; resubmission in preparation for the November 1, 2026 deadline).

2024 *National Science Foundation* (HEGS) #2447256: "Boca Chica and the Road to Mars: Cultural Geography, Land Use Policy and the Impacts of SpaceX in Texas." PI. $316,582. *Comparative study incorporating the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan. Submitted, not funded.*

2023 *National Science Foundation* (HEGS) #135400-24-65742. Colonizing Boca Chica: A Cultural Geographic Study of the Environmental and Community Impacts of SpaceX Ground Based Space Launch Installations in South Texas." PI. $127,826.00. *Comparative study incorporating the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan. Submitted, not funded.*

Graduate Awards

2015 *Association of American Geographers* (AAG)/*National Science Foundation* (NSF), International Geographical Union (IGU) annual convention in Moscow, Russia. $1200. Awarded.

2015 *Less Commonly Taught Languages* (LCTL). Award, Kazakh language study, Almaty, Kazakhstan. University of Toronto. $4,350. Awarded.

2014 *Graduate Improvement Award for Travel and Research, Department of Geography and Planning,* University of Toronto. $1000. Awarded.

2012 *Graduate Office Fellowship (GOF).* Department of Geography, Michigan State University. Summer research in Kazakhstan. PI. $1,500. Awarded.

2012 *Departmental Conference Funding Award.* Department of Geography, Michigan State University. To present a paper at the American Association of Geographers Meeting, New York, NY. $850. Awarded.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2025 American Association of Geographers (AAG). Detroit, Michigan. March 24-28. Presenter: *Environmental Policy and the New Space Race in Texas.*

2024 American Anthropological Association (AAA). Tampa, Florida. November 20-23. Presenter: *Space X: Landscape, Technology, and the State of Exception Reserved for Rockets.*

2019 American Association of Geographers (AAG). Washington D.C. April 3-7. Presenter: *Monotown Renaissance: Waste, Governance, and Boosterism in Stepnogorsk, Kazakhstan.*

2019 Island Dynamics. Special Territorial Status and Extraterritoriality: Exceptional Sovereignties and Sovereign Exceptions. Longyearbyen, Svalbard. January 20-24. Presenter: *Former Closed Cities in Kazakhstan: Governance and the New Political Economies of Industrial Reinvestment and Decline.*

2018 American Association of Geographers (AAG). New Orleans, Louisiana. April 10-14. Presenter: *Rocket Wastelands in Kazakhstan: Scientific Authoritarianism and the Baikonur Cosmodrome.*

2018 The Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES). Boston, Massachusetts. December 6-9. Presenter: *From Secret to Spectacle: Bioweapons, Uranium, Rare Earths and the Post-Soviet Afterlives of Stepnogorsk, Kazakhstan.*

2016 American Association of Geographers (AAG). San Francisco, California**.** March 29-April 2. Presenter: *Commercializing the Naval of the World: Information, Ecology, and the Baikonur Cosmodrome*

2015 International Geographic Union (IGU). Moscow, Russia. August 17-21. Presenter: *Yuri Gagarin, Abay Kunanbayev, and Karlag: Monuments and Memory in the Landscape of Karaganda.*

2015 American Association of Geographers (AAG). Chicago, Illinois. April 21-25. Presenter: *Is There a Future to the Soviet Past in Kazakhstan: New Monuments to Heroic Figures and Baleful Episodes.*

2014 The Canadian Association of Geographers Ontario Division (CAGONT). Toronto, Ontario. October 24-25. Presenter: *Is there a Soviet Present in Kazakhstan: New Nationalism and Old Figures in Karaganda's Everyday Landscapes.*

2014 Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES). San Antonio, Texas. November 20-23. Presenter: *Roadside Picnic in Kurchatov: Science Fiction in the Landscapes of Kazakhstan.*

2013 Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES). Boston, Massachusetts. November 21-24. Presenter: *Reading the Russian Villain in the X Files: The Waning Use-Value of the Cold War in American Popular Imagination.*

2013 American Association of Geographers (AAG). Los Angeles, California. April 9-14. Presenter: *Refashioning the Soviet Techno-Industrial Landscape for a New Kazakh Future.*

2012 Northern Eurasian Earth Science Partnership Initiative (NEESPI). Irkutsk June 24-July 2. Presenter**:** *Land Use Change on Nuclear Ground: The Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site as Research Laboratory and Traditional Pasture Land.* (unable to present in person due to visa restrictions).

2012 American Association of Geographers (AAG). New York, New York. February 24-28. Presenter: *The Power of Symbols in Kazakhstan: Memorial Landscapes and Contested Memories.*

2012 The Association of Central Eurasian Students (ACES). Bloomington, Indiana. March 3. Presenter: *Neglected by Neoliberalism: Soviet Memorial Landscapes in Transition.*

PANELS ORGANIZED AND CHAIRED AT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

2017 American Association of Geographers (AAG). Boston, Massachusetts. April 5-9. Panel Organizer: *Geographies of the Wasteland.* Presenter: *Kazakhstan's Defense Installations and Emergent Economies of Ruin.*

2015 The Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES). Philadelphia. November 19-22. Panel Chair/Presenter: *From the Cold War to the Global Market: Baikonur and the Legacies of the Soviet Space Program.*

INVITED LECTURES AND SEMINARS

2026 The Greater Piedmont Chapter of the Explorers Club. "Kazakhstan, Soviet Military Legacies: Cold War Secrets, Urban Ruins, Exploration and Fieldwork in Human Geography." January 8. Invited lecture.

