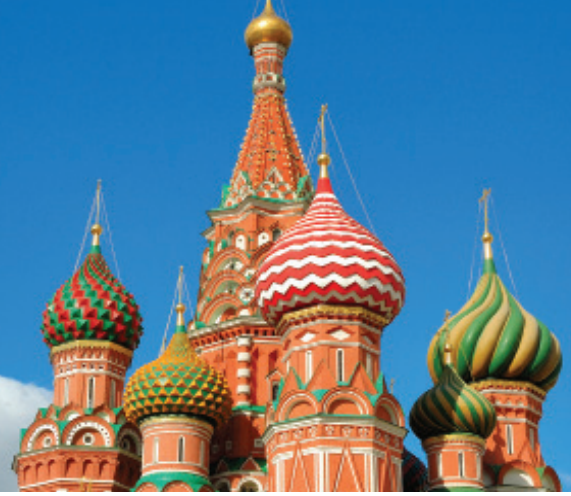


REESNews



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A Letter from the Editor

BY MICHAEL LONG '13

WITH RUSSIA AND UKRAINE in the news, the need for greater expertise of the politics, language, and culture of the region is more pressing than ever. Oberlin students and faculty are taking up the challenge. Exciting events followed hard on the heels of our last newsletter, and OCREECAS has much to report on from this academic year. November 2013 marked an occasion that is unlikely to be repeated: the reunion of Oberlin's 1964 vocalist-emissaries to the USSR. Also, before the turn of the year, Russian department students completed two groundbreaking

internships in Russia's sunny south. Not to be outdone, 2014 has already seen a fantastic series of visiting speakers, with nationally regarded names among them. Oberlin's visiting faculty in Russian-related fields (Molly Blasing and Rebecca Mitchell) made their presence felt on campus with fascinating and timely panels. With Eastern Europe constantly in the news these days, REES faculty and staff have been far from idle. They are ready to meet and encourage a likely swell of student interest in Russian studies.

Back from the USSR: Reunion of the 1964 Oberlin College Choir

Last November, Oberlin was host to an extraordinary and unique class reunion. Nearly 50 years after their whirlwind tour of the Soviet Union, the members of the 1964 Oberlin College Choir met to reminisce and celebrate, while also recording their experiences for posterity. Among the events of the reunion was a freeform panel discussion, where the former choirists recounted tales of their State Department-supported concerts, held in 39 cities of the USSR and Romania. The choir group's performances packed concert halls from Leningrad to the Crimea, with Soviet audiences especially enthused by renditions of Russian sacred music and African American spirituals. As official cultural ambassadors to America's Cold War rival,

choirists had many personal interactions with intensely curious Soviet citizens. Professor Tim Scholl recorded such reminiscences in interviews with each of the visiting performers, providing material for a memory booklet and upcoming documentary film.

With the reunion carried off so successfully, we asked Professor Scholl to reflect on what was so special about the choir's Soviet tour and its place in the history of Cold War cultural engagement:

I think there were several things that made the Oberlin tour very different from many of the others, both the professional tours and the amateur ones. The record from the exchange with the State Department before the tour shows the extent to which U.S. government officials were anxious to have Oberlin students participate. Obviously, they were interested in a first-rate ensemble representing the U.S., and the choir in those years was certainly that. I also have the sense that they realized that Oberlin students, in particular, would be terrific ambassadors.

Many of the other student groups tended to be less broadly educated, so far as I can tell. About half of the Oberlin Choir were conservatory students, but that meant the other half (approximately) were college students. So there was a range of experiences and skills those students brought to the tour. Among the most important of those were language skills. Many wished that their German, French,

continued on page 2



TANYA ROSEN-JONES

Back from the USSR, *cont.*

or Russian had been better, but many of them managed to communicate quite effectively or translate for others.

Add to that a world view that also seems to have been broader than that of many U.S. college students at the time, and you have a sense of the effectiveness of Oberlin students in negotiating the myriad questions that Soviets asked of them. Also, we can't forget how charged the political situation was at the time: the Kennedy assassination and the Martin Luther King "I Have a Dream Speech" were fresh on minds as they were preparing for the tour.

The Soviets had been prepped as well. The American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 had primed the pump; the Soviets were also ready to engage, and had learned—after the exhibit and the Festival of Youth in Moscow in 1957—that a conversation with an American didn't merit a trip to the gulag.

