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Why Bother? The Importance of Russian History on the Canadian Campus

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Article abstract

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Why Bother? The Importance of Russian History on the Canadian Campus

DAVID SCHIMMELPENNINCK VAN DER OYE

Abstract

What is the state of Russian history on the Canadian campus today? This article addresses the question by discussing the subject's challenges in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. Much as in the United States, the Cold War made it de rigueur to "know the enemy," but since the "evil empire's" collapse over 20 years ago, the field has appeared to be less important to academic administrators. Nevertheless, no serious history department in Canada can claim to be comprehensive without counting in its midst at least one Russianist.

Résumé

À quoi ressemble l'histoire de la Russie sur les campus canadiens aujourd'hui? Le présent article se penche sur cette question en abordant les difficultés liées à ce sujet qui ont surgi après la chute de l'Union soviétique. À l'instar de ce qui se faisait aux États-Unis, il était de mise pendant la Guerre froide de « connaître l'ennemi », mais vu que « l'empire du mal » s'est effondré il y a plus de 20 ans, ce domaine d'études a perdu de son intérêt aux yeux des administrateurs universitaires. Malgré cela, aucun département d'histoire qui se respecte au Canada ne peut prétendre être exhaustif sans compter au moins un russe.

History is like the height of skirt hems or the width of neckties. Except that fashions here change from decade to decade rather than every season. Let's take the case of Russia. In North American universities, until the Soviet Union became Public Enemy Number One in the 1950s, the subject was very much on the margins. The case of one venerable American institution on Long Island Sound is a good example. In the late 1920s, It hired an émigré - George Vernadsky - mostly at the urging of one of its most distinguished Classicists, Michael Rotovtzeff.¹ Although the

scholar had begun publishing a monumental six-volume history of early Russia, in addition to writing a survey and a biography of Vladimir Lenin among other accomplishments, he languished at the research associate rank for nearly two decades. It was only when another university tried to poach him that Vernadsky was promoted.² However, during much of the Cold War, the History Department at that university's boasted three faculty members for the subject — one for the medieval period, a second for the Imperial era, and a third for the Soviet Union. Now the same department counts only a single specialist who, while still very active, is already in his sixties.

When I landed a tenure-stream position in 1997 at a modest Canadian university, I thought myself very lucky. For one thing, I was writing a dissertation about the distinctly unfashionable topic of diplomatic history. The fact that I had not gone beyond first base at three American Historical Association interviews earlier that year suggested that my job search would still take some time. Meanwhile, in the eyes of academic administrators, my geographical area of interest was not relevant in the wake of the Cold War's apparent conclusion. When the Russianist at Brock University retired in the mid-1990s, the dean suggested that a specialist in the more promising field of East Asian history replace him. The head of the History Department nevertheless felt strongly about the need to teach Russian history, and he reached a compromise with his dean. Why not look for someone who could teach *both* East Asian and Russian history? As it happened, my thesis was about Sino-Russian relations and I had studied both subjects in graduate school.

I began at Brock with three courses: a second-year modern East Asian survey, a third-year lecture course on the Russian Empire, and a seminar on the Russian Revolution. To teach the East Asian survey, the registrar had put me in one of the newest lecture halls, a large amphitheatre with all the hyper-modern accoutrements of the smart classroom, topped off by a state-of-the-art backlit screen. Some twenty undergraduate students enrolled. As for the Russian history course, the registrar had consigned me to a dank, semi-subterranean chamber on the furthest

reaches of campus equipped with a superannuated overhead projector. Yet nearly forty, or more than twice the number of students as in my East Asian course, wanted to learn about the Russian empire. Clearly Russian history has not yet gone the way of Sumer, Carthage, and Dzungaria, at least not in its appeal to the BIUs (Basic Income Units, or students) of our universities.

To confirm my suspicions about the subject's health on university campus, I recently conducted an informal poll among colleagues who also teach Russian history here in Canada. Most of those who replied reported that undergraduate enrolments remain relatively stable. The response of Dalhousie's Denis Kozlov is typical: "My understanding of the post-1991 trajectory is that, despite some earlier predictions that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, student interest in Russia would dwindle and disappear, this did not happen ... And since 2014, with the drastic (if ominous) increase in Russia's international significance, student interest has actually been growing."³

The decades after the evil empire's collapse are hardly the first time when the importance of studying Russian history has been questioned. In the early twentieth century, the University of Chicago's Russian instructor, Samuel Harper, actively discouraged a student from pursuing studies in his field since it comprised only "freaks and nuts."⁴ And immediately after World War II, Walter Kirchner a historian of Russia at the University of Delaware suggested that universities not offer courses in the subject despite growing interest. According to Kirchner, "To change the existing curriculum for the sake of this transitory fad by adding Russian history to the schedules of those colleges which have so far rejected it ... would mean nothing but giving in to a fad."⁵

