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Contraband Canvases

BY VLAD BURSUC '13

Professor of Russian and East European Studies Arlene Forman, together with Director of Sponsored Programs Pam Snyder, organized a mini-course in fall 2010 titled *Contraband Canvases*, an exploration of the Savitsky Collection in the Nukus Art Museum in Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan. Igor Savitsky (1915-1984) gathered more than 40,000 unsanctioned Soviet artworks and used state funds to create the second-largest collection of Soviet avant-garde art in the world. The historical and political conditions that made this endeavor possible, and the works of art themselves, offer fresh perspectives in our understanding of Soviet art, history, and politics.

The course drew on the expertise of several faculty members from the Russian and East European Studies Committee. Marko Dumancic provided an introduction to Central Asian history, Steve Crowley spoke on contemporary Uzbek politics, Tim Scholl discussed the features of Russian Modernist art, and Forman detailed the features of Socialist Realism. Students also had access to relevant Soviet-era documentaries and photographic images of Uzbek life captured by photographer Max Penson.

These introductory lectures helped contextualize the public screening of the 2010 documentary *Desert of Forbidden Art*. Directors Amanda Pope and Tchavdar Georgiev came to campus to discuss their experiences making the film and the present state of the museum. In addition to leading a roundtable discussion for students in the *Contraband Canvases* mini-course, Pope and Georgiev spoke to students in cinema studies and met with members of the Allen Memorial Art Museum. The course concluded with a lecture by art historian Pamela Kachurin of Duke University, a specialist in Russian art who has worked with the Savitsky Collection in Nukus. Thanks to the contributions of all these participants, students were able to gain a multifaceted understanding of the topic in a rather short period of time.



HOW DID IGOR SAVITSKY (1914-85) SECURE STATE FUNDING FOR A MUSEUM FEATURING ART DEEMED ANTI-SOVIET? THIS COURSE EXAMINES THE POLITICAL CLIMATE AND THE HISTORICAL FACTORS THAT MADE THE SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE.

The most sobering part of this wonderful mini-course, however, was the reality of the danger that still surrounds the collection. This was highlighted by the conspicuous absence of museum director Marinika Babanazarova. She had hoped to come to Oberlin as part of a U.S. tour that would include venues such as the National Gallery of Art, but was denied an exit visa by Uzbek authorities.

The most recent coverage of the political and economic woes facing Babanazarova appeared in March 2011 in the *New York Times*: www.nytimes.com/2011/03/08/arts/design/desert-of-forbidden-art-igor-savitsky-collection-in-nukus.html. Those interested in the topics discussed in this course can visit the Nukus Art Museum's website at www.savitskycollection.org/, the film's website at www.desertofforbiddenart.com/, or photographer Max Penson's website at <http://maxpenson.com/en/>.

Learning a Language, Meeting Yourself

BY MAIA SOLOVIEVA, Faculty-in-Residence, Lecturer in Russian

What does it mean to learn a foreign language? Observing my students and being an active language learner myself, I see it as one of the most exciting learning experiences in life. By learning a foreign language, we not only obtain new knowledge, we also become deeply involved in a foreign culture in a way that can subtly affect our identity. I often remind my students that through learning Russian (or any other language), they can discover something new in themselves and see the world from a new perspective.

In his 1987 Nobel lecture, Joseph Brodsky described the power that language has over poets: “Beginning a poem, the poet as a rule doesn’t know the way it’s going to come out, and at times he is very surprised by the way it turns out, since often it turns out better than he expected, often his thought carries further than he reckoned.” Brodsky calls this dependence on language “absolute, despotic,” but notes that “it unshackles as well.”

This dependence on the hidden patterns of language and culture seems to work in similar ways in second language acquisition and in the creative process of writing. Students take



Russian House residents celebrate Valentine’s Day.

foreign language classes for many different reasons: some do it out of pure curiosity, just to try something new; others to prove something to themselves; still others for strictly practical reasons. Very often at the beginning of our language journey, we have only the vaguest idea of where we are going and how the target language and culture may affect our lives.