One of the things that drew me to this project was the similarity of the students' experiences of 1964 with my own student times in Moscow and Leningrad in 1981. Of course, some of the questions had changed, but the degree to which Soviet citizens were interested in some very basic questions about life in North America, how we lived, was striking. I'm about to travel to Russia with Oberlin alums,



Director Robert Fountain holds a rehearsal on the stage of the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory.

at a time when the rhetoric of the Cold War has risen, like a very unwelcome phoenix from the ashes of the Soviet empire. But I'm fairly certain that the group will be met with a similar warmth that greeted other tourist groups in these past five decades. The anti-U.S. propaganda is like nothing we've seen recently, but the people-to-people exchanges are likely to be as genuine as before.

OCREECAS Internships in Taganrog

The year 2013 saw new additions to the series of OCREECAS-supported internships, with two students sent to the small city of Taganrog, on the Sea of Azov. Oberlin's first pioneer to the south of Russia, Matthew Horowitz, reports back on his experience with youth theater.

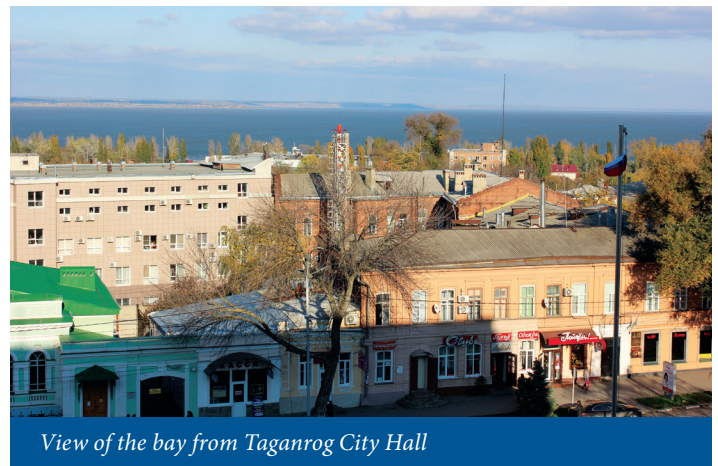
BY MATTHEW HOROWITZ '15

I spent my summer in Taganrog working at the city's Youth Theater on a grant from OCREECAS. The Taganrog Youth Theater is a small theater with two acting companies: an adult company that performs in repertory productions in the evenings and travels to various schools during the day to perform, and a youth company whose members serve as understudies, assist in the technical aspects of the theater and perform in children's productions. From the outset, my work was extremely undefined. Katya, the assistant director, had told me that they would work



Press photo for production of Baba Chanel

with me and play it by ear. I had a place to live, and I had a budget, and that was enough. My first few weeks in Russia were an enormous shock; I had never heard Russian spoken



View of the bay from Taganrog City Hall

naturally by Russians before, and now I was surrounded by it everywhere I went. Beyond the linguistic challenge, keeping up with the Russian train of thought proved to be another incredible hurdle. But playing it by ear meant that I could set my own expectations, which proved to be extremely beneficial as I started to participate in the theater's day-to-day activities. The theater was run very much like a collective, so I found it easy to insert myself into their routine of building and deconstructing sets, traveling from school to school and helping in other technical capacities. After about a month, the director, Nona Mulygina, entrusted me to direct the theater's youth company in an adaptation of Pushkin's *Count Nulin*, which proved to be a fascinating

OCREECAS Internships in Taganrog, cont.

experience in cross-cultural collaboration. Nona also asked me to lead a workshop in “the American system of acting,” which ultimately went beautifully. Another aspect of my grant—since I was the first student to go to Taganrog with OCREECAS—was to scout further opportunities for other Oberlin students. This led me to develop a rich relationship with the city as I explored its history and art museums and cultural centers. I ended up teaching English lessons at Café Freken-Bok, as well as developing a

friendship with the artists at a local Masterskaya (workshop/studio), whom I helped around the workshop and who took me on generous tours around the city.

Living in Taganrog was an amazing opportunity to experience a face of Russian life that’s rarely talked about and scarcely understood, from fishing with my host family and celebrating birthdays on the beach with *shashlyk*, to making theater in the birthplace of Anton Chekhov.

