

Reviewer's Corner



Книжное обозрение

Kourova, Alla. *Picturing Russia: a research guide to Russian Culture.* Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2016. 132 pages. ISBN-10: 1524906255. ISBN-13: 978-1524906252. \$55.00 for the E-Book at <https://he.kendallhunt.com/product/picturing-russia-research-guide-russian-culture>

People interested in Russian culture and preparing for travel, study, or work in Russia face a problematical task when trying to find a single, multi-faceted, thorough treatment of the culture of Russia. In fact, the very definition of culture, as presented in guidebooks and other resources attempting to encompass the elusive nature of culture, varies widely. The Cambridge Dictionary offers the following two definitions of culture¹: 1) the way of life of a particular people, especially as shown in their ordinary behavior and habits, their attitudes toward each other, and their moral and religious beliefs and 2) the arts of describing, showing, or performing that represent the traditions or the way of life of a particular people or group; literature, art, music, dance, theater, etc.

These two definitions are reflected in the works of Nelson Brooks, *Language and Language Learning: Theory and Practice*²

and Barry Tomalin and Susan Stempleski, *Cultural Awareness*³. These authors distinguish between what has become known in language teaching circles as “capital C” or “big C”, culture, which refers to the celebrated visual or performance arts of a culture and “little C” or “small C” culture, which includes a culture’s informal and often hidden patterns of human interactions and viewpoints⁴. A precise understanding of both types of culture provides optimal preparation for any travel, study, or work in Russia. To this end, *Picturing Russia: a research guide to Russian Culture* will be considered in this review as a tool for providing that optimal preparation for successful work, study, and travel to the Russian Federation.

The purpose of the work in the context of fully understanding Russian culture

The book’s author, Alla Kourova, has dedicated nearly a decade to “researching the integration of cultural knowledge and intercultural competence into the foreign language curriculum” (p. 2). She describes the overall purpose of her book in the preface, stating, “This book is about understanding and studying Russian Culture. [The book] can be used as a basis for further

research of Russian Culture by scholars of various disciplines and by students who are interested in cultural analysis” (p. v). Kourova aims to include an introduction to elements of history, literature, art, music, and architecture into the objectives for her work. In tandem with these cultural elements, the text offers opportunities for cross-cultural analysis, linguistic data analysis about cultural perceptions, and Russian language development. Furthermore, the author designed the book “to enhance cultural understanding between American and Russian students” (p. 1), referring to linguistic experiments that show that these two groups experience a lack of such understanding in their interactions.

Structure of the book

The first chapter opens with a history of the work that led to the creation of the book. The author states her objectives and the benefit of her text to her own university. According to Kourova, the text purports to “provide an international focus to our curricula and research programs”. Her belief is that the book “offers a unique learning experience for faculty and students by facilitating understanding of Russian culture on an individual level and creating new opportunities for

interaction, dialogue, and collaboration” (p. 4). Such benefits could easily be utilized in other universities and educational establishments, meeting such institutions’ overarching goals for international-level cooperation.

The second chapter presents a fascinating word study conducted by the author herself using the 1992 model of Dr. Svetlana Ter-Minasova of Moscow State University. In 1999, and then again between 2011 and 2014, Kourova asked approximately 300 students of English in high schools and universities in Penza, Russia, to give five words that “express their vision of America and Americans” (p. 5). She asked both Russian and American students for single-word responses to the categories of *Features of the Russian (or American) character*, *Features of contemporary life in Russia (or the United States)*, *Nature and Landscape*, and *Proper Names*. She also compares the five-word language pictures of Russia provided by American students before and after an academic year spent becoming acquainted with the language and culture of Russia. For Russian-language professionals, these words can serve to paint a picture of each culture’s perception of the other and how such perceptions change with the introduction of certain dynamics (political or social shifts, academic training, etc.) in the test subjects’ environment.

The third chapter offers a

fascinating cross-cultural study grounded in Russian culture as the point of departure for comparison. The chapter begins with definitions of culture and then describes twenty-four types of “cultural ways” or concepts rated by 100 students participating in a joint Russia-American program and/or in an intensive Russian language study program. These students used the criteria of pertinence to their own lives to rate the cultural ways in order of importance. Some of the cultural ways represent rites of passage such as marriage, childbearing, family, and death. Others are more sociological: religion, work, gender, family, age. Further categories include learning, food, dress, magic, naming, sports, time, wealth, building, freedom, power, and speech. The remainder of the chapter illustrates the manner in which these cultural ways are expressed, viewed, and perceived by Russians with the understanding that the American audience is the point of reference.

