

## **A Russian View on Teaching Russian History in Canadian Universities**

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### Article abstract

As a Russianist, I have always been interested in understanding the basic approaches in teaching Russian studies in the West. My intimate knowledge of the development of Western historiography — and its latest developments — can only clarify, though, some facets of my inquiry. In 2014, as a visiting professor of Russian history at Brock University, I had the chance to acquaint myself with essential principles, forms, and methods of teaching Russian history in Canada. I also appreciated the opportunity to find out the source of Canadian students' interest in Russian history, their motivation, likes and dislikes in learning and researching it. Comparing Russian and Canadian ways of teaching Russian history and discussing the inconsistent views of Canadian students toward Russian history, I would like to define the most useful concepts and forms to assist in the learning of the Russian past in both our countries, despite current political troubles.

# A Russian View on Teaching Russian History in Canadian Universities

VICTOR AVDEEV

## *Abstract*

*As a Russianist, I have always been interested in understanding the basic approaches in teaching Russian studies in the West. My intimate knowledge of the development of Western historiography — and its latest developments — can only clarify, though, some facets of my inquiry. In 2014, as a visiting professor of Russian history at Brock University, I had the chance to acquaint myself with essential principles, forms, and methods of teaching Russian history in Canada. I also appreciated the opportunity to find out the source of Canadian students' interest in Russian history, their motivation, likes and dislikes in learning and researching it. Comparing Russian and Canadian ways of teaching Russian history and discussing the inconsistent views of Canadian students toward Russian history, I would like to define the most useful concepts and forms to assist in the learning of the Russian past in both our countries, despite current political troubles.*

## *Résumé*

*À titre de russiste originaire de Russie, j'ai toujours cherché à comprendre les façons dont l'histoire de la Russie s'étudie en Occident et je suis attentivement l'historiographie russe qui en émerge. En 2014, en tant que professeur invité en histoire russe à l'Université Brock, j'ai eu l'occasion de me familiariser avec les principes, formes et méthodes d'enseignement de l'histoire russe au Canada. J'ai aussi pu me pencher sur les attitudes des étudiants canadiens à l'égard de l'histoire russe, y compris leurs motivations, leurs préférences et leurs aversions. Le présent article compare les façons russes et canadiennes d'enseigner l'histoire de la Russie et analyse la gamme de points de vue des étudiants canadiens envers ce sujet.*

In 2014 I had the opportunity to take part in a special exchange program between Brock University and Moscow State University

as a visiting professor of Russian history.<sup>1</sup> As a Russian teaching Russian history to Canadian students, I do not pretend to cover all issues pertaining to the subject. On the basis of my own experience, I offer my thoughts here in an effort to assess the differences and similarities between teaching Russian history in Russia and in Canada, to gauge the popularity of Russian history among Canadian students, and to find tools and methods apt to encourage their interest in Russian studies.

Reflecting on teaching Russian history in Canada, I would like to pay attention primarily to the Russian ways of teaching it. For obvious reasons Russian universities and their history departments attached greater importance to teaching Russian history. In a similar way, Canadian or American history dominates in history classes in Canadian or American universities. Although curricula may vary across different Russian universities, Russian history is generally taught in an array of courses. Students majoring in fields other than arts and humanities take a mandatory course on world civilizations (usually two semesters for all of world history), which as a rule reduces the Russian past to four or five themes. History major students must take a seven-semester sequence of Russian history courses, from the early East Slavic tribes to the contemporary Russian Federation. In these courses, Russian Imperial and Soviet history is taught in the context of world history, usually in the second, third, and fourth year of studies. The main themes of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries include the Russian Empire from the Napoleonic Wars to World War I. Then Russian history courses turn to Soviet Russia to discuss the Revolutions of 1917 and the Civil War, industrialization, and usually Stalin's Era (often in the context of World War II). From 1945 onwards, the Soviet Union is regarded as an international power and one of the two poles of world confrontation until the collapse of the communist regime in 1991. Students majoring in Russian history are additionally taught specialized courses over one to three semesters. In such programs Russian history is taught systematically and within the framework of an interdisciplinary approach, which includes courses on Russian literature, culture, linguistics, and politics.