A month or so after Matthew’s return, OCREECAS gave Michael Long the opportunity of his own project in the Don region.

BY MICHAEL LONG '13

As the second Oberlin student to live in Taganrog on an OCREECAS grant, I felt myself quite the pioneer. Here was a city practically unknown to westerners (except as the birthplace of Chekhov and the deathplace of Alexander I), thanks to its former status as a restricted military zone during Soviet times. With a name that would make most people think of Ireland, architecture that recalls Saint Petersburg, and flanked by sand cliffs where the Eurasian Steppe dives into the Sea of Azov, Taganrog is the Russia you don’t often hear about.

I arrived already determined to comb the city for everything



Michael Long

of interest, pick through its history and brick-scattered beaches, and find out how its residents saw their place in the world. That personal goal meshed well with the arrangement of my internship: making myself useful around the studio

workshop of local artist Anna Maksimova, and all the while keeping an eye out for new opportunities for future students.

At the ‘Masterskaya,’ I realized how much I enjoy translation from Russian, and took some uncertain steps into investigating the American contemporary art market. The essence of any Russian cultural experience, however, is in the company you keep. Being in the Masterskaya meant being surrounded by artists and designers, and I would often remark that I had hardly any acquaintances that didn’t fit that bill. From my perspective, Taganrog was a city filled with creative types, part of a cohort of incredibly hospitable people who would react enthusiastically to my interest in their hometown. People in Taganrog turn into tour guides without warning. At one point, my friend’s father promised me the ‘unofficial Chekhov tour’ and led me out the front door. He crossed the driveway and pointed to the casement



Halloween in the studio

windows of the neighboring house’s basement:

“Here, the Great Russian Writer Anton Pavlovich Chekhov and his teenager friends sat around and drank beer.”

Without invoking any clichés on Russian hospitality, I was struck by the incredible warmth of these people, whom I now call friends. Even more so than in Oberlin, in Taganrog I found kindred spirits and made connections that run all the deeper for the great differences between us.

These folks also number among the most active of Taganrog’s residents, and from my first days and first acquaintances, I felt that I had been handed the keys to the city. Between my host parents and the Masterskaya, the people I met seemed to know absolutely everyone else. This is a typical small-town dynamic, of course, but very rarely can a foreigner pull into a provincial city on a battered minibus and proceed to be introduced to so many excellent and interesting characters. Such a reception was gratifying and exciting, but also critical to the success of the internship. I attended gallery and museum openings, received a personal tour of a museum that had previously held Oberlin at a suspicious arm’s length, and became a spontaneous volunteer at the archeological museum of the Ancient Greek fortress-city Tanais. I hope I was able to forge some links between Oberlin and Taganrog that will develop and endure. As for my own ties there, I know they are steadfast already.

After leaving Taganrog, Michael spent three more months in Moscow, working with the Quaker charity organization Friends House.

On Campus: Masha Gessen Holds Forth on Pussy Riot

Reflections from students who attended the talk...

S.M. Celmer '13

On a weekday afternoon this past March, the Russian-American journalist Masha Geesen spoke to an eager group of students, faculty, and community members about the topic of her latest book, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot*. Gessen painted a vivid picture of the motives behind Pussy Riot's ill-fated protest at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012. Gessen acquainted the audience with the known Pussy Riot members that orchestrated the action, filling in plot holes and offering essential background details that mainstream media sources have largely overlooked or just entirely ignored. Because of her relevant, insightful commentary on the current state of political protest in Russia—infused with the occasional dry-humored quip—the audience found. Gessen's talk worth attending and took advantage of the question and answer session that followed. Gessen graciously answered questions not only pertaining to Pussy Riot, but also on the crisis in Ukraine and LGBT rights in Russia. Oberlin was lucky to host such an influential guest during this critical time in U.S.-Russian relations.

Peter Kutzen '14

I will remember Masha Gessen's visit to Oberlin as one

of the real highlights of the academic year and a thrilling testament to the strength of Russian and East European Studies at our college. Along with many other students, I had the great opportunity to speak with Masha over lunch as well as during her lecture and reception. Masha is, of course, a leading figure in journalism and Russian affairs, but she is more than a critical observer—she is a citizen



Masha Gessen

with singular experience and insight into the violence and harsh political realities of Russia today. Intense academic study combined with travel throughout Eastern Europe has equipped many Oberlin students—including myself—with the intellectual framework necessary to analyze current events in Russia, and yet just one hour over lunch with Masha was more valuable than any book in the library or article in the *New York Times*. I came away from our talk with a newfound appreciation for the reality of violence in which so many Russians live, and with a renewed sense of urgency for the country's

social and political change.