Oddly enough, it is only relatively recently that we began considering “culture” as an essential part of language learning. As an instructor, I have undergone my own journey, moving from my initial attempts to present culture to my students as a body of eminently teachable and learnable *facts*, to an approach, more recently, that views culture as a complex, elusive, constantly changing concept. I learned a great deal from observing my students abroad and from reading their reflection papers on culture in the United States. I gradually accepted the fact that my students and I will be engaged for the rest of our lives in an ongoing process of learning culture. In more theoretical terms, learning culture is also the “process of acquiring the culture-

specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It’s a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process that engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively”¹. (Paige R.M. et al, 2003:177).

Learning cultural rules in the American classroom is safe, enjoyable, and (most of the time) exciting. But coming face to face with real-life culture can be a different experience. The culture shock students experience is sometimes disheartening, and it can affect them deeply on both an emotional and cognitive level. Here is what one of my students had to say while he was still in Russia:

Everything seemed to be going so bad at first: I was overwhelmed with my new environment, the new culture, the language, and with the classes at school, and to top it all off, my family situation wasn’t all that great ... I hit the downward side on my adjustment curve first.

One of the most important lessons students need to learn in preparing for culture shock is that it is not enough just to be “theoretically” open to cultural differences. We need to remind ourselves that our worldview is based on our native culture and can be viewed as foreign and strange in other cultures. Even in the classroom, it takes strength, courage, and flexibility to understand cultural differences and to continue pushing forward to explore aspects of another culture that are uncomfortable. In real life, we are constantly forced to move out of our comfort zone:

For the first two weeks ... my adaptation to Russian culture was difficult. Being immersed in the culture can be a frightening experience, because it requires a loss of control that many Americans would find unacceptable, and requires opening oneself up to experiences that are potentially uncomfortable. My inability to control my surroundings was the biggest hindrance to my being able to adjust to daily life in Russia. Having only a limited knowledge of the language and culture ensured that every day was filled with awkward and embarrassing moments. When I learned to accept these experiences as part of the adjustment process, I learned that Russia has a lot to offer the interested foreigner.

It is possible, of course, for students to prepare themselves for the cultural differences they will encounter abroad and begin learning the cultural “grammar” of another country right here at Oberlin. The right kind of preparation will help minimize all sorts of fears and will reduce the negative impact of culture shock. At Oberlin there are abundant resources and opportunities—from traditional courses in the language departments to language learning activities outside the classroom—to help students with this preparation.

Language learners may already use these resources without being conscious that they are building their own personalized image of culture that scholars call a “third place.” This third place is not one’s native culture, but it’s not exactly the target culture either: rather it is the trajectory that you, and only you, take from your personal culture toward the target culture. It’s an exciting journey, and since culture is elusive and constantly changing, acquiring “cultural grammar” can be a lifelong journey.

As a language instructor, I introduce cultural metaphors and symbols to my students to give them the context necessary to create their own personal meanings about Russian culture. There are certain Russian words and phrases that are particularly marked, that are deeply rooted in the culture, so to speak. Students can explore cultural specificity as it is lexically expressed through key terms such as *sud'ba*, *dusha*, *smirenje*, *grust'*, *toska*, and many others. These terms function as cultural metaphors and symbols that encapsulate how Russians conceptualize desire, agency, time, space, etc., and we can only fully understand their meaning through broad exposure to Russian art, literature, and film.

Our various activities at Russian House and our informal conversations at Russian Table give students the opportunity to push themselves toward the notion of “otherness.” It might seem that we are just having fun at Russian House—drinking tea, watching movies, listening to live music by the Balkan ensemble, etc.—but all these forms of “feeling” another culture at an emotional level help students build their own “third place” even while they are still at Oberlin.

The Oberlin College Center for Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies (OCREECAS) awards competitive grants for students to pursue internships abroad. Candidates must prove their readiness to function in a real-life working environment in another culture. One recent recipient, Zachary Rewinsky, came back from Russia recently after working for three months at the Great Baikal Trail (Irkutsk, Russia). Zach gave a very enthusiastic lecture on the ecological resources of the Baikal region and shared his personal reflections on his time in Russia. I'm really proud of Zach and would like to see more students and OCREECAS interns bring back their own discoveries of Russian, East European, and Central Asian culture to campus.

Creating a “third culture” outside of one's native culture is an enormous source of personal growth and an important way to discover the complexity of the world. I wish students good luck in their own personal journeys as they meet themselves in the context of other cultures!