Russian history was slow in coming to the Canadian university lecture hall. Indeed, the subject was slow in coming to any campus outside of Russia. The first chair in Slavic studies was established at the Collège de France in 1842. But its occupant was the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, and the chair had been founded during the July Monarchy as a gesture of sympathy to the nation after the unsuccessful revolt against tsarist rule a decade earlier.⁶ Politics also motivated the rise of Russian studies

in the Third Republic's early years. After the disastrous Prussian war, France began to look east for potential partners against its Teutonic nemesis. And towards the end of the nineteenth century, French investors prudently bought increasing amounts of tsarist government bonds, thereby becoming Imperial Russia's largest creditor. Both of these developments stimulated the need for chairs in Russian at other institutions, such as Paris' *École des Langues Orientales Vivantes* and *Université de la Sorbonne*, as well as the *Université de Lille*. One should equally note that one of the leading centres for the study of the subject is the *Oriental Languages school* in Paris, along with Mandarin, Arabic, and Hindi, among other Asian tongues (which suggests something about where the French think Europe's border with that continent really lies). Meanwhile, similar chairs had already been founded in Berlin, Breslau, and Vienna during the 1840s.

As Robert Byrnes points out, however, "the study of Russia in the United States ... [and] England was launched not by universities or by the government, but by gifted amateur scholars and journalists." Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, Bernard Pares, and George Kennan the Elder all come to mind. In the Anglo-Saxon world, it was the great literature of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov that first made Russia fashionable. However, the political convulsions of the early twentieth century also played a role. Nevertheless, before World War I, there existed only a handful of chairs in the United Kingdom and the United States. On this side of the ocean, the pioneer was Archibald Coolidge who began teaching Russian history at Harvard in the 1890s. Until 1914, Columbia was the only other American campus where the subject was offered.

Despite the Revolution of 1917, and the subsequent arrival of many learned émigrés, the situation did not really improve in the North American academy during the interwar years. A few institutions, such as Berkeley and Yale, added the study of Russian history to the curriculum, but even at those institutions it remained somewhat of a lonely child. Before World War II, Russian history simply was not a field that offered much promise for someone hoping to get a job at a North American university. As

David Engerman points out in *Know Thine Enemy*, although 140 dissertations had been written before the 1940s on topics related to Russia, they yielded only six successful academic careers in the US. And, of course, there were no Russian historians in Canadian universities until after World War II.⁷

To be sure the Cold War put Russian history in a permanent place on the curriculum of every department with any standing in both Canada and the United States. Although he does not venture above the 49th parallel, David Engerman tells the story about scholarship of the Soviet Union south of the border well. By most objective criteria, the field still seems to be an ongoing concern in Canada. According to the American Historical Association's annual guide to history departments in the United States and Canada, among the 36 Canadian universities it lists, 20 have one or more full-time positions.

The increased accessibility to archives, not to mention the country itself after the Soviet Union's fall in 1991, has greatly reinvigorated the subject. There is no shortage of books still being published by university presses, and about a dozen years ago three ambitious American scholars launched an important new journal in the field. And, as the older generation — many of whose members came of age in the sixties — retires, their heirs are far less consumed by ideological fervour, which has made for a more collegial and inclusive climate at academic conferences. Even specialisations long considered reactionary and outmoded, such as military and diplomatic history, and others dealing with dead, white, elite men with beards, have come out of the closet again.

Yet for some time now there has been a sense of unease on both sides of the border about the continued survival of Russian history. And not without some justification. For example, during the 1980s, Carleton, an institution that prides itself as being Canada's "capital university," had a flourishing Russian studies department, which included three historians. As on many campuses, Carleton has since merged Russia into a larger European studies programme. However, its history department has not replaced even one of the three Russianists it once employed when they retired. So far, the undergraduate survey remains on the

books only because one of the former troika, who attained emeritus status some years ago, still has the strength to teach it. By the same token, McGill University has made no effort to replace its specialist in the field. Meanwhile, when McMaster's Russian historian retired about ten years ago, his department advertised for a modern European historian to take his place. It was only through some political subterfuge by the chairman at the time that all of those who made the short list were Russianists. And, as mentioned earlier, although Brock did replace its Russianist, the dean really wanted a Sinologist.

The field remains vulnerable for the very same reasons that it flourished in the twentieth century's second half, namely the Cold War and its end. There are still "evil empires," but they now speak Mandarin, Arabic and Farsi rather than Russian. As a result, Sovietology is no more and enrolments in Russian language courses declined sharply in the 1990s. Although the Association for Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages in the United States reports that the latter have once again risen at a number of American universities, they are unlikely to return to the dizzying heights of the sixties and seventies.

