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Image by Sam Withrow

Just days after last autumn's election debacle in Ukraine, Beth Knobel, CBS News' Moscow Bureau Chief, found herself not in Kiev, but in Oberlin, speaking to over a hundred students for the OCREECAS short course "Putin's Presidency." The week-long class presented a broad overview of the current political climate of Russia, effectively opening the door for further exploration into a range of issues raised. "I thought a lot about what to say and how to explain Russia, so I've tried to take off my 'bureau chief' hat and 'journalist' hat and tried to sit in your seats as students of Russian and think, 'What do I need to know about what's going on here, and what's the most interesting? What's the most important stuff going on?'" Knobel explained, prefacing each class with the announcement that the views she presented were her own and not those of CBS, in order to open herself fully and share her own valuable experiences and insights.

The answers to the questions lay in the topics discussed each evening. Engaging and personable, Knobel started off the first class with an examination of Putin, the man and his rise to

power. As the week progressed, Knobel moved the discussion into Putin's methods of dealing with the weighty topics of everything from Yukos and the economy, to the takeover of the media, to terrorism, along with a touching on a myriad of other problems including corruption, AIDS, and loose nukes along the way.

"I have been incredibly lucky and been



Beth Knobel lectures at Oberlin College

able to witness modern Russian history firsthand. I've met Yeltsin. I've met Gorbachev. I've met Putin. I've seen the Soviet Union fall apart. I've been to most of the former soviet republics, traveled to all kinds of places like Afghanistan that affect Russia. I think it's one thing if people talk about things that they've read about in books, but it's quite another if they talk about things that they've actually seen with their own eyes, so I feel that it's my responsibility as someone that's been really blessed to see things personally to try to pass on to others the feeling of what it's like to be there," Knobel said.

A New York native, Knobel found herself in Russia for the first time in 1990 while working on her doctoral thesis on how Gorbachev utilized the media. It was during this time that she fell in love with the Russian people, and was so swept up in the exhilaration of the times that when she finished her thesis Knobel says, "Instead of taking a teaching job as a professor, I decided, 'I can't do

this. I've got to go to Russia,'" and took a job in Moscow reporting for the LA Times. Before moving on to CBS, she also spent some time at Worldwide Television News, providing pictures to television clients across the globe.

Knobel did get a taste of the professional life. She spent a semester in 1993 at the Northwestern journalism school teaching a course focusing on media law and public policy, as her husband, also a journalist, had won a fellowship to the University of Chicago—but she's never had the opportunity to teach about Russia.

Considering the difficulties she encountered in trying to compress everything she wanted to say into a week-long course, it's evident that Russia is one subject close to her heart. Having lived there for over ten years, the excitement still surfaces when she says, "One thing I really thought hard about was: what stereotypes are still out there about Russia? And how can I let people know that's just not what it's like anymore? It's so much more developed and advanced and... crazy, wild, electric, amazing than they ever expect."

Knobel worries that she isn't telling students enough about the good that is happening in the former Soviet Union. She's especially pleased about the religious revival not only among the Orthodox believers, but also in the Jewish community, and took the opportunity to show a piece that she and her team put together on the ancient art of bell ringing. Politically and economically, Knobel is glad to witness a shift as average Russians are starting to feel the benefits of the exploding economy, and see the tax structure simplified for individuals and businesses. Knobel does have her concerns for the future of democracy under Putin, however, citing the fact that Russians no longer vote directly for their representatives.

"I'm not sure that we should be saying to Russia as Americans that 'You need to have the same democracy that we do.' That's not right. They need to come up with their own democratic system." Looking at the enormous steps that have been made, Knobel has little doubt that it will happen, but sees a lot more

dents to take an active interest in Russia, and advised "I would argue that Russia is the second-most important country in the world after the United States, because it still is a nuclear power like none other. It's the anchor for a large part of the world. It's a place that we need to be our partner not our enemy and I think it's really important that you as the next generation of world leaders care about Russia and do what you can to bring it into as opposed to keeping it out of the fold. Everyone should come to Russia and see for themselves. Hopefully if just one person in that classroom thinks about things differently, or takes an extra Russian history or politics or language course that they weren't going to take before, then I'll feel like I've done my job."

