

# O C R E E C A S

# N e w s

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The Oberlin Center for  
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## U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan Gives Talk at Oberlin

During his junior year abroad, Steven Mann, '73, had a run in with the Yugoslav authorities while camping out near Tito's Summer Palace. He didn't get into serious trouble, but his subsequent trip to the American consulate sparked an interest in the Foreign Service. He is now the United States Ambassador to Turkmenistan. OCREECAS recently invited Ambassador Mann back to Oberlin to speak about career opportunities in the U.S. Foreign Service, as well as his perspectives on diplomacy in Central Asia.



Mann told students in an informal talk sponsored by Career Services that Foreign Service work "is the most interesting work in the world...It's the best seat in the action...if you like international politics, learning languages...you get a chance to reinvent yourself every two to three years." Mann's own career, spanning just under twenty-five years of service, has taken him all over the world: from his initial assignment in Jamaica, to Sri Lanka, Micronesia, and Mongolia, among other places. But he feels most at home in the former Soviet Union, where among other assignments, he facilitated visits to the American embassy in Moscow by Andrei Sakharov and other political dissidents. Mann says, "Sitting in the kitchen of a crumbling Soviet

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high-rise, drinking vodka and eating cucumbers and greasy sausages is one of my pleasures in life.”

Mann’s recent appointment as Ambassador to Turkmenistan takes him where Americans never had access during the Soviet period. In a lecture he gave to students and faculty, he summed up the United States’ diplomatic mission in Central Asia: “We want sovereign, independent states in this region...we want them to become democratic, market-oriented societies.”

The region plays a key role in efforts to stop the flow of military technology out of the former Soviet Union; fortunately, according to Mann, “the countries [of Central Asia] are very serious about cooperating with the U.S., with the international community on proliferation issues.” Moreover, experts estimate that Turkmenistan possesses the world’s third largest reserve of natural gas. Mann is currently engaged in negotiations with Turkmenistan’s president regarding the construction of a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline between Turkmenistan and Turkey, which would provide the former country with an easy means of export. But Dutch Shell Oil, backed by the United States, faces competition in this deal from a Russian oil company.

In general, says Mann, the countries of Central Asia face “tremendous challenges” in their transition to independence. For one, although the Soviet regime left them with “a very stable baseline,” in terms of near-universal literacy, social stability and a lack of crime, “the Soviet infrastructure is crumbling.” In addition, Mann notes that “for decades there has been a lack of foreign investment in Central Asia.” And while foreign investors are certainly attracted to the region now, there is hesitation on both sides: the Central Asian nations fear foreign interference, and outside investors worry about the lack

of rule of law in the region. Convincing the current administration in Turkmenistan of the need for institutionalized rule of law has become his top priority as ambassador, says Mann.

Mann calls the Turkmen president a reformer but adds that “he [the president] wants to control, in the most minute detail, the transformation.” Some might even characterize the president’s administration as a cult of personality, given the recent official declaration of his status as “President for Life” and the erection of a rotating golden statue in his honor in the capital city, Ashgabat. Mann also acknowledges the persistence of human rights abuses in the country, a problem which the ambassador and his staff are working very hard to persuade the Turkmen president to solve.

Overall, Mann retains a sense of optimism about the long-term future of Central Asia, placing his hopes on the more open-minded younger generations. “The best thing I do is support and run the exchanges program with the U.S.,” says Mann, referring to the Embassy’s scholarship program which sends Turkmen high school and college students to study in the United States. According to Mann, this program “imprints the younger generation with what a market economy is like, what rule of law is like.”

Mann points out that only one percent of the U.S. federal budget goes to international affairs, a figure which has been declining since the 1960’s, despite the fact that “the need for diplomacy is increasing.” He concluded his talk with another exhortation to Oberlin students to consider the Foreign Service as a career option: “We do what we do with people...More than any other resource, we need quality people. In keeping with the Oberlin tradition, you can help people, make a difference, and you won’t get rich.”