As a continuation of the cross-cultural study begun in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 describes the similarities between the United States and Russia and then illustrates the misunderstandings that come from the often nuanced, sometimes glaring differences in areas such as values, nonverbal behavior, the perception of time, educational and other customs, gestures, and superstitious beliefs.

Chapter 5 centers around five pillars of mainly “big C” Russian Culture with some elements of “small c” culture included. These pillars are literature, architecture, music, art, and the interaction and history of religion in Russia. To illuminate each pillar, the author offers the reader texts in English side-by-side with the same text in Russian. Sub-categories of each of the five pillars of culture follow, but the dual-language texts deserve special commentary. Each of the texts in the sub-categories is laid out in a visually appealing way with a photograph or image illustrating each text’s content. The author has included succinct texts that give the reader an overview of the significance of each figure or phenomenon for a Russian person. The fifth chapter evokes Genevra Gerhart and Eloise Boyle’s invaluable contributions to the Russian language profession: *The Russian’s World: Life and Language* and *The Russian Context: the Culture behind the Language*⁵. Kourova’s approach, akin to that of Gerhart and Boyle, endeavors to give students of Russia and Russian language a sense of what phenomena Russians themselves hold significant in their cultural self-perceptions. An additional benefit of Chapter 5 for students of Russian and English is the value of these texts for developing reading comprehension. The pillars of Russian Culture/culture

Reviewer's Corner, continued from p 19.

(both "big C" and "little C" culture) included in *Picturing Russia* incorporate:

1. Literature:

Leo Tolstoy, Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov.

2. Architecture:

a. Moscow: the Kremlin Cathedral Square, Moscow's Tall Buildings, Moscow's Parks and Squares

b. Saint Petersburg: European influence, Canals and Bridges, Peterhof, Tsarskoye Selo

3. Music: Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Alla Pugacheva, Vladimir Vysotsky, Lyube, Pussy Riot

4. Art: Portraits, Landscapes, Action Shots

5. A Brief History of Religion and its Influence on Culture: Cathedrals

The sixth and final chapter provides detailed lesson plans that have been used successfully in classes teaching Russian and English as a Foreign Language at various levels of proficiency. The author gives clear directions for the use of specific chapters from the text and includes a variety of instructional activities that reinforce the content of the text while developing language proficiency.

Picturing Russia ends with an exhaustive list of references that allow for further investigation of and research into Russian Culture/culture.

Conclusion

The complexities of an odyssey into another culture can be subtle, if not confounding. Paul Sturges, a proponent of library scientists widening their understanding of various cultures, writes, "The sheer difficulty of entering into the minds of people from different cultures is frequently undervalued..." (p. 16⁶). However, for those who are determined to make such an attempt, *Picturing Russia*, recommends itself as a rare, in-depth, and painstakingly-prepared guide. The author, her colleagues, and her research participants are to be congratulated on an excellent resource, indispensable for the library and classrooms of any institution or individual keen on entering the minds of people from either Russian or American culture.

The Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede describes culture as the "software of the mind"⁷. The analogy of a computer operating system that directs the actions of the hardware and software of a computer may fall short for an adequate description of human beings. However, successful work, study, and life in Russia and the United States depend heavily on developing a certain understanding of and possibly even an appreciation for those things that the native members of that culture hold dear.

~Submitted by

Aimee Roebuck-Johnson,

Reviewer's Corner Editor
NASA/Johnson Space Center

Work Cited:

- ¹ Cambridge University Press. 2008. *Cambridge online dictionary*, Cambridge Dictionary online. Retrieved January 12, 2017, from the website <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/culture>
- ² Brooks, Nelson D. 1968. *Language and Language Learning: Theory and Practice*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- ³ Tomalin, Barry and Susan Stempleski. 1993. *Cultural Awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ⁴ Alatis, James E., Carolyn A. Straehle, Maggie Ronkin, and Brent Gallenberger, eds. 1996. *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics: Linguistics, language acquisition, and language variation: Current trends and future prospects*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- ⁵ Gerhart, Geneva. *The Russian's World: Life and Language*. Fourth edition. Slavica Publishers at Indiana University, 2012. [reviewer's note: The 1974, 1995, and 2001 versions serve as excellent windows into the life and culture of Russians at the time they were published.] Boyle, Eloise and Geneva Gerhart, Eds. *The Russian Context: The Culture behind the Language*. Slavica Publishers at Indiana University, 2002.
- ⁶ Sturges, Paul. "Understanding Cultures and IFLA's Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) Core Activity". *Journal of Documentation*, 61(2) 2005, 296-305. <http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/faife/publications/sturges/understanding-cultures.pdf>
- ⁷ Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. 3rd Edition. McGraw-Hill USA. 2010.