~Lisa Strid '05

Events

OTPOR: The Fight to Save Serbia

September 29, 2005

Serbian film director Goran Radovanovic will show his award-winning documentary on the Serbian student organization that helped topple Milosevic in October of

Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin

October 21, 23, 28 & 29, 2005

Cleveland Opera, State Theatre

Winter Term in Russia

January, 2006

The Russian Department is proud to announce its first organized Winter Term trip to Moscow and St. Petersburg. Designed primarily for first-years, this three-week long event seeks to provide a fascinating introduction to Russian language and culture.

Short Course

Folk Beliefs Then and Now

Sep. 19 - Oct. 31 2005

Through an interdisciplinary approach to folklore and folk beliefs, this course surveys topics including:

- * deities and mythical beings
- * medieval Russian literature
- * traveling minstrels and fairy tales
- * Siberian shamanism
- * folk music and dance performance
- * the rise of a neo-pagan movement in Russia

All course lectures are free and open to the public.

Guest Lectures:

Sep. 26 - Linda Ivanits (Penn State) - "Folk Belief and 19th C Russian Literature"

Oct 3 - Francis Butler (University of Illinois) (Oberlin alum) - "The Russian Primary Chronicle, medieval literature and the pre-Christian tradition"

Oct 10 - Laura Olson (Colorado) - "Contemporary Russian Folk Music"

Oct 17 - Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (Georgetown)- "Siberian Shamanism"

Oct 31 - Anatol Shmelev (Stanford) - "Neopaganism and the Rise of Russian Nationalism".

La Cosa Hava: Vadim Volkov's Comparative Mafia Course

For four weeks from February into March, I was one of several Oberlin students participating in an OCREECAS short-course focusing on organized crime: comparative mafias. The course was taught by guest professor Vadim Volkov, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at the European University of St. Petersburg.

Volkov's first encounter with Oberlin was in the autumn of 2001, when he spoke at "After the Fall," a conference on the developments of Russian society ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union. It was Oberlin professor Veljko Vujacic who invited Volkov, to teach a short-course here based on his studies of the economics of the protection industry, and how illegal private organizations compete with the state.

The class learned about the mafia in Japan, America, and Italy, but focused on Russia over the past twenty years, as it is an invaluable case study in the way which the growth of organized crime directly correlates to the policies, organization, and services offered by the state. From his personal observations, Volkov realized that the rise of the protection industry in Russia was the sort of social phenomenon that he, as a sociologist, could not ignore. "As I started doing research, I realized it was something much more important than just organized crime: it was also about the state, the new elites, the primitive accumulation of capital, and some kind of twisted warrior subculture," says Volkov.

During the 1980's in Russia, many young men unable to find opportunity elsewhere turned to extortion for money. Small gangs of young men, called "brigades," would demand protection money from street market

vendors. These young men, known as *kachki*, or "pump-ups," were often former athletes and Afghan war veterans, with violence as their only money-making skill.

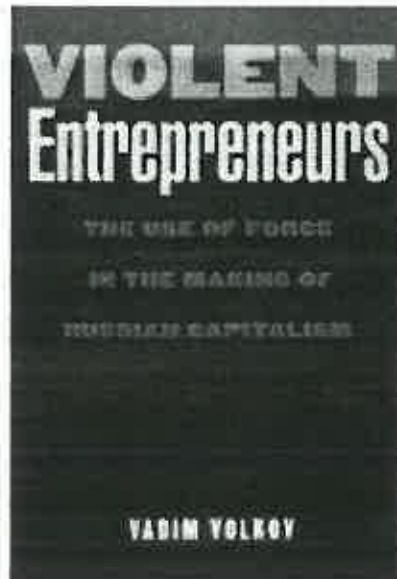
With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the Russian state's slow reconstruction, many of these brigades were able to strengthen their organizations. With the legal system in complete disarray, no one had any experience in settling property disputes. Business transactions were increasingly unreliable. Many *kachki* became "enforcement partners" in private security firms.