Masha is incredible; she is undoubtedly one of the warmest and intellectually sharpest personalities out there. Every conversation with her is 100 percent down-to-earth. I cannot express enough gratitude to Oberlin for bringing such a leading figure (and idol) to Oberlin, and to Masha for being so generous with her time!

Advice from the Experts: REES-related Careers for Obies

This spring, the Russian department, with generous funding from OCREECAS and the OCLC, held two events designed to counsel students on the wide range of career opportunities



Greg Walters

available to individuals with knowledge of Russian language and culture.

On April 1, Greg Walters hosted a seminar titled "Politics, Revolution and International Journalism (*Or, how to write about global events, travel the world on an expense account, and get paid to do it*)." During his lively presentation, Walters regaled an audience of approximately 20 Obies with stories from his work as a Moscow-based journalist covering Russian energy politics, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the Russian-Georgian war.

The following day, the department hosted Walters, and two other profession-

als who use Russian in their work, in a well-attended panel discussion of career opportunities for students of Russian. The panelists included Rina Kirshner of the Russian-American Foundation (RAF), a non-profit devoted to promoting bi-lateral dialogue through initiatives in youth educational exchange in the arts



RUSSIAN AMERICAN
FOUNDATION

Advice from the Experts, *cont.*

and athletics. Kirshner shared stories of her early work in international business as a fertilizer salesperson and described her evolution into the area of non-profit work. As the vice president and CFO of RAF, she advised attendees that grit and determination are key to overcoming potential challenges students face in securing employment after college. She also spoke to student concerns about intercultural tensions between the U.S. and Russia (e.g., in the area of gay rights); she recommended seeking ways to work around seemingly intractable differences and to find common ground and areas of mutual understanding as the point of departure for such cross-cultural encounters.

The second panelist was Matthew Rojansky, director of the Kennan Institute in Washington, DC. Rojansky is an expert on U.S. relations with the states of the former Soviet



Matthew Rojansky

Union. He has advised governments, inter-governmental organizations, and major private actors on conflict resolution and efforts to enhance

shared security throughout the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian region. He and other the panelists encouraged students to take full advantage of study abroad and internship opportunities as a way of gaining real-world, on-the-ground experience working in Russia. Rojansky also emphasized the importance of making oneself an absolutely indispensable asset to one's employer or supervisor. Being a conscientious, responsible, and contributing member to one's organization or employer, he asserted, is the key to securing recommendations and employment opportunities at all levels.

Greg Walters also joined the panel and spoke of what he described as an unlikely path to his professional work as an international journalist. Having started Russian language courses late in his Oberlin career, Walters attributed much of his success to a combination of willingness to take risks and embrace unexpected twists of fate. His message to students was that keeping an open mind and seizing opportunities as they arise can be part of securing a successful career path. Walters also emphasized the importance of acquiring outside skills and knowledge, especially in the area of international finance, which he argues is the key to suc-

cessful careers in most fields.

The Russia Careers events were organized by Professor Molly Blasing. She related her motivations for putting together such a project:

I feel strongly that our departments have a responsibility to help students explore the many professional areas in which knowledge of Russian language and culture can be valuable. Students observe their professors in their work on a daily basis, but academic careers are increasingly difficult

to secure. And the fact is, there is significant demand for graduates' knowledge of Russian language, history, politics, or culture in a wide range of



Molly Blasing

fields. We wanted to bring these individuals to campus to offer students a picture of some possible ways to apply their skills in the realm of business, the arts, journalism, translation and interpreting, and international relations and foreign policy.

The Russian department hopes to continue such initiatives in the future.

A Semester of Soviet Art and Agitprop

Soviet and Communist Art has had a big presence at the Allen Memorial Art Museum this spring, with an exhibit on the Legacy of Socialist Realism. In addition, an anonymous gift of a three-part Soviet propaganda poster has been added to the museum's collections on display in the Ellen Johnson Gallery along with other works of Socialist Realism. All of these materials have proved instructive for visiting Russian department classes, as artifacts of visual propaganda and primary sources in their own right.