*Dolsy Smith, OC ‘00*

## *Would you be willing to share career advice?*

If so, please let us know, so that we can put interested alumns and students in touch with you.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation/ field of work: \_\_\_\_\_

How to contact me: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact us by e-mail at: [ocreecas@oberlin.edu](mailto:ocreecas@oberlin.edu)

## Alumn combines Russian and non-profit work

In her senior year at Oberlin, Robbyn Kistler ('95) knew that she wanted to to play in a steel drum band in Seattle but had no idea that this move would lead her to a job in a rapidly growing non-profit organization, the Foundation for Russian-American Economic Cooperation. OCREECAS and the Alumni Association recently brought Kistler back to Oberlin for a visit, where she spoke to a roomful of Russian majors and other interested students about her work at the Foundation and about opportunities for involvement with the former Soviet Union in the non-profit sector.



The Seattle-based Foundation, which receives funding from the federal government, seeks to foster good relations between the United States and Russia by facilitating economic cooperation. Kistler started out there as a summer intern, but now she works as the Foundation's Director of Training and Exchanges, arranging internships in American businesses and organizations on the West Coast for Russian entrepreneurs, government officials and people working in the non-profit sector. This program, which already boasts three hundred alumni across Russia, helps the Russian participants both build their professional skills and establish important connections with U.S. counterparts. Being this program's director satisfies both her interest in Russian culture and her desire to continue using her Russian, Kistler says.

She enjoys the great range of practical and business-related experience she has gained at the Foundation, which has grown from a four-person operation at the time of her hiring into a well-established organization with twenty employees in Seattle, and four branch offices located in the Russian Far East and staffed mostly by Russians. In

addition to the cultural exchange program, the Foundation runs an annual policy forum on U.S.-Russia trading issues, helps American export firms navigate the red tape of Russian customs laws, and provides federally-funded technical assistance to nascent businesses in Russia. For Kistler, "there's always been something new to do at the Foundation."

She is also very optimistic about employment prospects in general for those who have studied Russian and/or Russia. She told students: "Your Russian degree is really valuable and needed....We're still in a transitional era with Russia. There are a lot of opportunities and a lot of important history being created that really needs people who know about Russia and who understand to some degree...the specific needs of the country...."

Currently, a major area of work is technical assistance—that is, providing equipment and professional guidance to Russian entrepreneurs. In this field, one can find a job either in a U.S. government agency or with a non-profit organization. Kistler points out that although a great deal of U.S. federal government money goes into Russia each year, much of this support does not end up where it is most needed, due to the fact that those administering the funds have little knowledge about the society and culture with which they are dealing.

Kistler also wants to dispel the myth that one can only find a Russia-related job in New York or Washington, D.C.: she says, "there's a whole other world on the West Coast in terms of things Russian." In Seattle, for example, there are approximately fifty to sixty thousand Russian speakers. International organizations there tend to focus on the Russian Far East, thanks to the large amount of fishing, shipping and trading activity between the two regions. But the large Russian population within the city itself makes for a wide range of jobs in interpretation or translation: in courts, hospitals, businesses, social service agencies, etc.

And for those who want to spend more time in Russia, Kistler describes another spectrum of employment opportunities. For one, cultural exchange organizations—such as IREX, the Center for Citizens' Initiatives in San Francisco, or even the Foundation for which Kistler works—maintain American recruitment officers in Russia, who network and interview applicants for internships and homestays in the U.S. Humanitarian aid organizations, such as Project Aid Siberia, and environmental organizations like the World Wildlife Fund also have many employees working throughout Russia. Often these organizations provide one with an opportunity to work in villages and in the countryside. Another such organization is the World Heritage Center on the Kamchatka Peninsula, dedicated to the preservation of

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indigenous cultures in Siberia during the transition to a global economy.