Many Canadian universities offer Russian history courses. Flexibility characterizes their approach which responds to the norms, traditions, and needs of Canadian university education, both regional and local. Committed and enthusiastic scholars and instructors try to offer a full scope of courses in Russian studies (language, history, culture, and literature). Textbooks on Russian history, which are now published in Canada, pay more attention than before to national traditions and national character, the role of religious history, interethnic relations, and the structures of everyday life. Canadian universities regularly launch Russian studies programs and these hold an important place in the Canadian Association of Slavists. It would also appear that numerous similarities between Russia and Canada — such as climate, geographical position, rich natural resources, agriculture, etc. — together with educational tools and opportunities stimulate interest in, and even broad popularity for, Russian history among Canadian students.

However, from my own experience teaching in Canada, I wonder to what extent Russian history courses are really popular. Are Canadian students interested in studying Russian history as much as they did during the height of the Cold War? One would think that opportunities for studying Russian history have grown since the end of the Cold War because of the several beneficial changes that happened since. The dictatorship of communist ideology in history has vanished. Russia's increased openness has also enhanced research opportunities in Russian history. Access to Russian primary sources has equally increased thanks to the opening of the Russian and Soviet history archives, along with new translation projects. Furthermore, many fundamental documents pertaining to Russian history have been translated and published in the West. Unfortunately, the shortage of online digitized document collections has significantly restricted the teaching and studying of Russian history in the West. Although the Russian State archives provide free access to the majority of state paper collections, periodicals, and old books, which allows Western scholars to tackle a broad range of topics for their courses, papers and theses, travel expenses and working difficul-

ties in Russian archives hinder further the broadening of reading and research opportunities for foreign students.

Of course, the new level of information access and possibilities could give students an opportunity to learn about, and do research on, Russia through the internet, even though it poses a challenge for mass media and the official governmental information policy, which can no longer hold a monopoly on knowledge about Russia. Moreover, students' personal experiences may be enriched through travelling. Unfortunately, students' pragmatic interest in Russia as a place of work and travel and as a source of education for those planning international careers has not encouraged the introduction of additional courses on Russian history. Also, Canadian students may be reluctant to choose courses in Russian history because the Russian Federation does not present them with sufficiently enticing opportunities. The lack of exchange programs between Russian and Canadian universities also discourages students from taking up Russian studies and Russian history classes.

The teaching methods as well as the thematic and conceptual content in Russian history courses in Canada depend on two interconnected conditions: the general state of Russian studies and the character of the relationship between Russia and Canada. It is obvious that the end of the Cold War torpedoed and damaged Russian studies in the West, including Canada. During the Cold War, American and Western European universities loaded their curricula with an ideologically- defined image of the Soviet Union as the "main adversary" in a bipolar standoff. In the 1990s a romanticized image of the new Russia began to prevail, when the end of the Cold War helped scuttle old priorities linked to the search for geopolitical rivalry. Although state authorities brandished the image of the Russian/Soviet "Other", Western scholars paid much attention both to Russian and Soviet history. Their multiple lecture courses and seminars provided a wide panoramic view of Russian history at that time. The end of the global confrontation and the rise of new international issues and actors reduced governmental agencies', think tanks', and NGOs' interest in Russia.

During the Cold War, political science influenced the study and teaching of Russian history in a very important way by introducing the concept of totalitarianism to analyze Russia. Its impact was undoubtedly considerable if one takes into account that serious alternative theories, necessary to explain complicated trends of Russian and Soviet history, were almost nonexistent, at least in the West. The dominance of the totalitarian lens inherited by Western politicians and the mass media has established a huge analytical distortion in regards to the Russian past. They proceeded to regard the Russian Federation as a weakened centre of international relationships. Such attitudes led to the simplification of political approaches and the rejection of a developed, expert society based on historical knowledge. State agencies and mass media postulated primitive ideas and multiplied stereotypes about the Russian past. All of this matters because neglecting historical knowledge can have concrete political consequences. The way states and societies define and evaluate the past of a foreign country affects their contemporary/current relationship with that nation.