1. *Culture as the Core: Perspectives on Culture in Second Language Education*. Edited by R. Michael Paige and Dale L. Lange, 2003.

Adventures on Lake Baikal

BY ZACH REWINSKI '10

In August 2010 I spent two weeks living on Lake Baikal in Siberia as a volunteer for the Great Baikal Trail (GBT) project.

We camped on the eastern shore of the lake, spending our days building a trail from the beach to the nearby dacha [summer cottages] settlement of Maksimikha and our nights by the campfire singing the songs of our international group of volunteers, conversing, and playing games. GBT, founded in 2000, is an organization unique in Russian culture—a non-profit focused on environmental preservation, eco-tourism, and environmental education that is staffed almost entirely by volunteers from Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude. GBT relies on international volunteers to donate their time, money, and summer vacations to the construction of a system of trails around Lake Baikal. GBT also partners with Rotary International, the U.S. Forestry Service, the Tahoe-Baikal Institute, the Russian National Parks and biological reserves (*zapovedniki*), and many other organizations to accomplish this goal.

I arrived at Lake Baikal with only scattered knowledge of the lake and its denizens, but with an extremely generous OCREECAS grant following my graduation from Oberlin in May 2010. While there, I learned about and experienced the lake and its unique culture and heritage, but it has become apparent to me that others know as little or less about this area of Asiatic Russia. So, I'd like to share a few of the things that I learned.

Lake Baikal is the world's oldest and deepest lake. The figures connected to these superlatives are astounding: Baikal is 30 million years old, which is about as old as many mammal species. It



Zach sits with the GBT project's translator on the steps they built as part of the trail building project.

is also, at its deepest, 5,387 feet deep, almost 500 feet deeper than Tanzania's Lake Tanganyika. However, because its maximum width is only 49 miles and overall length 395 miles, it has less surface area than the Great Lakes, despite containing approximately the same amount of water. In fact, Baikal holds roughly 20 percent of the world's unfrozen fresh water (5,700 cubic miles), compared to the Great Lakes' combined 5,412. However, geologists debate its classification as a lake. Because Lake Baikal is situated in a rift valley where the earth's crust is slowly separating, some argue that it should be considered a sea rather than a lake. Of course, this also means that the lake is slowly growing.

The lake also has a rich indigenous and Russian history. The southern and eastern parts of the lake are still populated primarily by the Buryat people, Siberia's largest ethnic group. Russians first came to this part of Siberia in about 1630 and have since come to outnumber Buryats. In fact, many of the most prominent Decemberist revolutionaries transformed Irkutsk into a cultural and

intellectual center following their exile. Several other 19th-century revolutionaries also populated the Baikal region: Mikhail Bakunin was exiled to Siberia, although he eventually escaped to Japan, and Petr Kropotkin, famous for his political activity, is considered a hero of Baikal by the locals for his extensive geological work in the area.



Needless to say, I had little time to ponder these facts with the wonders of Baikal’s natural beauty in front of me. I lived in a tent on the lake’s eastern shore for two weeks with 15 other volunteers, our group’s leader (*brigadier*), and a translator. Our group consisted of volunteers from Russia, Ukraine, Germany, the United Kingdom, Austria, and the U.S., and therefore we had some cultural and linguistic hiccups. However, there were many things that we all agreed on: how delicious our food was after a day of hiking to our work site (two miles uphill) and trail building; that we didn’t like the midges (*moshki*—it’s a helpful word, by the way), and the beauty of our environment. Waking up to the sound of the tide lapping water onto the shore, spending our days in birch and evergreen forests, and sitting on the shore side watching the sunset after a well-deserved dinner were some of the distinct pleasures we experienced, completely severed from civilization and with few of the comforts it affords.

Upon my return to Irkutsk, I started to understand many of Baikal’s subtleties. Despite its idyllic setting and its UNESCO

World Heritage Site status, Baikal faces a number of threats. These threats, unfortunately, are almost always the result of human impact, and they greatly endanger local flora and fauna, which are still mostly endemic and include the world’s only fully freshwater seal (*nerpa*). Tourism has ravaged some of Baikal’s most scenic and geologically compelling areas, including Olkhon Island and Listvianka. Poachers of both game and timber threaten Baikal’s ecosystem. Last, but certainly not least, the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill, reopened by Putin in 2010 after a two-year shutdown, emits pollution and waste that directly enter Baikal’s southern waters.

