

[< Previous installment](#)
[Textbooks and Teaching](#)

[Home](#) > [2010: Teaching U.S. History Abroad](#) > Teaching U.S. History in Russia

Teaching U.S. History in Russia: Issues, Challenges, and Prospects

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Alexander N. Fursenko and Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, two patriarchs of Russian American studies, died in 2008.^[1] Their achievements were probably the highest points of Soviet studies of history of the United States, and their deaths have become a watershed in modern Russian scholarship. A new generation of scholars is now taking the lead in studying and teaching U.S. history in Russia. The approaches and favorite topics of this new group of scholars differ from those of the older Americanists, as do their environment and their students.

At the start of the new millennium, U.S. history courses in Russian universities are an integral part of the curricula at the B.A., M.A., and Specialist levels.^[2] The contexts of teaching American history in Russia have changed markedly over the past fifty years. During the Cold War, Soviet universities loaded their curricula with an ideologically defined image of the Soviet Union's "main adversary" in a bipolar standoff. In the 1990s a romanticized image of the United States began to prevail, when the end of the Cold War helped scuttle old priorities linked to the search for social and class conflicts. More recently, the foreign policies of the George W. Bush administration and another American crusade to reform Russia have aroused a new wave of demonization in official and popular discourses. Nevertheless, students' pragmatic interest in the United States as a place of work and travel and as a source of education for those planning international careers has encouraged the introduction of additional courses on American history. Since the end of the Cold War, the students have changed, too. Those who apply to American studies programs and take American history classes differ from their predecessors in many respects. Often, they have personal experience traveling to the United States (for instance, participating in the popular Work and Travel usa program). These students speak fluent English and frequently seek opportunities to participate in exchange programs with American universities or to continue their education there. They choose courses on U.S. history because the United States inspires them with its opportunities; they also readily participate in student panels at academic conferences.^[3] This new level of student familiarity with America poses a challenge for their professors, who no longer hold a monopoly on knowledge of the United States; a student's personal experience may exceed that of his or her teacher.

Although curricula vary across different Russian universities, U.S. history is generally taught within several courses of study. Students majoring in fields other than those in the arts and humanities take a mandatory course on world civilization (usually two semesters for all of world history), which as a rule reduces the American past to two or three themes. Students with history majors must take an eight-semester sequence of universal history from ancient Egypt to the contemporary world. Within these courses, U.S. history is taught in the context of world history, usually in the third and fourth years of study. Main themes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries include British colonial policy in North America and the American War for Independence. Then a universal history course turns to the United States to discuss the Civil War and Reconstruction, industrialization, and sometimes the Progressive Era (often in the context of the Spanish-American War). Starting with World War I, the United States appears more frequently as it becomes an international power and the bipolar relationship develops between the Soviet Union and the United States. Students with majors in area studies (who choose North America as their field of specialization), history (who choose U.S. history), and international relations or philology (who choose U.S. themes for their specialization) are taught U.S. history as a special course lasting from one to three semesters. In such programs the history of the United States is taught systematically and with interdisciplinary approaches that include those from American literature, culture, linguistics, and politics.

Opportunities for studying U.S. history have grown since the end of the Cold War because of several beneficial changes. American studies centers have cropped up rapidly in Russian regions outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, formerly the only places to study U.S. history in Russia. Moscow State University, Moscow State Institute of International Relations, and St. Petersburg State University, which launched American studies majors in the Soviet period, still offer those majors. However, new competing centers have emerged. Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow) is acquiring a reputation as an active center for training Americanists. Undergraduate courses on the United States are also taught in Moscow at the State University of Humanities, created within the Russian Academy of Sciences (previously a purely scholarly institution with just a few graduate students); in St. Petersburg, the Institute of History also offers U.S. history courses. More striking, U.S. studies has developed rapidly elsewhere, too. Reputable centers for studying and teaching American history, politics, and culture now exist in Volgograd, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Tomsk, while courses in U.S. history are also offered in regional universities including those in Samara, Izhevsk, Saratov, Tambov, and Kursk.

