

When I embarked on my study of Russian history, initially during the course of a Masters' at the London School of Economics, I did not fully realise the implications that would result from my interest in the subject, or where such study would take me. After completing my Masters' dissertation, and working from 1920s Russian newspapers at Stanford University in the US and the Library of Congress, I decided I wanted to continue to explore the 1920s Russian countryside by way of a PhD at Cambridge. I continued to learn Russian at evening classes at a local college, and narrowed down my PhD topic. I decided to explore the dynamics of village life under the New Economic Policy from 1921 until 1926. I wanted to avoid the perception of the village as a monolithic whole, bound by centuries of tradition and customs, which endured after the Revolution in opposition to the new regime. Instead, I wanted to look at the complexities of village life, and the conflicts between those peasants whose daily life was anchored in tradition, and those that embraced the new order and communist ideals. In order to focus my study, I decided to work in one region of Russia, and I chose Nizhny Novgorod which has rich archival materials available to the scholar, and has had little previous work done on it.

My research, it soon became clear, would necessitate spending a considerable amount of time working in the local archives in Nizhny Novgorod. A few months ago I decided that I did not have sufficient command of the Russian language, and so was delighted to find that Ambergh organised language courses in Nizhny Novgorod so that I could kill two birds with one stone and spend time at language classes and in the archive. I flew Aeroflot and on the plane found myself sitting next to several Russian mayors from various towns and cities. My Russian experience really began there and then. At 11am they had brought on the plane with them a bottle of vodka and a bottle of whisky, and several shot glasses. I now know well through observation the Russian ability to have a drink at any time of the day, even first thing in the morning in order to make an occasion and celebration out of an event, but at this time it was quite a culture shock. They were interested in me and my work and I practiced my elementary Russian on them whilst they toasted me and my forthcoming trip and interest in Russia. They seemed amazed that I had voluntarily chosen to devote my studies to Russian history and submerge myself in the archives. Their sceptical reactions did not undermine my determination to begin this project of learning Russian and exploring the archives, and in fact after submitting to having one toast and drink with them (they pressed me to join them for more but given that my command of the Russian language was shaky, I did not want my ability to communicate to be impaired further by being too tipsy!) I felt reasonably confident as I left the plane at Moscow airport.

I was intending to spend a few days in Moscow before I ventured to Nizhny Novgorod for the start of my language course. Moscow I found was a city of contradictions; at times breathtakingly beautiful in its architecture, and in places suffering from the cruel demolition of whole areas and churches to make way for such Soviet monstrosities as the *Rossija* hotel in Red Square. The city has a pace and a feeling of new times and experiences which I found very dynamic; it is a city which is changing every day.

One particularly memorable evening I found myself dining on the roof terrace of Café Pushkin, looking out over a panorama of the city as the evening sun slowly descended behind the buildings. Russian summer evenings are particularly lovely, with their long drawn out hours of daylight, as if the sun is reluctant to disappear for the night. The twilight sun gradually becomes orange and gently sinks beyond the horizon, casting long shadows over the city as dusk descends.

Café Pushkin is open 24 hours so at 4am it is possible to go there to go there for tea and tasty pirozhki and to watch the underworld types doing the same thing. I visited with a Russian friend I knew from my undergraduate days at Cambridge, now working in Moscow, at a more reasonable

time for a veritable Russian feast. It was more than just simply a meal; the food we chose and the way we ate and drank conformed to the way in which Russians make a whole experience and occasion out of meeting each other for food and drink. The rituals which are observed in addition to the nature of the food create this unique experience. Our dinner, for example, was punctuated by a sequence of traditional toasts, made in a particular order. We drank to our families, to the women, to the men and to our food, and to Russia of course, and had chosen particular food to bite into after the vodka had been consumed; pickled fish and cucumbers, smoked fish, caviar and beetroot soup. I had been mildly worried at the prospect of going to a country where vodka is such a staple (in many of the villages in the period I am looking at its consumption was considered medicinal, and of utmost necessity to daily life and health) as I had not enjoyed it much drinking it in bars in London. However, in Moscow where the vodka was of better quality, and cold, and coupled with the appropriate food, the experience was vastly more enjoyable, and the whole process of using it to give the proceedings a structure and remember loved ones lent the meal a special sense of occasion and camaraderie.

After a very enjoyable few days in Moscow, I found myself on board a night train headed for Nizhny Novgorod. The train was very comfortable and the fellow passengers in my compartment pleasant. I decided to go to the restaurant car to see what diversion could be found there, and spent a few hours observing and being amused by the antics of some of the Russian men at the tables who had decided to make a night of it, and were ordering carafes of vodka. I noticed that as the level of vodka descended in their glasses, their attentions towards the poor waitresses ascended! We reached the city in the early hours of the morning, and I did not really know what to expect of Nizhny Novgorod. I had heard that it was an industrial city which had been closed to foreigners in Soviet times and I therefore expected a rather bleak, industrial metropolis, but was in fact pleasantly surprised. The main avenue on which my apartment was located was pedestrian and tree lined, and full of people strolling up and down and sitting in the cafes, restaurants and bars outside. The cultural scene in the city was fantastic. As a classical music lover, I found that I had come to the right country. Russia really takes pride in its music, orchestras and performers, and they all have a very devoted following. I was delighted to find out that the Nizhny Novgorod Philharmonic Orchestra had a summer programme, comprising two concerts a week in the Kremlin concert hall. The programme was varied and incorporated French, German, Austrian and of course Russian composers. The performances of Russian music were my favourites; Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and Prokofiev. The concert hall was always packed, with people filling every seat and standing in the aisles, which is testimony to the support that music receives in Russia. The audiences' enjoyment could be felt throughout the performances and everywhere in the hall, generated by feverous applause and the giving of many flowers at the finale, and soaked up by the orchestra. The atmosphere was electric.