Enforcement partners from one firm would meet with those from another firm, representing the businesses on either side of a transaction. The threat of violence these enforcement partners represented was the guarantee that certain rules were followed and the terms of contracts obliged. Much of

Volkov's work is based on one-on-one interviews he conducted with men from these private security firms. He organized these interviews through friends of friends of friends, and is frequently commended for his bravery in the name of academia, though he denies ever feeling in danger. "The image people have of mafiosi is the TV image,"

he says.

The class was made up of a mix of Russian language students and students more interested in the sociology and economics of organized crime. In addition to the discussions and lectures, we also watched the 1931 American film *Public Enemy*, starring James Cagney, the Japanese film *Anti-Extortion Woman*, directed by Junzo Itami, and several episodes of the Russian mafia television drama, *The Brigade*. Considered a Russian version of *The Sopranos*, *The Brigade* is about the criminal careers of four young friends. The show follows these four men from their start as a small





Vadim Volkov, courtesy of Wooster.edu

gang of extortionists through their ascent over the years, eventually becoming a powerful private security firm. Starting in the 1980's and going to the new millennium, the show also charts the collapse and

reconstruction of the Russian state.

Of his more general experiences in Oberlin, Volkov said that he was very glad to fulfill his long-standing goal of finally watching *The Sopranos* himself, after hearing so much about it over the years. "A couple of times colleagues took me to some wonderful working-class bars," he said. "I had to make an effort in order to have experiences that I could thereafter report to someone. It's a small and generally quiet place. But in the end I made friends with some very interesting people, the living souls of Oberlin."

Regarding future studies, Volkov says that he is planning to start where his old project left off - with the newer state-building efforts in Russia and the relationship between the state and businesses. The research will be set against the backdrop of the American Gilded Age, around 1870-1910 - the early days of unbridled capitalism, robber barons and unregulated markets - providing a comparative dimension that will inform Volkov's discussion of Russia's new capitalism.

With organized crime, typically considered a flashy subject, the focus is often on the intense mafiosi lifestyle. A true understanding of the social mechanics behind this cultural phenomenon, however, can be invaluable. There are very specific social conditions under which organized crime can grow, when people will want to turn to crime to support themselves, and when the populace will accept the authority of criminals. Understanding how

organized crime becomes so deeply rooted in society makes it no longer a dangerous and exotic topic, but a common illness of the modern world to be cured. Volkov's course gave several Oberlin students precisely that sort of insight.

Dr Volkov's book, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism*, 2002, is available from Cornell University Press.

~Sam Newhouse '05

Summer 2005 OCREECAS Internships

OCREECAS sponsored three internships in the summer of 2005, creating new partnerships with Russian organizations and continuing established ones.

Anna Brown ('06), a biology major and Russian minor, interned for 10 weeks with the Great Baikal Trail Association in Irkutsk, Russia. GBT promotes ecotourism as a practical path to conserving Lake Baikal's environment and supporting the cultures around it. Russian and international volunteers work together to build and maintain trails. Anna worked on several trail building projects and did some translation.

Dual Degree Engineering Major Janis Sanders ('07) also worked on four two-week long Great Baikal Trail projects, clearing trails and helping in small towns, and learning about the culture and people, as well as helping with translations and organizing of local guides and handouts.

Conservatory Composition Major Jason Lindgren ('05) is currently interning in Moscow with Transatlantic Partners Against AIDS. As a media partnerships intern he helps to coordinate relationships with various mass media companies, including television, radio, press, and outdoor advertising, to distribute public service announcements about HIV/AIDS in Russia and assists the development of new campaigns such as a national hotline, an SMS information service and celebrity endorsements.

The Culture of Gardening

Last spring (2004) OCREECAS awarded the first Lankford Awards to fund student research in Russian studies. I took the opportunity to design a summer project interviewing recent immigrants in my hometown of Sacramento. Sacramento's large Russian population was what first sparked my interest in Russia in middle school. With this project I aimed to learn more about the community, in particular about views on environmental issues in Russia and America. Improving my Russian skills before studying abroad in Krasnodar would also be useful.