An expanding list of periodicals devoted to American studies has also promoted the teaching of American history in Russia. *Amerikanskii Ezhegodnik* ("American yearbook," published by the Center of North American Studies at the Institute of World History, Russian Academy of Sciences) and the journal *SShA & Kanada: Ekonomika. Politika. Kultura* ("usa and Canada: Economics. Politics. Culture," published by the Institute for usa and Canada Studies) have been joined by such annual collections as *Americana* ("Americana," published in Volgograd), *Aktualnye problemy amerikanistiki* ("Actual problems in American studies," Nizhnii Novgorod), and *Amerikanskii issledovaniya v Sibiri* ("American studies in Siberia," Tomsk). A special section on the United States appears in *Vestnik Rossiiskogo Gosudarstvennogo Gumanitarnogo Universiteta* ("Journal of the Russian State University for the Humanities"). Unfortunately, the oldest series, *Problemy amerikanistiki* ("Problems in American studies"), published at Moscow State University for several decades, has not produced a new title for approximately five years due to the virtual disintegration of the Russian Association for the Study of U.S. History (which existed for about ten years beginning in the mid-1990s; it was financed mostly by grants from the U.S. embassy in Russia and played an important role in supporting U.S. studies in Russian universities in the worst period of economic crisis).

Russia's increased openness has also enhanced the teaching of American history. Russian universities today can integrate American experiences into their curricula. This integration can take traditional forms, such as hosting U.S. professors participating in the Fulbright program. In 1974, during the *détente* period, Professor Nikolai V. Sivachev introduced an annual Fulbright lecture program in the Department of Modern History at Moscow State University. After the Cold War, Fulbright professors began to teach in other Russian universities, including centers for American studies in Russian regions outside of Moscow. Russian professors, in turn, visit U.S. universities not only to make new connections but also to acquire new skills and approaches to teaching American history. The numerous joint programs developed by Russian and U.S. universities have had similar benefits, and Internet technologies have provided opportunities to create joint online courses. For example, Volgograd State University and Ramapo College in New Jersey organized such a course on World War II for two semesters. Professors Alexander Kubyshev in Russia and Tom Heed in the United States presented Russian and U.S. views on the major events of the war, and their students in Russia and America asked questions and commented in a virtual classroom. Participation in such international courses helps students and professors accept methodological innovations (including videoconferencing as well as a wide range of multimedia presentations, documentaries, and movies in the classrooms), as well as become acquainted with the latest works by historians and with current research and teaching practices in both countries.

Access to American primary sources has also increased, thanks to the Internet and translation projects. The surge in the number of online digitized document collections has significantly enhanced the teaching and studying of American history in Russia. The Library of Congress and American universities provide free access to digitized collections of state papers, periodicals, and old books, which allows Russian students to tackle a broadened thematic range of topics in courses and in their diploma papers (essay assignments that students must produce annually to fulfill diploma requirements), and help widen the scope of theses written by

more advanced Russian students. Further, many basic documents of U.S. history have been translated and published in Russia. In the 1990s two editions of the Federalist Papers and a volume of Thomas Jefferson's works appeared in Russia, and several translations of the U.S. Constitution were offered in the book market. The well-known Russian historian Eduard A. Ivanyan prepared the first reader on U.S. history and published in Russian all of the inaugural speeches by American presidents. In the same decade, as Russia attempted to develop a market economy, memoirs and other works by John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, and Andrew Carnegie were translated into Russian. All of these sources and electronic databases, along with new reference books, have been integrated into the teaching and studying of U.S. history in Russian universities.^[4] American historiography in Russian is now represented by a wider range of positions than in the Soviet era, when radical critics of the United States predominated in Russian courses. During 1992–1993, the United States Information Agency sponsored the translation into Russian of classic works by Max Lerner (*America as Civilization*, 1957), Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (*Cycles of American History*, 1986), Daniel J. Boorstin (*The Americans*, 3 vols., 1958, 1965, 1973), and Louis Hartz (*The Liberal Tradition in America*, 1955). Schlesinger's *Cycles of American History* was officially "recommended by the Committee on Higher Education of the Russian Federation for use in teaching." Those works were published in huge runs of twenty-five thousand copies each, were acquired by university libraries and incorporated into curricula, and corrected the picture presented by the Progressive historian Vernon L. Parrington's three-volume *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927), which had been translated into Russian in 1962–1963. The 1992–1993 translations appeared at the peak of a new pro-American attitude in Russian society and, in turn, promoted a positive image of the United States in Russia. They shifted the focus of the historical representation of the American past from conflict to continuity and success, and they highlighted those traditions and features of the American character that allowed the United States to emerge as a country of liberty, democracy, economic leadership, and advanced technologies. Although this was a new angle for Russian students, it represented American history in terms laid out by consensus historians half a century ago.^[5]