Yet if these fields have imploded, Russian history continues to appeal to Canadian undergraduate and graduate students alike. According to Alexander Hill, who teaches the subject at the University of Calgary, "interest has certainly declined, but only to the extent that interest in History courses as a whole seems to have declined."⁸ Why is this so? Geopolitics no longer seems to motivate many of them. While the bear is still not cuddly, his claws now seem somewhat less menacing. To be sure the recent chill in relations with Russia has helped revive curiosity in its past. Corinne Gaudin at the University of Ottawa recently noted, "Pussy Riot, Olympics, Crimea, Ukraine, and especially Putin have shot enrolments up again this year."⁹ It remains to be seen if this is merely a temporary upsurge.

In a discussion about the revival of student demand for Russian language courses in American universities, one scholar suggested that there are three reasons, which he describes as "Pushkin, Putin, and Pasha." By Pushkin, he means the contin-

ued allure of Russia's rich literature and culture. "Putin" refers to the inherent interest in Muscovite politics, both domestically and internationally. As for Pasha, this is his shorthand for the recent influx of Russians in North America and the ease of travel there that make the country more familiar to American students.

All of these factors also play a role in the continued interest among Canadian students in Russian history. Like its remarkable culture, Russia's exotic and often violent history still excites the undergraduate imagination. There is an old French saying, "*heureux le peuple sans histoire!*" Russia, for good or for ill, has a great deal of history packed in the millennium of its existence as a nation. The Putin factor has also come to play a role. Russia may no longer be enemy number one. Yet despite its somewhat diminished military, it remains a great power that can still dramatically affect the course of world events. And the Pasha factor also accounts for interest in Russian history. It is not at all uncommon to hear Russian being spoken in Canadian university hallways and, while the country is not quite in the same league as Cuba, Florida or France as a vacation destination, it is much easier to travel there now.

In addition to the Pushkin, Putin, and Pasha factors, there is another reason why Russia continues to be important to history. More than perhaps any other nation, Russia has elements of, as Edward Said would put it, "self" and "other." Neither fully European, at least in the Occidental sense, nor entirely Oriental, it reflects the West in unusual and intriguing ways. This is particularly true in its intellectual and political life. Enlightened despotism, colonialism, nationalism, socialism, and robber baron capitalism are all important European phenomena. Among many others, they have been adopted at various times by Russians with great, indeed even excessive, zeal. This enthusiastic adoption often caused such phenomena to assumed exaggerated forms in Russia and its twentieth-century Soviet incarnation. Therefore, to understand Russia is also to understand ourselves.

Students clearly do not need to be convinced that, regardless of the reasons, Russia continues to occupy an important place in the history curriculum in Canada. The real challenge

is among department heads, deans, and provosts. Denis Kozlov puts it well:

Study only brings tangible results when study is consistent. The financial and administrative support for a particular discipline should not go away immediately after a region becomes ostensibly less important — because the importance will come back again. With regard to Russia-related fields, the withdrawal of support for them at some universities in the 1990s and early 2000s was a strategic mistake. Now Russia appears important again, but the necessary academic expertise and cadre are sometimes lacking. The conclusion is that, with a country as significant (and lately as volatile) as Russia, university investment in the teaching and research of its history will only be productive if the investment is long term and stable.¹⁰

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Endnotes:

- 1 Charles Halperin, "Russia and the Steppe: George Vernadsky and Eurasianism," *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 36 (1985): 55–194; N. N. Bolkhovitinov, *Russkie uchenye-emigranty (G. V. Vernadskii, M. M. Karpovich, M. T. Florinskii) i stanovlenie russistiki v SShA* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), 65–7.

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- 2 According to Yale apocrypha, Vernadsky was promoted at the insistence of George F. Kennan who apparently refused to accept an honorary doctorate from an institution that did not properly recognize the historian. Kennan denies the story. George F. Kennan, letter to author, 8 December 1997. Charles Halperin explains that the job offer from the University of London led to Vernadsky's promotion. Halperin, "Russia and the Steppe," 37.
- 3 Denis Kozlov, e-mail message to author, 24 January 2015.
- 4 In David C. Engerman's *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.
- 5 Walter Kirchner, "The Place of Russian History in the Curriculum of American Universities," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 32:2 (1946): 298.
- 6 Jerzy Axer, "Présentation" in *Les Slaves: Cours du Collège de France*. Paris," ed. Adam Mickiewicz (Paris: Klincksieck, 2005), vi–xii.
- 7 Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 13.
- 8 Alexander Hill, e-mail message to author, 24 January 2015.
- 9 Corinne Gaudin and Alexander Hill, e-mail messages to author, 24 January 2015.
- 10 Denis Kozlov, e-mail message to author, 24 January 2015.