



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Successful American-Russian Partnership Through Education Abroad

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Over the past almost ten years, the University of Maryland has been developing a four-way partnership among the University of Maryland Libraries, the University of Maryland College of Information Science (iSchool), the Library of Russian Academy of Sciences (BAN), and the Library and Information department at the St. Petersburg State University of Culture and Arts (SPbGIK). It began with the development of a single course for the College of Information Science: LBSC 729: International Opportunities in Information Studies; Libraries and Cultural Heritage Institutions of St. Petersburg, Russia, later re-numbered INST729R. This course was initially developed in a partnership between an iSchool faculty member, Trudi Hahn, and a subject librarian for Slavic Studies, Yelena Luckert, who was the initiator for the course. This chapter provides a history of the course as well as reflections on its success from both the course leader and a student participant.

A Faculty Perspective

It took about four years to develop this course before the first class went to St. Petersburg in 2012.¹ The first cohort consisted of thirteen students, the two instructors who developed the course, and another librarian who was invited to assist with the class because none of the students spoke Russian or had any cultural familiarity with the country. This trip was followed in 2014 by the second class with five students, the same principal librarian, but another iSchool faculty member, Ann Weeks. The goals and curricula for both classes were principally the same, but some adjustments were made for the second class that will be discussed later.

At the time the course was being developed, the University of Maryland iSchool was very interested in international education, particularly in study abroad classes. Several courses already had been given in Nicaragua, England, South Africa, and India. Thus, adding Russia to this portfolio was met with great interest by the college. It is easy to understand the motivation behind the iSchool's drive to internationalize their students' education, which was rooted in its desire to fulfill the strategic goals of the university. We live in an increasingly global society where information travels with great speed across political, cultural, religious, and geographical divides. There is an interest in academic communities to develop conscientious citizens—i.e., people who can function in the increasingly global environment. As in the case of many other institutions, globalization of all aspects of the university's life has become an integral part of the strategic goals of the University of Maryland, which trickled down to all of the university's departments and program. This has since manifested in a variety of different activities, including education abroad.

The study abroad classes to Russia presented additional opportunities for the library and information program at Maryland that few other destinations offered. Russia and the US, two global superpowers much at odds with each other, compete in the world arena for moral and political superiority and information control. Russia's recent tampering with the American political process is an acute example of this. Yet most Americans are unfamiliar with Russian culture, history, politics, and the very policies and institutions that made them what they are. Even less understood and properly valued are Russian libraries and Russian readership, which are crucial factors in this information exchange. Both countries have very different information and library systems anchored in their political differences, and so are not fully apparent to each other. Historically closed to freedom of information, after the Glasnost' i Perestroika, Russian cultural institutions, including libraries and archives, have become more open to readers and researchers, both homegrown and international. However, this openness is rather fragile, discriminatory, and fluctuates over time, as it is often used for political gains of the state. All that had to be accounted for when planning this course.

The main goals for the course were to introduce our students of information sciences—future American library professionals—to the Russian library system by showing them different types of libraries, including those for the general public, children, and academic and specialized audiences. They would get a firsthand sense of how they work, have opportunities to communicate with library professionals and library users, see library processes, get a glance of Russian-held indescribably rich collections, have conversations and develop relationships with students and faculty of a library school, better understand the exchange and management of information, the network of the library system, issues of readerships, and above all learn from each other. St. Petersburg was chosen for several strategic reasons. Among them, St. Petersburg is one of few cities in Russia that could provide the students with all the opportunities mentioned above within a relatively small geographical area. The city is rather compact and easily walkable, which makes things easier logistically. St. Petersburg boasts some of the best and oldest libraries in Russia, with fabulous collections and the oldest and most prestigious library program in the country. St. Petersburg also is one of the most beautiful cities in the world with lots to do for all types of interests. The summer short-term study abroad course, rather than other possible variations, was also chosen with care and thought for financial and logistical reasons. For example, these courses do not go through the regular registrar; thus, it is easier

to organize payments, include non-UMD students, decide on the length and structure of the course, time of travel, and monitor cost.

Organizational logistics of this course were excruciatingly difficult. Developing contacts and finding people in St. Petersburg willing to work with the course was challenging. There is a general mistrust in Russia of everything that is new and unfamiliar. To break through this barrier required recommendations from known individuals, in-person meetings, numerous letters with signatures from the top administrators of both sides—in all, a very lengthy process. Securing permissions was different for various libraries. For example, getting access to the Mayakovsky Central City Library, the main public library of the city, was rather easy and required just a few signatures. They were also very interested in working with us and were amenable to all our ideas; they even organized a meeting with their readers during our first trip. (It did not work as well as we hoped, and we decided not to repeat it during the second trip.)