To my surprise, the first five Russians I met were from Krasnodar, and happy to meet an American who knew about their city and could even speak some Russian. In the past 10 years many evangelicals from Krasnodar, as well as others from the former Soviet Union, have relocated over the 11 time zones to Sacramento. Partly because many were religious refugees, the Russian speakers are a very well organized 8% of the population, with churches, stores, radio stations, newspapers and neighborhoods forming the foundation of their community. Once I had met Andrei, a community leader who immigrated from Krasnodar 3 years ago, meeting others became easier. He wanted to talk to me (about religion not the environment, but it was still interesting), to introduce me to his niece and her family, and to let me sit in on community meetings in the housing complex where he lived. He also gave me the telephone number of a friend in Krasnodar to contact in the fall.

By talking to the people I met through Andrei and the mutual housing complexes, I

was privileged to learn a bit about the immigrant community and culture, peoples reasons for immigrating, and the balance of integration and insulation. In the end I didn't interview as many people as I expected about environmental issues, but there were a few good conversations about the benefits of gardens, gathering wild foods, accessibility to wilderness areas, and pesticides, always comparing America to Russia. students have the same opportunity to design research or journey's of their own.

All of the people I interviewed saw differences between America and their original countries in environmental issues. Incidentally, everyone I interviewed about environmental issues was female, which I'm sure affects responses. In their native countries they all had gardens, preserved foods, gathered berries or mushrooms, and had easy access to natural areas. They took pride in the freshness, taste, and even the smallness, of their homegrown vegetables, especially the Georgian. Gardens had become less economically important to them in the past decade, as vegetables and fruits become available year round in stores and markets. In America having a garden



The garden at the housing complex where Anna conducted her interviews

was still less important, though still a healthy hobby, as evidenced by gardens on the edges of the mainly Russian housing complexes. When I asked about foraging around Sacramento they were horrified, and thought it must be against the law, (although

it is not illegal, and a good number of people pick blackberries along the river). Surprisingly to me, most felt they had enough access to natural areas in California, despite the necessity of a car and long drives. In their home

countries (Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia), public transportation is much more available, both within and outside of cities.

I continued with the project informally in Krasnodar, by talking to people (again, mostly women) about current environmental issues. Most were more concerned with the environment and health problems like asthma, and more apt to have gardens or take trips to the forest, than Sacramentoans. The people I talked to thought air and water quality should be improved, but did not anticipate any government action, especially considering a depressed economy.

My host mother expected that enough angry citizens could force the government to pass stricter laws on pollution, but also assumed new laws would be enforced no more than current ones. An elderly Cossack spoke with sadness and anger about the privatization, partitioning, and destruction of the forest, which he felt the Soviet government had valued and conserved for all Russians.

A language professor remembered fumes from a now closed factory making her sick, but is acutely aware how many people remain unemployed from the factories closings.

As an agricultural center but also a growing and westernizing city, Krasnodar has many choices about land use, industrial agriculture, re-developing industry, public transportation, and privatization, that will impact environmental health and people. It is hopeful that many people value a healthy environment, but discouraging that people do not see a way to voice or protect their interests. In my opinion, peoples' desires for having healthy food, preserving the forests, and stopping air pollution, need to be organized

and integrated into Krasnodar's development. However, I did not find any organizations working on environmental issues in Krasnodar, besides a group of scientists affiliated with the university.

Overall, the feeling was that the environment is one of many concerns, and while a healthy environment is vital for the body and soul, it is a personal, not state, value, and outweighed by other concerns.

Compared to Sacramento, environmental issues in Krasnodar are more obviously critical at state and personal levels, but issues like employment, social



benefits and economic development also need attention. The Lankford award thus gave me a wonderful opportunity to research environmental issues with the Russian community in Sacramento, and a framework for further research in Krasnodar. It is interesting and exciting to bring Russian and environmental interests together, and to compare views, values, and problems in Krasnodar and in the Russian-American community of Sacramento. I will continue involvement in environmental issues in the US and Russia, and I hope many other students have the same opportunity to design research or journey's of their own.

~Anna-Martha Brown '06