For example, the far-fetched and artificial opposition of Ukrainian to Russian history, often portrayed in Ukrainian studies, is one of the most distorted points in the study of Russian history, especially in respect to the twentieth-century. Important and intricate issues of the Soviet epoch, such as the Russian Civil War, the collectivization and the famine it provoked, World War II and collaborationism, and the mass political repressions, need systematic and thoughtful analysis from all possible angles. Ukrainian studies scholars do not always evaluate these events in the most proper and impartial manner. Their assessments entertain strong political myths that impede the reconstruction of the past while restricting students' learning experience. The mythologization of Soviet history does not help Canadian students who are embarking on the study of Russian history for the first time see past these stereotypes, because of their lack of knowledge and access to primary sources and broader historiography.

Contemporary public opinion toward Russia in the West consists of mixed ideas, aspirations, and approaches — the

triumph of victory in the Cold War when the Soviet Union collapsed, condescending attitudes toward Russia (and its citizens), seeing Russia as degraded from the Evil Empire to a subordinate power, disappointment in Russia's transformation into a modern democratic society, anxiety over the rise of organized crime and political instability in the post-Soviet space, and finally suspicions and fears concerning the increase of geopolitical tensions between Putin's Russia and the West. All of these feelings have a great influence on students' attitude toward Russian history. While Canadian scholars have progressed in Russian studies in the post-Soviet time, Canadian students' progress in their study of Russian history has declined. Although the achievements of the Canadian historiographical school in exploring Russian history *per se* have a great value today, misperceptions (and misconceptions) about Russian history among the new generation of students still exist.

How could we improve the situation? I do not consider my recommendations in the light of my lecturing experience at Brock University in 2014 as universal and applicable everywhere in Canada. But I hope my view on the existing problems in that area could be useful. Teaching Russian history in Canada to students new to this subject is predominantly a comparative enterprise: events, trends, and characters of Russian history enjoy more attention when they can be compared to the Canadian or, in general, Western experience. Russia, friendly or hostile, still plays the role of the "Other", which predisposes Canadians (whether critical, ambivalent, or admiring Russia's historical experience while often making no distinction between the state and the society) to shape their initial attitudes toward Russia.

The drawing of pressing parallels not only between historical events and modern political, social, and economical processes, but also between Russian and Western experiences within the framework of my seminars produced a decisive shift in students' opinion about Russian history. By way of promoting a better understanding of Russian history, I proposed to analyze some exclusive features of Russian state and society usually debated by mass media. A special case study on the corruption in Russian

military production was discussed in a course on Russia during World War I. Students severely criticized Russian War minister V. Sukchomlinov for his corruption, but later they found out similar corruption problems existed in the British military industry and logistics when they studied the Allies' (including Canada) military supplies to Russia during World War I. Considering specific examples in comparison with similar events in other countries can lead to an unbiased and open-minded attitude toward the so-called genetic traits of Russian history.

My Canadian classroom experience demonstrates that the new generation of students still follow the concept of totalitarianism and project moral judgments on Russian and Soviet history. While they embrace the discourse of the most influential experts and scholars of totalitarianism, they miss an opportunity to understand the broader social and cultural contexts of the Russian past, including the pursuit of national identity. Russia-watchers take Russians' loyalty toward Vladimir Putin as evidence of an authoritarian gene embedded in the Russian character. As a result, the American crusade to reform Russia, based on a vision of Russia through a totalitarian lens, has aroused a new wave of demonization in official, popular, and historical discourses. At the outset of the courses, Canadian students routinely selected "Stalinism" or "Russian Imperialism" as the analytical framework for their papers and theses, although Russian historiography in Canada is now represented by a wider range of positions and themes than during the Soviet era.

Conceptual content in Russian history courses in Canada depends on the quality and variety of textbooks. Modern textbooks on Russian history have become less narrative and more analytical, human-oriented, and problem-posing, but they still have a tendency to reproduce moral evaluations. *A priori* moral estimations ignore historical context and lead to erroneous beliefs and serious mistakes in students' research projects. Such willful blinkers are dangerous. Only through novel and rigorous research and unknown or unpublished primary sources from the opened archives, together with debating conventional views and alternative interpretations and theories applied to well-known epochs



or events, will Russian history be demythologized. Historical reconstruction of debates between Slavophiles, Westernizers, and partisans of the Official nationality during the reign of Nicolas I, or between different Russian political parties before the Revolution, or between Stalin and his rivals —all of which were used in my survey course on Russian history and historiography — helped the participants clarify and understand the goals and views of Russian leaders, elites, and people alike.