In conjunction with these exhibits, the museum, along with the Russian, history, and sociology departments, cosponsored a lecture by art historian Masha Kowell of the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California. "Voice Amplified/Voice Interrupted: The Use of Punctuation Signs in Soviet Posters" traced the syntactic, semantic, and graphic evolution of punctua-



Allen Memorial Art Museum Curator Liliana Milkova discusses the newly donated propaganda poster with a visiting class.

A Semester of Soviet Art and Agitprop, *cont.*

tion signs deployed in Soviet propaganda posters. Reading from her doctoral thesis, Kowell linked the usage of punctuation to shifts in Soviet censorship and artists' resistance or complicity with it.

Many might regard punctuation as a dry topic, but in the works of the 1920s Russian avant-garde, the humble question mark and exclamation point become striking in their visual and symbolic stridency. Sickie-shaped queries leap from the surface of these posters, epitomizing the bold experimentation of the NEP-era intelligentsia during its brief bout of enthusiasm for the Soviet state. Exclamation points can be seen with their two parts turned against each other in a grammatical microcosm of class struggle: a spear of revolutionary red that pierces a black period, representing the bourgeoisie.

The freewheeling forms of the 1920s were soon curtailed by Stalin's Socialist Realism, which saw punctuation signs stricken from symbolic roles in the artwork itself, relegated to the task of adding emphasis to predictable subtitle text. Question marks disappeared, as Soviet agitprop moved on from cajoling and advising the proletariat through unresolved issues of economy and polity, and simply declaimed what was the absolute truth. And



On exhibit at the Allen Memorial Art Museum this spring, "The Legacy of Socialist Realism."

on it went from there, with the artists of the Khrushchev thaw cautiously drawing on the bygone avant-garde, and the stolid Stalinist forms subsequently rehabilitated under Brezhnev. Dr. Kowell was able to identify the major political currents of each of the Soviet Union's eras, as represented on the tail ends of the slogans that worked their way through censorship.

Oberlin's 2013 Fulbright Scholars Report on their Eastern Europe Experiences

AMANDA GRACIA

From my time at Kostroma State University with the Fulbright Scholarship, I came to realize that the Russian concept of time and planning are very different from my American understanding. This became apparent to me in many instances, but the most striking was that no one could tell me when the semester ended or when exams would be. I asked my fellow professors, my students, and my hosts at the international office. My follow up question would always be, "If you don't know when vacation is, how can you plan for vacation?" The most common reply was, "It is so hard to know tomorrow, how can we know so far into the future?" At the time, I supposed they had a point, but my tendencies to neurotically plan my future didn't find that answer satisfying.



Amanda Gracia

By the time second semester rolled around, I was sure if I asked enough times, I would receive an answer. So I began to pester my Russian tutor when vacation in May would start. I must have asked her four times a week for three weeks. Like a child asking her mother to buy her candy at the grocery store, I kept hoping she would give me the answer I wanted! Finally, she sat me down and laid it out for me.

"Amanda," she said emphatically, stressing my name with her exasperation. "Amanda, it is not only the university that does not know the vacation dates in May, but the whole country of Russia. I cannot tell you the dates because no one knows the dates! It is simply Russia! But Amanda, Russia's history is long and tragic and people are used to this type of life. You must realize that the sun is shining, you are alive, what does it matter if you do not know the dates of vacation in May? It is a small worry! So don't worry so much, everything will be OK."

I realized that she was right. The sun was shining (a rare occurrence in February), and I was alive. My inner child finally realized that candy causes cavities...and maybe it would be better to just eat some fruit. May was months away and I really had nothing to worry about. So why fret?

After that conversation, I think I will always regard my

Oberlin's 2013 Fulbright Scholars, *cont.*

obsessive future planning tendencies as somewhat ridiculous. When I return to the U.S. amidst the hustle and bustle and constant pursuit for something better, I'll be reassured that there is whole country whose current focus is not vacation time, but the sunshine.

