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Reviews: “Go East” Summer Schools of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), 2017

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“Go East” Summer Schools of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), 2017

Each year, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) offers students in Germany the opportunity to take part in numerous summer schools in (Central and Southern) Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In 2016, the so-called “Go East” program facilitated 52 summer schools in 19 countries of the region and co-sponsored the participation of several hundred students. Although the possibilities for financial support by the DAAD are unfortunately focused on a German student clientele, the program has an impressive scope and has helped to facilitate an extensive network of summer schools in the region that are usually open to non-German participants as well. The summer schools are independently organized by universities in the region that apply annually for inclusion into the DAAD program.

The schools cover a wide range of concerns, from (petrol) economics to the environmental sciences, yet most take an interdisciplinary approach including historical, political and cultural questions; language courses form an integral part of many summer schools. In order to reflect this extensive scope, we have included reviews of two “Go East” summer schools—albeit both in Russia—that should give an impression of the breadth of possibilities within the program and the limitations that accompany them—whether they are to be found in overly broad guiding questions that remain unanswered or in mosquito attacks. Nils Oellerich reviews this year’s interdisciplinary summer school in Nizhny Novgorod asking: “Does Russia have a Strategy?” whereas Hauke Jacobs reports on his summer school and waterbound expedition to a former Gulag prison camp in Stvor, near Perm, that was organized by students themselves.

“Does Russia Have a Strategy? Understanding Economic Change”

Summer School of the Higher School of Economics, Nizhny Novgorod, August 2017

REVIEWED BY NILS OELLERICH

Nils Oellerich currently studies Political Science as a master student at Central European University in Budapest. He previously completed his Bachelor of Arts at the Universität Bremen and studied at Budapest’s Corvinus University for two semesters. In his studies, he focusses on the former ‘transition countries’ in Central and Eastern Europe, on the history and nature of political parties and party systems in the region, as well as populism and Euroscepticism.

The summer school “Does Russia Have a Strategy? Understanding Economic Change,” held in Nizhny Novgorod, was one of many seminars throughout Eastern Europe that were made considerably more affordable for students enrolled in

German universities by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). During the school of two (or optionally three) weeks, daily classes on the relevant topics were accompanied by an extensive cultural programme as well as Russian language courses tailored to different levels of knowledge. The school was organised by the Nizhny Novgorod branch of the Higher School of Economics (HSE), a university established in 1992 to support reforms in Russia's post-Soviet economy and the education of "a national cadre for the emerging market economy."¹ The university is well known for its excellent international links, its distinct focus on economic and social modernisation, and its remarkable contributions to Russian socioeconomic research.²

The Higher School of Economics applied the breadth of its expertise and the depth of its resources to the summer school. Classes delivered on the promise of the summer school's name: we were indeed taught to understand economic change in Russia. Insider perspectives from the banking sector, reports from marketing experts, as well as general observations of experts on Russia's geostrategic positioning offered insights into contemporary political problems. Such insights ranged from a general introduction to International Relations to first-hand reports from individual Russian businesses. In this regard, future perspectives and frequent obstacles for Russian businesses in the country's political and economic environment were outlined. A recurring issue was the football World Cup taking place in Russia next year: in Nizhny Novgorod, the venue of several matches, it is perceived as a unique chance for urban and business development although the sustainability of its positive impact is frequently questioned as well. This focus was complemented by an obligatory course on intercultural communication.

The chosen interdisciplinary approach of the school, which was reflected in the different backgrounds of the participating students, gave a holistic impression of the strategic position in which different disciplines, mostly political science and (business) economics, see Russia. Yet the interdisciplinary focus was rather directed towards the country's economic and political perspectives than its past. Historical issues, such as the transition towards a free-market economy after the Soviet Union's collapse, formed an important backdrop of our discussions but could have been emphasised more strongly. Furthermore, the summer school's guiding question—Does Russia Have a Strategy?—proved difficult to answer due to the varying perspectives presented. Indeed, we felt that an answer was lacking—however ambiguous it might have been—and that underlying connections between the different issues remained underexposed.

¹ Isak Froumin, "Establishing a New Research University: The Higher School of Economics, the Russian Federation," in *The Road to Academic Excellence: The Making of World-Class Research Universities*, ed. Philip G. Altbach and Jamil Salmi (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 2011), 300.

² *Ibid.*, 294-295.

Moreover, on some occasions one could observe a general sense of defensiveness among lecturers who made a point of reiterating the role of cultural differences and certain Russian circumstances, presumably in order to say, “We are not that bad after all.” Such defensiveness unfortunately resulted in a stronger focus on questions of difference between Russia and other countries instead of pointing to commonalities. This is unfortunate as it could be argued that cultural differences become more tangible and more ‘real’ the more they are embraced. After all, the perception among us students was one of communality in spirit rather than one of irreconcilable differences.

Naturally, academic outcomes are not the only things that matter: Coming together with students and teachers from different backgrounds and countries is of great personal gain. Seeing Russia, its culture, and politics from a perspective off the beaten tracks, i.e. away from the overcrowded environs of Moscow and Saint Petersburg and beyond commonly expressed truisms about Russian-ness, was indeed a unique and valuable experience.