In addition to foreign-based organizations, many local Russian non-profit organizations desperately need the expertise of someone who can write grant proposals in English. Moreover, in Kistler's words, "being able to put up a web-page is a supervaluable skill in Russia." And of course, one can almost always find a post in Russia teaching English.

So how does one go about getting a Russia-related job? According to Kistler, a graduate degree in Russian may not make one automatically more desirable to an employer, nor does it necessarily reflect greater skills on the part of the applicant. Kistler herself majored in Russian Studies in Oberlin, which she describes as "a lot of history and literature." Her major acquainted her with Russian language and culture but in no way prepared her for the business-oriented aspect of her work at the Foundation. She says that she learned a variety of practical skills and approaches on the job, and she advises Oberlin graduates not to rule out the world of business simply because they have had no exposure to it during their college career. "Do internships, do things to get some experience outside the classroom," she advises, citing her own transition from summer intern to a permanent position at the Foundation. Email listservs, such as the one distributed by the Center for Civil Society International, as well as the Internet in general are good sources for finding out about internship and job openings, but Kistler also underscores the importance of networking and maintaining personal contacts in the field.

For Kistler, though, the most important qualities for a prospective employee to have are good interpersonal skills and an enthusiasm about the work. In these respects and others she believes that her Oberlin education prepared her well for a versatile career: "What did I learn at Oberlin? What I learned was how to think, how to recognize a good idea, how to organize and process information, how to treat people well..." She also notes how the Oberlin ethic has carried over into her work at the Foundation: "As Obies we're committed to using our talents to make a difference in the world. Russia's a great place to do that...I've learned more about myself and more about the world from working with Russia and Russians than anything else I can imagine doing."

*Dolsy Smith, OC '00*

*To find out more about the Foundation for Russian-American Economic Exchange, or to get in touch with Robbyn Kistler, visit the Foundation's website at [www.fraec.org](http://www.fraec.org).*

## П О М О Г И !

Last year the Oberlin Department of German and Russian received eight Soviet civil-war era posters. The posters are examples of mass-produced propaganda created during the Bolshevik revolution, and they include a very famous image created by Dimitri Moor, one of the two major artists of the Literary Publishing Department (Litizdat) created by the Bolsheviks. Distributed in 1921, the poster was designed as a plea for famine relief after the war.

The department is delighted to acquire the posters and hopes that they will form the basis for a teaching collection of Russian and Soviet materials. They are currently being held at the Allen Memorial Art Museum. Unfortunately, they are in terrible condition: all are torn, some very badly, and several are stained. If repaired, however, the department feels they would be invaluable teaching aids.

To be at all usable, the posters must undergo an active conservation process, involving removal of dirt and stains, de-acidification of the paper, repair of tears, and backing the posters with new paper. Since it is such a time-consuming and therefore expensive process, the cost of even the most minimal conservation will be approximately \$1000.



The department hopes to raise at least part of the money for the conservation of the Soviet posters through alumni donations. If you would be interested in contributing to the poster conservation fund, please send checks payable to Oberlin College to the following address:

**Poster Conservation Fund**  
**c/o Department of German and Russian**  
**Peters Hall 222**  
**50 N. Professor Street**  
**Oberlin, OH 44074**

## *From Alumni*

**Aileen Rambow, '85**, received her Ph.D. at the Free University of Berlin, where she says she used her notes from classes with Heather Hogan to prepare for her dissertation defense. She now works as an external relations officer at the Civic Education Project in Germany. She continues to pursue her interests in academia and is currently involved in research on the Russian intelligentsia.

Until recently, **Melissa Prager, '98**, worked for a non-profit organization in Jerusalem called SHAMIR: the Association of Jewish Religious Professionals from the Former Soviet Union. SHAMIR is a publishing house of Jewish books translated into Russian. Melissa says the organization is open to any volunteers, and "the employees dish out every kopek they have to help sustain SHAMIR."

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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