By the early 2000s, however, the general attitude toward the United States had changed. Anti-American feelings skyrocketed as a result of disappointment in Russia's 1990s domestic policies; government efforts to build a new national identity, using the United States as the Other; and reaction to U.S. foreign policy decisions during the last years of Bill Clinton's presidency and the whole George W. Bush administration (including the bombing of Yugoslavia, policies in Georgia and Ukraine, the war in Iraq, and the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The number of students specializing in American studies fell during those years. Probably to acquaint Russian readers with U.S. critics of the American experience, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the American Embassy sponsored the 2006 Russian-language publication of the radical historian Howard Zinn's now-classic *A People's History of the United States* (1980).^[6] Zinn's book provided Russian students and general readers with an alternative history of the United States through the eyes of disadvantaged Americans, including women and representatives of racial and ethnic minorities.

All of these translated books were integrated into the list of mandatory reading for American history students, as well as for other students in the arts and humanities, and they present students with a very different image of the American past. The appearance of translated works has made it easier to organize historiographical colloquia in which students discuss the variety of American historical thought. Such study has become even more widespread with the publication of the first Russian textbook on the history of historical knowledge, which contains two chapters devoted to U.S. historiography.^[7]

At the same time, the United States, friendly or hostile, still plays the role of the Other, helping Russians (whether critical or admiring of America's historical experience and often making no distinction between presidential administrations and the society) shape their own national identities. Teaching U.S. history in Russia is predominantly a comparative enterprise: events, trends, and characters of American history enjoy more attention when they can be compared to the Russian experience. Russian students routinely select a comparative analysis of "Russian" and "American" historical paths as the framework for their papers and theses.

The teaching methods as well as the thematic and conceptual content in U.S. history courses in Russia depend

on two interconnected conditions: the general state of American studies and the quality and variety of available textbooks and readers. Since the mid-1990s, freedom of the press has led to a flood of low-quality translations and other publications. At the same time, some fields that were traditionally strong in U.S. studies during the Soviet era (such as social-economic history) were abandoned. Analysis of current trends in the U.S. historical profession has become an extremely rare topic in the major Russian journals, and representatives from other disciplines—sociology, literature, or linguistics—with no background in American studies, have begun to enter the field. Thus, despite the broadened scope of available scholarship and sources, one could say that some twenty years ago U.S. studies in Russia as a professional field was hit by a crisis it has still not overcome, even with the many encouraging recent initiatives. The high level of ideologically charged content that was inherent to Soviet history of the United States proved fatal for some historians' careers when that ideology collapsed. The economic hardships of the 1990s forced many scholars out of their professions and, in some cases, out of their country. However, some of the patterns that survived into the new millennium demand a larger professional community than exists now.