These and other threats show the importance of GBT’s work. Lake Baikal’s residents unanimously take great pride in their lake and its role in their lives, and they lament its potential decline. GBT’s work focuses on reducing the impact of tourism on the lake. The organization wants visitors from around the world to experience its majesty, but in an ecologically responsible manner. Someday, we hope, visitors and natives will be able to hike around the lake on GBT’s footpaths.

In the meantime, anyone older than 18 who is willing and able can join GBT on a summer or winter project. To learn more about GBT, its work, and Lake Baikal, visit www.greatbaikaltrail.org. There, you can read about these topics, view pictures from previous projects, and learn more about GBT’s functioning as a non-government organization. Read the site in Russian or German, and you’ll undoubtedly learn some new nature vocabulary. And while you’re at it, visit the website of GBT’s partner in Russian environmental activism, Baikal Ecological Wave, at www.baikalwave.eu.org/.

The phenomenal experiences I had on and around Lake Baikal could hardly be summed up in a short article. To really understand the place I’ve been rhapsodizing about in this article, you should just go see it for yourself.

Zach Rewinski is now a graduate student in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of Wisconsin.

Oscar Jaszi Lectureship Series Hosts Professor Venelin Ganey

BY VLAD BURSUC '13

Oberlin College, as part of the Oscar Jaszi Lectureship Series, hosted a visit by Miami University Associate Professor of Political Science Venelin Ganey in December 2010. His talk, “Post Accession Hooliganism: Bulgaria and Romania in the EU,” discussed the political atmosphere in the two former-communist countries and their transition and adaptation to the European Union. Ganey also spoke about the nature of the relationships between these new member states and the older EU members, especially as a result of the newer members having to adapt to existing norms. In the lecture he discussed how elite behavior in Bulgaria and Romania shifted, first responding to the EU’s leverage over

these countries as they aspired for full membership, and then how they reacted to a very different structure of incentives, which resulted in “hooliganism,” once these countries were admitted as full members in 2007.

Ganey also gave a guest lecture as part of the curriculum for Social and Political Change in Eastern Europe, a cross-disciplinary course at Oberlin in sociology and politics. Holding a PhD from the University of Chicago, he is a faculty associate of the Havinhurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies at Miami, where his interests include postcommunist politics, democratization studies, constitutionalism, and modern social theory. He has published widely, and his first book, *Preying on the State: The Transformation of Postcommunist Bulgaria*, was published in 2007 by Cornell University Press.

100 Years After Tolstoy: Thoughts on a Road Not Taken

BY TOM NEWLIN, Associate Professor of Russian

In August 2010, I was forced to return home early from a trip to Russia. I had planned to go by foot from Moscow to Yasnaya Polyana, Leo Tolstoy's estate some 125 miles to the south, with my daughter and Michael Denner, a friend and fellow Tolstoy scholar. We cancelled the walk because of bad weather.

The purpose of this walk was not so much to pay homage to Tolstoy, who died in 1910, as it was simply to go out and see what we could see, and to take measure at ground level of the relevance or irrelevance, a century out, of his cantankerously radical views about technology, consumerism, and voluntary poverty.

Tolstoy made this same trek three times in the second half of the 1880s, when he was in his late 50s. He was already engaged in a wholesale reevaluation of what he considered the addictions and excesses of his aristocratic-bourgeois lifestyle, and he was giving up—or trying to give up—alcohol, meat, hunting, sex, and private property, including his own estate and the publishing rights to all his books. A count who could trace his ancestry back to Prince Rurik, Tolstoy was now mowing hay with the peasants at Yasnaya Polyana, chopping firewood at his house in Moscow, and teaching himself how to make his own boots. He read Thoreau's *Walden*, in English, and was responsible for first bringing it to the attention of the Russian public in 1887. He learned about the Shakers in 1889 and began corresponding with them. He looked askance not only at sex, but also at trains, electricity, telegraphs, and (later in life) cars, motorcycles, and airplanes.

Back in Moscow, his wife, more conventional and pragmatic, viewed his long-distance hikes, like his other forms of refusal, as willfully perverse and she worried that he would catch cold. But he moved quickly for a man his age, covering 25 or so miles a day, outpacing all his younger companions. He was not a purist (in this instance at least), and would occasionally hitch rides or stay at hotels.