To visit the Library of the Hermitage Museum required a personal introduction to the head librarian and then the approval from the director of the Hermitage. Getting to know faculty at the St. Petersburg library program was more challenging until, by chance, we were introduced to Dr. Valerii Leonov, director of BAN, who, as it turned out, studied at the University of Maryland iSchool as a foreign exchange student in the 1970s during the Cold War. Dr. Leonov was able to open those doors to us. In Summer 2011, the Slavic Librarian traveled to Russia to secure final approvals and work out all details of our visits and to develop logistics for the trip—housing, food, excursions, transportation—with a goal to make it affordable for students. All of this had to be done by us since we were not successful in getting funds to develop the course and could not hire outside help. Of course, the fact that the Slavic librarian was born and raised in St. Petersburg and knew the city, its history, and culture were enormously helpful in all these negotiations and arrangements.

The issue of resources, or lack of them, was challenging to overcome. The team applied to several grant opportunities to develop this course, including several on campus that provide seed money to develop innovative courses, and a few outside, such as the Likhachev Foundation, the U.S.-Russia Peer-to-Peer Program, Open World, and several others. Many of these organizations expressed a strong interest in our project, and several times it felt like the course, and even the partnership at large, would receive some granting, but in the end it did not happen and we had to rely on our own resources and student tuition to make it happen. Keeping the cost down for the students was very important to ensure the success of the trip—and for a very good reason: Russia is an expensive country to travel to and could be completely unattainable on a student budget. Here, the librarian's knowledge of the city was the key factor in ensuring that the cost for each student did not exceed the cost of an average study abroad class, a major achievement. Lodging, food, transportation, sightseeing, and other components of the trip had to be meticulously developed ahead of time. Visas were another daunting and costly issue that required careful planning. To allow ample time to get them, the university's Education Abroad office made an exception for us by allowing an early registration, several months ahead of schedule. However, it should be noted here that dealing with our own campus bureaucracy, including the Education Abroad office, was at times painfully slow and with many issues.

The course consisted of three components. Before both departures, the class met to prepare for the trip and get to know each other. Harold Leich and Angela Cannon, two

Russian specialists from the Library of Congress, presented lectures on the Russian library system and network as well as on the development of Russian collections in the US, specifically at the Library of Congress. This gave the background framework for the class. The first time around, we also had a security specialist on Russia, who was particularly familiar with St. Petersburg, providing students with information of what not to do to stay safe. To provide them with further background information, the students were assigned several articles on the topics related to Russian libraries, including a couple of articles by Dr. Leonov since they were to meet him during the trip, and were asked to watch several movies that the instructors felt might help them better understand the places we will visit.

Once in St. Petersburg, we visited libraries of different types to provide students with an array of experiences. All students had to keep a detailed daily reflection journal that later was graded. They also had to take turns to write in our blog, to which all friends and families were invited as observers to follow adventures of their loved ones. We visited the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the National Library of Russia, the Presidential Yeltsin Library, the Mayakovsky Central City Library, the Pushkin Central Children's Library, the Library of the Hermitage Museum, and Pushkinsky Dom, which is the main and best-known literary archive in the city. Each visit was different, exciting, meaningful, full of information, and affected different students in different ways, often based on their own specializations and interests. Some could not get enough of the public children's library, while others were mesmerized by the accounts from the Pushkinsky Dom of selfless and courageous acts by curators preserving materials of doomed individuals during turbulent times. The visit to the Hermitage library, so seldom visited by patrons outside the museum staff, also included a guided tour of the museum; individuals were then allowed to wander around for the remaining time, which all students were very excited about. We were met as old friends at BAN, and meeting Dr. Leonov, the author of the articles the students read, was another highlight of the trip. At the start of the trip, we also visited and had activities with the St. Petersburg State University of Culture and Arts School of Library and Information Services (SPbGIK). Students' comments in their diaries and course evaluations attested to many different emotions these visits evoked, from strong, admiring, appreciative, and exciting to questioning and even, at times, disappointing. We did a lot of sightseeing of other cultural institutions, such as parks, churches, palaces, and other iconic activities, including seeing the Bolshoi Theatre performances and the opening of the bridges over Neva during White Nights. Upon return home, the students had to write a final paper detailing an aspect of Russian librarianship of their choosing.

Although most of the course remained the same in both years, the work with SPbGIK progressed and improved over time. In 2012, when we came to Russia for the first time, SPbGIK was not clear on their own goals for this program. Thus, most of the work was done on our side, with our students preparing short, two-slide presentations each to our Russian friends on the important topics of American librarianship. Topics included services to patrons with disabilities, green libraries, storytelling, and others, which proved to be new to Russia at that time. We were shown around, looked in on their classes in session, saw their promotional videos, and talked to the dean. It was a very nice visit but missing was one of the most important things that we desired—more interactions between the students of the two countries.