2025 University of South Carolina, Department of Geography. South Carolina Geographic Alliance (GEOFEST). "Kazakhstan Secret Cities: Research and Teaching." Invited lecture. February 8.

2023 University of South Carolina, Department of Social Work. "Public Health Transitions in Kazakhstan's Defense Industrial Cities after 1991." October 10. Invited graduate seminar speaker.

2022 University of South Carolina. Department of Anthropology, Colloquium. "Rocket Wastelands, Secret Cities, and the Politics of Global Space Commerce in Kazakhstan." October 27. Invited lecture.

2017 University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Department of Geography. "The Afterlives of Closed Cities." Invited lecture. November 19. Invited lecture.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

2023 Intercultural Inclusion and Diversity Learning (IIDL) Certificate Program University of South Carolina Center for Teaching Excellence

2022 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) University of South Carolina Center for Teaching Excellence

2021 Implicit Bias Workshop. University of South Carolina Center for Teaching Excellence

2021 Safe Zone Ally Training and Workshop. University of South Carolina Center for Teaching Excellence

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Undergraduate Courses

- *Foundations in Geography* (100-level; University of South Carolina)
    - Taught: 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026
    - Significantly revised

- *Geographies of Global Change* (100-level)
    - Taught: 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024
    - Significantly revised

- *Understanding Other Cultures* (100-level)
    - Taught: 2020
    - Significantly revised

- *Comparing Cultures Through Film* (200-level)
    - Taught: 2020
    - Significantly revised

- *Geography of Europe* (200-level)
    - Taught: 2020
    - Significantly revised

- *Geography of Russia and Central Asia* (200-level)
    - Taught: 2026
    - New course

- *Landscape and Cultural Geography* (300-level)
    - Taught: 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024
    - Significantly revised

- *Senior Research Seminar* (400-level)
    - Taught: 2024, 2025, 2026
    - Significantly revised

STUDENT MENTORING

Chair: Undergraduate Honors Theses

Peter Caldwell. Title: "Could it be Cold War?: How Sino-American Tensions are Unfolding in the South Pacific."

- Completed: May 2025
- Runner up: William A. Mould Senior Thesis Award

Carlos Sanchez-Julia. Title: "Perceived Land Tenure and Agricultural Production in Ecuador's Mache-Chindul Reserve."

- Completed: May 2024
- Winner of William A. Mould Senior Thesis Award - recognizes excellence in research, creative endeavor or impact

Committee Member: Masters Theses

Iwalewa Olorunyumi. Title: "Unsettling Space: Race, Memory and Colonial Logics in Space Exploration" (Chair: Marc Moskowitz)

- Completed: May 2025

Alex Fulham. Title: "Twitter Analysis of Public Opinion in Sweden and Finland Regarding the Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Ascension to NATO." (Chair: Zhen Long Li)

- Completed: July 2023

John Rinehart. Title: "Logistics and the New Imaginary of Economic Development." (Chair: Connor Harrison)

- Completed: May 2022

External Committee Member

2025-2026 **Jay Nelson**. Title: in progress. Heathwood Hall Episcopal School. Senior Exhibition.

2024-2025 **Talbert Miller**. Title: "Social, Economic and Cultural Impacts of Wrestling in Dagestan." Heathwood Hall Episcopal School. Senior Exhibition.

SERVICE AND OUTREACH

Department

2024 Chair of Alumni Outreach, Department of Geography. Coordinated departmental alumni engagement and outreach program. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina.

2024- Faculty Advisor for the Geography Club. Department of Geography. Advise undergraduate club, mentoring student officers, and supporting programming. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina.

2024- Faculty Advisor for the Geography Honors Society (Gamma Theta Upsilon). Department of Geography. Advise the undergraduate honor society, mentoring student officers and supporting programming. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina.

2020-2024 Departmental Advisor. Department of Geography. Served as primary undergraduate academic advisor for the department. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina.

2021- Faculty Awards Committee. Department of Geography. Reviewed and selected departmental faculty award recipients. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina.

College

2020-25 Faculty Member of the Critical Ecologies Lab. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina.

University

2022-2026 Transfer Credit Coordinator. Division of Enrollment Management, Office of the Registrar. Evaluated and adjudicated incoming transfer credit for the Department of Geography, serving as the departmental point of contact for course equivalency decisions across the university's enrollment pipeline. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina.

2021 Dean's Advisor, Undergraduate Student Affairs and Advising, McCausland College of Arts and Sciences. Advised on undergraduate affairs and advising policy at the college level, supporting the Office of the Dean on student progression and curricular matters. University of South Carolina. Columbia, South Carolina.

FEATURED IN THE MEDIA

2025 "The Attitude" with Arnie Arnesen. Podcast. January 29.
https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/staff74238/episodes/2025-01-29T10_57_28-08_00

2022 "U.S. Officials Warn of Russian Cyber Attacks" WISNews10. February 27.
https://www.wistv.com/2022/02/27/us-officials-warn-cyber-attacks-amid-ukraine-crisis/

PEER-REVIEWER FOR SCHOLARLY JOURNALS

2026 *Political Geography* (revision)

2026 *Central Asian Survey*

2025 *Political Geography*

2025 *Case Studies in the Environment*

2024 *Geographical Review*

2022 *Central Asian Affairs*

2021 *Geoforum*

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

The American Association of Geographers (AAG)

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)

The Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES)

American Anthropological Association (AAA)