Certainly Tolstoy was making a statement. In the 1850s he commented that “the railroad is to travel what the whorehouse is to love: just as convenient but also just as inhumanly mechanical and lethally monotonous.” On his walks in the late 1880s he sometimes skirted the railroad tracks, the better to thumb his nose at the fast lane of modernity.

Like Tolstoy's wife, many of my Russian acquaintances—the city ones at least—were puzzled by my planned foray into the hinterlands, which they saw as whimsical, naive, dangerous, and very American. They spoke ominously of the emptying out of rural Russia in the post-Soviet era and of its precipitous social, economic, and moral “degeneracy,” and worried about run-ins with drunk muzhiks and disaffected village youth.

Maybe they were right, maybe not: we never found out. When we arrived in Petersburg in late July, the heat was scorching. A front from Scandinavia finally brought heavy rain and cooler temperatures a few days later (and spawned unprecedented tornadoes north of the city that killed several people), but the



Graffiti translation: “The most important things in life—are not things.”

change in weather never made it to Moscow. Three days before we were supposed to set out on the walk, the thermometer there was still hovering above 100°, with no relief in sight, and the news about massive peat fires, burning villages, and choking smoke over the capital became increasingly apocalyptic, as did the general mood. Wary of jumping out of the proverbial frying pan into something much worse, we stayed put in St. Petersburg, and then finally cut our losses and headed home to the U.S.—defeated, paradoxically, not by Russia's famous cold, but by its heat.

It would seem that Russians, who have a long tradition of eschatological forecasting, are finally right: the world, or at least the world as we know it, is indeed coming to an end.

In any case, over the summer of 2010 global warming hit Russia—and the Russian consciousness—with a vengeance. President Medvedev, in an about-face, suddenly announced that climate change is real, adding vaguely that “this means we need to change the way we work.” Prime Minister Putin, moving more decisively, took to squirting at bog fires from an airplane.

Tolstoy never explicitly said anything about climate change, though it was a hot topic among 19th-century Russian scientists, who vigorously debated the extent and causes of climate shifts in the central steppes. But he did grapple directly with the immediate effects of these changes, spearheading a massive effort in the early 1890s to alleviate famine brought on by cyclical droughts and crop failures. Even more importantly, he spent much of his later life trying “to change the way we work” and the way we live. He started, bravely if sometimes inconsistently, with himself.

Most Russians, having put up with way too much involuntary simplicity during the Soviet era, are in no mood for Tolstoyan austerity, and like the rest of the world are bent, for better or worse, on finally living like Americans. They are unlikely to forgo driving their new cars in order to slow down global warming or to keep Moscow cooler; instead they'll start buying air

conditioners. In fact this may be why the centenary of Tolstoy's death passed by with so little official fanfare: his radical solutions still have the capacity to make both the powers-that-be and the man on the street uncomfortable.

Paradoxically, it may be that Tolstoy's unapologetically bourgeois wife had a more realistic take on human nature than her husband, author of some of the most psychologically astute works of literature ever written. We will not all give up eating meat any time soon, though this would reduce our carbon footprint immensely; nor will we collectively decide to stop having sex, as Tolstoy advocated, though this would certainly halt global warming in its tracks.

But the crotchety old man from Yasnaya Polyana had a gift for spelling out "impractical" and inconvenient truths. Deeply skeptical of the notion that science and technological tinkering would alone solve our many intractable problems, Tolstoy—perhaps more than any other public figure of his time—pushed his fellow human beings to take moral and ethical responsibility, on a daily basis, for their actions. A century later, this fast-paced and over-heated world could still learn something from his cold-eyed and honorable orneriness. We would do well to follow him, even part way, down that slower and less-travelled road that we would not take before. That would make all the difference.

Postscript: We took the walk, belatedly, in June 2011—but that is a story for another day. I will simply note that the weather was fine, and that the many Russians we encountered en route treated us with the utmost kindness. On the last day of the walk, as we were headed out of Tula, I noticed a piece of graffiti on a building on a side street: 'The most important things in the world—aren't things.' Not everyone in that increasingly prosperous-looking city would agree, but clearly the subversive, anti-materialist spirit of Tolstoy is still alive in hyper-capitalist Russia, at least in some quarters.