Digitizing a “Museum without a Guide”: a German-Russian Summer School and Expedition to the Former Prison and Labor Camp of Stvor, August 2017

REVIEWED BY HAUKE JACOBS

Hauke Jacobs is a graduate student in the History master program at Freie Universität Berlin, and holds a bachelor degree in History and Political Science from the Universität Bremen. He has a strong interest in European history of the late 19th and 20th centuries as well as the history of Latin America and the Soviet Union. In his studies, he focuses mainly on different and conflicting cultures of remembrance (Erinnerungskulturen) concerning experiences of violent and traumatic pasts. Other research interests include questions of film and history as well as the relationship between historical science and the methods of digital humanities.

“Where is that plaque?” I ask myself. It has been almost two hours climbing up and down the steep slope and I am getting more exhausted by the minute. All I can see are plants and trees while I am getting constantly stung by mosquitos, swarms of mosquitos. The plaque we are looking for is a small rusty metal plaque like the many others that I have already taken photos of this day. They bear only two letters and two numbers, letters and numbers that stand for an individual life, or several, we do not know for sure. Archival sources about this place are rare, but we know that it is a cemetery.

We are at Stvor, site of a former Gulag prison and labor camp on the banks of the Chusovaya River near the industrial city of Perm. Stvor, which can be translated as ‘strait’, was opened in 1942 and the prisoners sent to the camp were supposed to build a dam at a nearby river strait. Before construction works could begin, they had to build the camp from scratch by themselves. These efforts were part of a project to construct a hydroelectric power plant to secure the power supply of the region during the ‘Great Patriotic War,’ as the Second World War is known in Russia. The goal was to be achieved in record time by the use of mostly manual and forced labor. Later in the war, another camp for German POWs was opened on the opposite side of the river and returning Soviet soldiers who had been imprisoned in German camps were sent to Stvor under the accusation of being enemy spies or collaborators. Although many camps all over the Soviet Union were closed and their prisoners pardoned after the death of Stalin in 1953, others remained open. The number of prisoners at Stvor dropped from some 2000 people to a minimum of 400. The project of building a dam was dismissed but prisoners still had to carry out hard physical labor, *inter alia*, in the production of bricks and wooden furniture, until the camp was finally closed in 1972. The site was abandoned, neglected, and nearly forgotten apart from by the local people who looted the place and took away most of the useful parts of the former camp infrastructure.

The camp cemetery was discovered by members of a Memorial youth camp some years ago while looking for firewood in the forest. Memorial, branded a ‘foreign agent’ in a 2014 law, is a Russian NGO that was founded in 1989 during the late stages of the Soviet Union to document cases of political repression and human rights abuses under Soviet rule to make them known to the public. Nowadays, they fight to prevent stories such as the one of Stvor from falling into oblivion.

Their local branch, Memorial Perm, is one of the partners of our summer school that was organized by two German student participants and the universities of Tomsk and Perm before its inclusion in the DAAD “Go East” program. In a group of German and Russian students of different academic backgrounds, and supported by a team of researchers from Tomsk and Perm, we spent two and a half weeks in the region. For more than half of these days, we travelled along the Chusovaya River by boat, camping overnight on its banks. Memorial has turned Stvor and many other similar places in the region into a ‘museum without a guide.’ They have installed small signs about the history of these places to inform the few visitors they receive, mostly rafting tourists or people on fishing and hunting trips. Participants of former summer camps collected all kinds of artefacts they found at the site—among them shoes, all kinds of different tools, lamps and pieces of barbed wire—to erect a small monument and invite visitors to think about and interact with the place themselves.



COURTESY OF HAUKE JACOBS

What might seem to some people as an inappropriate or unscientific approach to the place is in fact currently the only way people are trying to preserve its history at all.

After documenting the place together with the activists of Memorial this summer, it is our group’s intention to transform what once began as a ‘museum without guide’ into a more accessible online museum.³ This has become all the more important in recent years, given that the political climate in Russia for groups like Memorial has become ever more hostile as the Stalin cult reemerges, while time and nature are taking their toll on the few remaining traces of places like Stvor.

Back in Stvor, I am thinking about calling it a day and returning to our camp, but Wanja does not want to give up yet. Wanja—whom everybody calls by his Russian nickname instead of the more formal Ivan—is a young Memorial activist accompanying our expedition. Our plans for the upcoming days are strict since we can only stay four days at Stvor before we return to Perm to finish our project and Wanja will have to wait until next year to take up his search again. He assures me that he had found the plaque we are now looking for in the summer before and shows me his handwritten map of the place. I follow him and Julia—a German participant of our expedition—downhill when suddenly I slip. Getting up on my feet again and quickly checking my equipment, I hear Wanja shouting: he has not found the plaque we were looking for but two new ones instead. They had not been marked on his map before, he explains as he scribbles down some new letters and numbers to be included on his map.

³ For further impressions of the summer school as well as information concerning the upcoming online museum, please see: <https://stvor.hypotheses.org/>.