MAGDALENA NEWHOUSE

Before I arrived in Azerbaijan, I expected it to be similar to rural Russia. In fact, the Soviet atmosphere in Azerbaijan is significantly muted by the heavy Turkish and Iranian influences. The city of Baku is full of Muslim-flavored architec-



Magdalena Newhouse

ture, with doner kebab stands on every corner. Azerbaijan is frequently characterized as a blend of old and new, or East and West. In the center of Baku there is the walled Old City (Icherisheher), parts of which date back to the 12th century, where you can explore the old palace of the Shahs and buy traditional Azerbaijani crafts. In other parts of the city, Azerbaijan's oil money and recent global attention (they hosted the Eurovision contest a few years ago) have facilitated construction of large, modern buildings, like the flashy Flame Towers or the handful of expensive shopping malls. Baku is a city in the process of rapidly modernizing, which is apparent from the

amount of construction all around.

In Azerbaijan, I've learned so much about the history, politics, and culture of a region I was entirely ignorant of. One of the most common topics of discussion, especially when foreigners are around, is the ongoing military occupation of parts of Azerbaijan by Armenia (Armenians would call it a reclamation of land that rightfully belongs to them). One of the least common topics of discussion is the government, since it is considered dangerous to speak out against the president, Ilham Aliyev. Election Day in Baku was more like a celebration of Ilham Aliyev, with people partying and waving Azerbaijani flags and pictures of the president.

As for my personal experiences, I've been running English conversational classes for students and faculty at the Azerbaijan University of Architecture and Construction, and facilitating an online advanced English writing course at the

American Center run by the U.S. Embassy. I have discussed many issues with my students, from the American government shutdown to the best place to buy Azerbaijani pastries in the city. Since Russian is widely spoken, it's been easy to keep up my Russian skills while exploring a very different region. I feel very grateful to have been given this opportunity and to have met so many wonderful Azerbaijanis, including the stray cat I adopted, whom I'll be bringing home to the U.S. with me in June.

RACHEL MCMONAGLE

"Герої не вмирають!" or "Heroes never die!" is the newest cheer of the revolution in Kyiv in honor of those who died during the violent clashes. Although the center of Kyiv looked like a war zone, the violence was relatively concentrated to the main city squares and could safely be avoided for the violent days of late February.

With the metro being closed for several days, I stayed on the outskirts of the city, bussing to and from my university until it

was closed when snipers were introduced to Maidan. Because I lived just outside the city limits in late February, my bus passed through a new protester camp established to monitor who enters the city. Two of the roads' three lanes were heaped with tires prepped for burning in the event some "undesirable" groups tried to enter the city.

During the past few months much of the protestor camps been cleaned up, but few people are satisfied with the recent political progress. It's far from over: there are safety and health concerns lingering, Putin remains a pressing threat in the east, the economy is collapsing, and there are no suitable candidates to lead the country out of this. Early elections in May will certainly be exciting, and the conversations revolving around the protests have taught me an incredible amount about the country's history and political system and people's hopes for the future. As an American, it's difficult to relate to Ukrainians' situation, but I think it's a good mental exercise to try. It's brought about a whole new appreciation and perspective on the United States' government and legal system for me.

While the protests have overshadowed events of recent months, a lot of really wonderful things have been happen-



Rachel McMonagle

continued on page 8

Oberlin's 2013 Fulbright Scholars, *cont.*

ing on a quieter level. I began living in Kyiv in September and moved in with a host family in late December. Although we've had a few blips of cultural misunderstanding frustration, it's been a great experience. I was able to celebrate New Years (Dec. 31), Christmas (Jan. 7), and Old New Years (Jan. 13) with lots of extended host family and traditional foods and alcohol and lots and lots of singing. I finished my Ukrainian class in December so most of my days are spent with my office family at the university—full of lunchtime vodka shots, curious homemade foods, language tricks, and mini-pranks. And of course, lots of sophisticated research.

My Fulbright research has evolved into a series of projects on small-scale agriculture in Ukraine. I recently finished an international comparison of crop rotation policies for USAID's AgroInvest group that is working on developing new agricultural policies for Ukraine. I've submitted two theoretical pieces on land tenure issues and the damaging effects of intense sunflower cultivation to Ukrainian academic journals and just finished a more light-hearted piece on Ukrainians' relationship to food and food production for an American audience. Although the violence in the east has interrupted some travel and conference plans, I hope to

continue to visit different regions of Ukraine to administer an ongoing survey to university students. These visits will contribute to a larger piece that I'm writing on the future of small-scale agriculture in post-moratorium Ukraine.



The protest camp on Independence Square