In 2014, things changed dramatically with the new dean, Valentina Brezhneva, and with the support of Dr. Leonov and American Consulate in St. Petersburg. Conversations about student participation began months ahead of the trip. More important this

time around, the Russian side came up with the idea of the International Library School (ILS), a two-part program, with both parts completely different from each other in their intent and goals and run consecutively not simultaneously. The first part of the ILS was designed for students and the second for professionals already in library employment in Russia and its former republics. For the ease of explaining, I will call them ILS1 and ILS2. As instructors of INST729R, we got to participate in both, which was a very special opportunity for us. The students of INST729R participated only in ILS1.

Early in the spring 2014 semester, twenty students were selected from the Russian side to participate in ILS1. All five students enrolled into INST729R were automatically included. As soon as INST729R was given the final OK and we got the names of participating students, we created a joint reflector where both Russian and American students could start communicating about things that interested them, including but not limited to librarianship. We were somewhat disappointed that participation in this reflector was not as robust as we hoped for and was usually initiated by the American students, which might give an insight on the pedagogical differences of both countries. Once in St. Petersburg, the program itself consisted of tours, lectures, presentations, discussions, a joint program with BAN, a fun marketing SPbGIK program called Bibliofest, and even a concert, where all students were participating together.

Comments on the joint program from both sides were quite interesting. One of the more unexpected comments was expressed by some of the Russian students. They felt that without our presence, they might not have been exposed to the treasures of BAN. Some independent socializing between the students of the two countries occurred, but not as much as American students wanted, particularly in discussions about librarianship. It is important to note that all our students were graduate students; however, library education in Russia is undergraduate, so our students were older, in a few cases by quite a bit. American students also observed that their Russian counterparts were more reserved, less willing to speak up, start conversations, or share opinions, especially in a classroom setting. This can be explained by the pedagogical differences of the two countries, the young age of some students within a multigenerational student group, cultural differences, and the language barrier, although all the Russian students spoke fairly good English; in contrast, many Russian faculty did not. A good number of Russian students also expressed a desire to come to the United States to further their education but, unfortunately, our iSchool could not establish any special scholarship to help them do so. Despite some difficulties, this was a great start, and students of both countries much appreciated the interactions and exchanges and were hoping for more.

ILS2 was designed for library professionals from all over Russia and former Soviet republics and took place immediately after ILS1 was over. One of its main supporters was the American Consulate in St. Petersburg. Staff from BAN, faculty of the SPbGIK, the two INST729R instructors, and the associate dean for collections at the University of Maryland, who flew in just for this session, were invited to participate as instructors and mentors for ILS2. Forty-three professional librarians from places such as Cheliabinsk, Karaganda, Perm, Kazakhstan, Volgograd, and St. Petersburg participated in ILS2. In the absence of well-developed post-MLS professional training for librarians, as it is the case in the United States, this program was innovative, experimental, and valuable to its participants. Although this program was about four weeks long, the guests from America participated only in a small portion of the program, providing our insights on libraries, library profession, and the future.

Once back in the United States and after grading the papers, we were able to assess the course based on student work and their course evaluations. Whether in 2012 or 2014, the results were similar. The students found the course interesting and appropriately challenging. They related that they learned a lot and all of them found it to be a trip of a lifetime. They also commented on getting a better understanding and appreciation of library and information fields both home and abroad. Here are some of the random comments from both classes:

- “Russian students have more fun.”
- “American students are less shy in classrooms.”
- “Russian librarians are very dedicated and work in [a] difficult environment.”
- “Huge discrepancy on how [Russian] libraries are funded, have and have-nots.”
- “Russian libraries do a lot for their users, but there is still a need for better information sharing.”

In the past several years, the relationship between the United States and Russia has deteriorated dramatically. Getting visas have become even more expensive and difficult. Grants to support academic work in Russia have also dried up, some due to budget instabilities in higher education as a whole, some because of political reasons. Thus, maintaining relationships, even more so the partnerships, are more difficult than ever. Yet it is important to persevere. Although at this time a third study abroad trip to Russia is on hold, I am not losing hope to do it in a very near future, perhaps after this book is finished. In the meantime, I am still constantly corresponding with my Russian contacts at BAN and SPbGIK and have contributed to their conferences in absentee, provided live webinars to their students, and have welcomed some of their faculty to the University of Maryland—Dr. Leonov in 2013 and Albina Krymskaya in 2017.

A Student’s Perspective

The study abroad trip to St. Petersburg had a tremendous impact on my education as a librarian, in ways that could not be replicated in a domestic course. At the time of the 2014 trip, I was pursuing dual degrees in library science and Russian/Soviet history. I was about halfway through my program and was struggling to decide whether to pursue librarianship or further graduate work in history after completing my program. This trip illustrated the opportunities librarianship could provide for exploring international history and politics, cultural exchange, and rigorous scholarly work, and cemented my decision to pursue academic librarianship as a career.