It is not only classical music which is ubiquitous in the city; I visited several dark, smoky and atmospheric jazz and blues bars at which up and coming Russian musicians were making themselves known. I found Nizhny Novgorod's cultural life to be further enriched by its interesting and varied museums. The highlights were the Sakharov museum and the Fine Arts Museum. The former is situated in the apartment in which Sakharov was exiled during the 1980s. Dr Sakharov was a leading nuclear physicist who became a strong and outspoken human rights advocate and one of the main figures opposing the regime from within. He was exiled to the closed city of Nizhny in 1980, in which he lived with his wife who was suffering from ill health. Because of the reluctance of the Soviet regime to transport her to a hospital, Sakharov undertook several hunger strikes. The museum is fascinating and sensitive in its treatment of Sakharov's life and ordeals. Hundreds of letters of support that never reached him are displayed, in addition to his own writings whilst in exile, and information on his determined vocal opposition to the regime. The museum highlights the contribution and plight of a resolute activist to the freedom of speech

and movement that Russians now have a right to, and is critical of the unsavoury aspects of the Soviet regime which denied people fundamental liberties.

The Fine Arts museum by contrast displays the treasures and rich heritage of Russia and Nizhny's past. The museum is crammed with Russian icons and paintings, ranging from the fourteenth century to the twentieth. I was particularly taken with the exhibit on the Russian avant-garde movement, which seemed to symbolise a specific moment in history, particularly prescient to the situation then in Russia due to the importance placed on futurism and industry. The Russian orthodox icons confirmed the historic importance of the Orthodox Church to Russia with their intricate scenes depicted in gold plate and a myriad of colours. I have always been interested in church architecture and artefacts, and Russia takes a great deal of care over their preservation and display. I was delighted to find such a collection in Nizhny, and also had the opportunity to visit a Russian Orthodox monastery nestled on the banks of the Volga in the sleepy village of Makarevo. The fortified stone walls and gold and blue church domes looked magnificent as I approached by boat, and I was met by a picturesque village scene of cows cooling off in the shallows of the water and fishermen taking out small wooden boats to catch the fish I often ate in the market, without ever really knowing what they were (I tried to look a few names up in my dictionary but could never find them and so resorted to pointing and trying whatever looked fresh. Possibly there exists a not commonly known and unique breed of Volga fish!). I picnicked on the river bank with a few hungry dogs and goats for company, and covering my head with a shawl, was allowed to look around the monastery with its quiet, fragrant gardens and striking churches.

The cultural life in Nizhny Novgorod absorbed a lot of my time at the weekends, and I was thrilled to find so much to do and explore. My weekend discoveries were enhanced by what I was learning within the classroom at the university, and not only in terms of being able to communicate and get around. My teachers realised I was interested in the country's history, culture and character and so they were particularly helpful and thoughtful in tailoring the texts we read together to these interests. Through them I delved into the intricacies of the Russian character and how it had developed, learning about Russian folklore and children's songs which played their part in shaping a Russian mentality. I learnt of the Russian hero from fairytales, Ivanushka-Durachok, who was constantly relying on magical and fantastical things in order to succeed, such as a black wolf and a golden fish. The sociologist writing the piece thought this reliance on external creatures and factors than rather than the self was indicative of the Russian mentality. I learnt more of the history of Russia and how this too shaped particular Russian characteristics; how they learned to be prudent and patient through years of wars and troubles, and also about significant historical character such as Lomonosov who went from being the son of a poor fishermen to an award winning scientist who founded the first university in Russia. I loved learning Russian through reading such texts; discovering its cultural heritage and character. I learnt of Russian loyalty and romance through texts about characters such as the Admiral Kolchak, whose wife kept their love true and alive after he was shot, and through reading poetry and romantic songs, the verses of which are still recited and enjoyed today throughout Russia. The country's cultural legacy has not been forgotten or neglected.

Further to my rich classroom experiences, I learnt much about Russia through my work in the archives and my interactions in daily life. My archival work was fascinating; wading through great tomes of court cases and reports on village life, and finding out about local rituals and celebrations, and how pervasive these were (a number of court cases involved local party chairmen convicted for brewing their own vodka, which was a practice the regime was attempting to cut down on, but it was clearly popular with their officials in the villages too!). With Russian friends, I tried homebrew myself, although it was wine made out of berries rather than vodka. I was invited to several Russian tea parties with the people I met, and very much enjoyed sitting

around the samovar attempting to chat away in Russian. I also stumbled upon a traditional Russian bathhouse which I was eager to try, although became slightly nervous when I was told to remove my swimming costume which was not allowed in the bathhouse, and a Russian lady offered to hit me with a bundle of birch twigs and leaves! Not a practice I had experienced before but I was told that it is very good for the circulation. I proceeded to reciprocate the favour and hit her, although being an amateur I was mildly worried about mistakenly inflicting any damage!

My time and experiences in Russia were diverse, and I felt I learnt more about the country every day. As its characteristics and traditions unravelled through my lessons, reading, archival work, experiences and friendships, I realised how varied and multi-faceted the country and its culture are. I wondered if I would ever be able to understand all the intricacies of the country, or if I would only ever scratch the surface. However as I swam in a local lake on my last evening, watching the late night sun descending behind the pine trees, I was looking forward to my next visit and discovering even more, and almost hoping that I would never fully understand the country. It is its infinite complexities which make Russia fascinating, exciting and mysterious.