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# Twentieth Century Russia and USSR (HIS 452) City as Classroom Project Report

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## City as Classroom Project: History 452: Twentieth Century Russia and USSR



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### **Course Description**

This course is an introduction to the major themes of twentieth century Russian and Soviet history for History majors. The events examined include the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the Russian Civil War, the changes introduced under the New Economic Policy, industrialization and collectivization, the Great Terror, World War II, de-Stalinization, the Gorbachev reforms, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Attention is paid to the ethnic diversity of the Russian empire and Soviet Union.

### **Project Description**

The goal was for students to immerse themselves in a Russian cultural experience that would enliven the perspectives explored in the course readings and lectures. Either individually or in groups, students were required to visit a site within Philadelphia city limits (but not on La Salle's campus) associated with Russian history or culture. Suggested sites included a Russian Orthodox Church during services, a Russian grocery store such as Bell's Market in Northeast Philadelphia, a play or ballet, a folk concert, or a Russian restaurant.

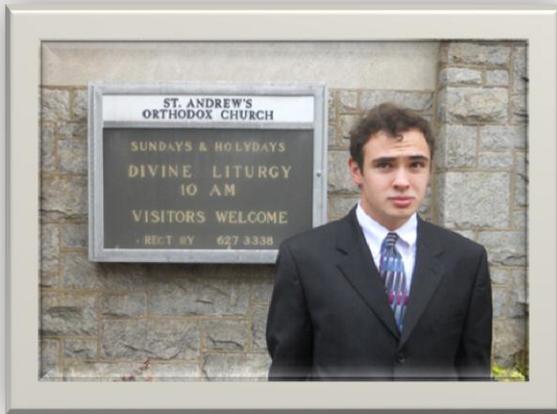
Each student was required to write a two to three page reflection paper on his/her cultural immersion experiences, which constituted five percent of the course grade. Topics differed according to the destination. For example, students attending church services compared the rituals to those more familiar to them. Students visiting the grocery store analyzed the interpersonal dynamics between themselves and Russian employees and the extent to which foods sold in the store reflected the multiethnic culture of the former Soviet Union. In addition to writing papers, students were also required to provide photographs of themselves at the locations and to discuss their experiences in class.

## Outcomes

All 23 students participated in the project and wrote papers. Two attended Orthodox Church services, two ate at a Russian café, and most visited Bell's Market. Only one was absent from the class discussion. The students who attended Russian Orthodox Church services noted many differences from Catholic services, yet enough similarities that they found themselves surprised and disoriented when services took a path divergent from what they expected. In the store, students noted East European food preferences in the large selections of pickled and smoked foods and Asian and Middle Eastern influences in the salads and sauces. Many students spoke and wrote about their initial discomfort at entering a public space in which everyone around them spoke Russian, announcements were made in Russian, and all signs were in the Cyrillic alphabet. Some worried that people were staring at them and perceived them (the students) as outsiders, while others felt they were welcomed and treated in a friendly manner. One student in the class was an immigrant from Ukraine who had obtained his first job in the U.S. at Bell's Market, a job he could do before he learned to speak English. During class discussion, he explained to the other students the perspectives of store employees. Nearly all found the experience worthwhile and some have become repeat customers of the Russian stores in Northeast Philadelphia.

Since none of the students were freshmen, they already knew how to navigate the city. Therefore, the course did not achieve the goal of introducing Philadelphia to students new to the city. Nevertheless, many had never been to Northeast Philadelphia, so they expanded their geographic concept of Philadelphia. Some who were natives of Northeast Philadelphia had not previously given much thought to the Russian presence in the area. By using their home region as a classroom, they gained new understanding of its population and cultural diversity. One student expressed displeasure at having had to "go somewhere" for class, but others I've seen since class ended have reaffirmed their positive views of the experience.

Based on positive student feedback, I intend to use the project again in Russian history classes. Although it is not suitable as a major course requirement, it is a means of enriching students' experiences in the class. The project can be adapted for other classes. A colleague who teaches American Studies has expressed interest in expanding the project to include all ethnic stores in the Philadelphia area. I hesitate to implement a similar experiment in my core classes on global history, because I have found it sufficiently challenging to orient global history students toward attending class, reading, and studying.



### **Lesson Learned**

In the future I will schedule the due date for the paper and the discussion in the middle of the semester rather than at the end. At the end, students were rushing to complete their papers at the same time when other class projects were due. In addition, if we'd held class discussion earlier, the insights aired in it could have informed our discussion of readings throughout the rest of the semester.