From the perspective of someone fascinated by rare books and Russian history and culture, the trip was an absolute dream. To go behind the scenes of the Hermitage, one of my favorite places in the world, was truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Viewing rare books and manuscripts at BAN (including a gorgeous manuscript celebrating the ascendancy of Peter the Great) was almost like entering a time machine. What made these experiences even more exciting was the obvious pleasure that the Russian librarians took in sharing these treasures with us. Their enthusiasm was infectious and was especially appreciated by students.

The trip offered sobering moments as well. Speaking with Russian librarians and archivists about historical collecting practices led to conversations about the intersections of politics, government, and libraries. Hearing stories of collections preserved in times of war, political upheaval, or natural disasters demonstrated to us the lengths to which

Russian librarians have gone to protect their collections. These conversations inspired my cohort to reflect on how politics shape American cultural institutions and have continued to provide me with food for thought as I navigate my role as an academic librarian.

Meeting fellow library sciences students was a wonderful experience. After the official tours and formal presentations and discussions concluded, we were able to connect with the Russian students more informally. My cohort took a group of students out to a restaurant where we treated them to pizza and beer. (They were fascinated by all things American, so we thought this would be a welcome gesture!) We had so much fun that evening. We talked casually about American entertainment (the students loved *How I Met Your Mother* and wanted to know if we really do say “cheers” each time we drink) and about their experiences growing up in St. Petersburg. Another night, a smaller group of us met for an evening picnic. We brought along snacks to share, and in a lovely gesture, one of the students brought me a crossword puzzle book in Russian. (I had told her before that I was learning Russian and was hoping to find one during my visit!) Once, in the smaller group, and now having become better acquainted with each other, we asked each other more frank questions about Russian-American relations and perceptions of our cultures. I tentatively asked them what they thought about the busts of Lenin that still adorned the main readings rooms in the National Library of Russia. They cocked their heads and laughed, telling me, “It’s not so weird.” For their part, they were clearly dying to ask us about stereotypes of Americans but were too well-mannered to do so outright. Once we assured them they wouldn’t offend us, they eagerly ran through a list of questions for us about Americans. By the end of the evening, we were all bent over laughing. I think anyone who has had the privilege of traveling abroad and interacting with locals knows this feeling of fast friendship; it is one of those unusual situations where it is sometimes easier to speak more freely with almost-strangers than with the people we see every day.

The immersive experience of traveling abroad not only deepens your understanding of a culture, it also deepens your relationship with your travel companions. This trip presented me with an opportunity to work closely with Yelena, whom I had briefly met while working on a group project for an earlier course. My library science courses were primarily taught by research faculty and, despite my classrooms being located just a few minutes away, I had only rare occasions to interact with academic librarians at my institution (outside of regular patron-librarian interactions). This was one of my first times interacting with an academic librarian as a librarian-in-training myself. Study abroad programs such as this one present students with an opportunity to learn more about the breadth and diversity of the work that academic librarians engage in and to speak in-depth with academic librarians about their professional experiences and career paths. Courses co-taught by MLS faculty and academic librarians offer students a chance to connect with mentors in the field, something that can be difficult for new professionals just starting to engage with the field.

The experiences I had on this trip were not something I could have coordinated on my own. Thanks to Yelena’s tireless work in building relationships and coordinating visits, I was able to meet people and visit places I would have never had access to as an independent traveler. Incorporating this international component into my coursework strengthened my interest in international and academic librarianship and heightened my awareness of the importance of international and domestic politics in our work. Despite how labor-intensive these programs are, I think that MLIS programs would be doing a true service for their students by coordinating short-term education abroad opportu-

nities. I strongly encourage MLIS students (as well as practitioners!) to take advantage of opportunities like these and to consider how these types of cultural exchange can enhance our librarianship.

Conclusion

The authors believe the work described in this article to be very important, particularly in view of the global political climate of today. The more we understand each other, the less there is a likelihood of unintended misconceptions and consequences. Whether good or bad, whether we agree or don't, we must understand what lays behind our differences so that we can come up with meaningful solutions. Libraries, especially academic libraries in the United States, are an integral part of such efforts, no matter how small each of these individual efforts appears to be. Libraries are cornerstones of our democracy. It is our mission to ensure the flow of free and reliable information and to encourage meaningful discourse. As academic librarians, we have an obligation to our communities to enable open dialogue and help raise globally responsive citizens, even if one at a time. To do that, we need to be an integral part of the educational mission of our institutions and participate in helping to raise individuals who can understand and follow all sides of debates.

Notes

1. Yelena Luckert, "Globalizing Librarianship: A Study-Abroad Class in Russia," *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 15, no. 3 (2014): 175–81, doi:10.1080/15228886.2014.928846.

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