I consider that presenting students with poignant material on Russian history — hence encouraging them to make a personal connection with the material — to be an important and progressive teaching method to raise their interest in Russia. For instance, the reading of vivid and forceful personal examples, such as the diary of Tanya Savicheva during the siege of Leningrad in World War II (an iconic image of Russian victims of Nazism as is the diary of Anne Frank in Western Europe) or the memoirs of Russian revolutionaries, prompted students to conduct their research in unexpected areas and helped them establish concepts for their papers. The screening and analyzing of Russian historical movies at Brock University were also a good way to generate and maintain the interest of Canadian students in Russian history. By presenting real historical events and personalities, these films tried to explain the characters' motives by using multiple sources: cinema, textbooks, primary archival sources, and monographs.

Despite of differences in mentality and way of thinking, some common problems characterize both Russian and Canadian or American students. All try to simplify the topics and problems they study. They prefer to focus on narrow subjects without seeing the whole picture in perspective because they have limited abilities in analyzing and synthesizing controversial views and information. Since the end of the Cold War, students have changed, too. The majority of them prefer to advocate the equivocal theory of the so-called self-restriction in reading: to put it simply, contemporary students do not want to read a lot. As a result, instead of getting a “three-dimensional” image of history, they retain only a fragmented patchwork of complicated subjects in Russian history.

The new generation of students also need more elaborate media content. Russian, Canadian, and American universities could yield important benefits by developing joint programs, notably online courses through internet technologies. The organization of such courses which focus on different aspects of Russian history would enable the teaching of Russian and Western historiographical views on major events, as well as create a virtual classroom in order to actively engage students, both in Russia and Canada. Participation in such international courses would help both students and professors introduce methodological innovations (including videoconferences as well as a wide range of multimedia presentations, documentaries, and movies in the classrooms), and become acquainted with the latest historiography, current research trends, and teaching practices in both countries. Online communication between Russian and Canadian students could encourage and stimulate their future participation and cooperation in student panels at academic conferences.

It is essential that Canadian universities introduce an advanced and widespread study of Russian history to avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes and myths concerning Russia's past. Good strategies for teaching Russian history in Canada could take traditional forms, such as increasing the number of courses on different aspects of Russian history, hosting Russian professors, or participating in special exchange programs. In 2011 Professor David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye introduced a special lecture series by Russian professors of Moscow State University in the History Department at Brock University. Russian professors, in turn, visit Canadian universities not only to make new connections but also to acquire new skills and approaches to teaching Russian history at home. This academic cooperation could generate a vast student exchange program for Russian history majors in both countries. Joint translation projects of primary sources and monographs between Russian and Canadian students, and various forums led by young historians on cultural heritage and tourism in Russia would create a fruitful and enduring cooperation in Russian studies. Unfortunately, and I see no small irony of history here, the Cold War experience and contemporary ten-

sions between Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Western states show that interest toward Russia and its history usually resurges to stimulate broad programs of studies only in times of political crisis.

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**VICTOR AVDEEV** enseigne l'histoire de la Russie et l'histoire de la diplomatie à l'Université d'État de Moscou (UÉM) depuis 2007. En plus de ces sujets, il s'intéresse aussi à l'autorité et à la société de la fin de la Russie impériale, à l'histoire militaire russe au XXe siècle, au stalinisme, aux idéologies et médias de masse, à la prise de décisions en politique étrangère et à la diplomatie publique. Il est l'un des auteurs permanents de la grande encyclopédie soviétique, et en 2014 il a participé à un programme d'échange entre l'UÉM et l'Université Brock, où il a enseigné à titre de professeur invité.

### Endnotes:

- 1 During the winter term I taught two courses in Russian studies: 1) a survey course on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian history and historiography, 2) a specialized course on Russia during World War I.