Russian historical scholarship traditionally strove to be all-inclusive: from Soviet times, Russian historians needed to shape their own (Marxist, in that epoch) opinion on every "important" event of world history. That tradition survives (despite the abandonment of Marxism), and the absence of Russian works on such issues as U.S. gender history, intellectual history, local history, or business history is a shortcoming of the field.^[8] However, university education requires Russian-language books on a wide range of events and approaches, especially general summaries that may be used as the basis for textbooks (or serve as substitutes for them). There remains a shortage of general books on many important periods and issues in American history, including the antebellum era, the Cold War, everyday life, and immigration. Russian students pay much attention to such themes and ask professors to suggest readings. The most recent general history of the United States, a four-volume work published in the 1980s, has become obsolete both in methodology and in subject; it discussed, almost exclusively, the development of a "deepening general crisis of capitalism" in the United States and paid more attention to American imperialism and working-class movements than to either state policies or activities of other underrepresented groups, with very selective analysis of the contemporary recent U.S. scholarship.^[9] As a result, Russian students of American history will miss the opportunity to understand broadly the social and cultural contexts of the American past, including the pursuit of national identity. Reading translations of American works helps to some extent, but that level of engagement requires an acquaintance with a range of American historiographical schools. Without that training, some students, depending on their reading, will perceive U.S. history à la Howard Zinn, some à la Daniel Boorstin. Declarations of the need for interdisciplinary research, repeatedly issued by historians, philologists, and specialists in cultural studies, have fallen on deaf ears. The majority of new Russian-language publications on U.S. history are still traditional neo-positivist narratives distant from contemporary research practices.^[10] Russian professors of U.S. history acutely feel the shortage of textbooks. The textbooks of Alexei V. Efimov, Lev I. Zubok, Nikolai V. Sivachev, Nikolai N. Yakovlev, and Evgenii F. Yaz'kov, and the collection of essays on U.S. history edited by Grigorii N. Sevostianov, published from the 1950s to the 1970s, have become obsolete. During the last two decades, three general books on U.S. history have been published, by the prominent Russian historians Boris D. Kozenko and Grigorii N. Sevostianov (1994), Vladimir V. Sogrin (2003), and Eduard A. Ivanyan (2004). Ivanyan's text, now in its third edition, tries to fill the place of a standard textbook; it is also supported by his reader on U.S. history. Although these books make a good start, classroom experience demonstrates that students need a textbook that is less a narrative of events and more analytical, human-oriented, and problem-posing.^[11] The current generation of professors has noted in the existing textbooks a lack of discussion of national traditions and national character, the role of religious history, interethnic relations, and the structures of everyday life. The new generation of students also needs more elaborate media content. Preparation of such a textbook is therefore the most immediate task for those historians of the United States who base their research on the best traditions of Soviet U.S. studies, with its detailed attention to primary sources, but whose methodological skills were developed in the post-Soviet environment.

Last but not least of the challenges faced by Russian Americanists is their lack of an institutional center for

their professional community. Today only one such organization exists: the Society for the Study of U.S. Culture, dominated by philologists and specialists on culture. No organization in Russia, professional or academic, coordinates scholars and teachers of American history and studies, and none of the periodicals mentioned earlier can fulfill that role. The first step toward such an organization was made in late November 2009, when the Russian Association of Historians of the USA was created.

Russians studying the United States need to solve these problems to break from the Cold War past. This goal is especially important given the anti-American feelings among students and in the society at large—a society in which authorities brandish the image of the American “other” as a tool for constructing national identity and American history is explained in the Russian media not by specialists but by amateurs and propagandists ignorant of the scholarship. Professionals must raise their voices to university audiences and in the media, in Internet forums and in tv political discussions to prevent both romanticizing and demonizing the image of the United States and to promote a reshaping of Russian-U.S. relations in a fruitful and mutually beneficial way.

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American readers know their works from numerous translations. See, for example, Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, *The Beginnings of Russian-American Relations, 1775–1815*, trans. Elena Levin (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, *Russian-American Relations and the Sale of Alaska, 1834–1867*, ed. and trans. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Canada, 1996); Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York, 1997); and Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev’s Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York, 2006).

[2] The Russian higher education system is gradually shifting from the old Soviet degree of Specialist (5 years of postsecondary education) to the more universally understood B.A. and M.A. degrees; both options exist simultaneously, but Specialist programs will be closed after 2010.

[3] A recent example of this type of student participation was in the organization of an international conference devoted to the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln at the Russian State University for the Humanities in February 2009. Three groups of students majoring in history, philology, and international relations presented their collective projects on “Inaugural Address as Social and Cultural Text: Comparative Study of Inaugurals of Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Barack Obama.”

[4] N. N. Yakovlev, ed. and trans., *Federalist. Politicheskie esse Aleksandra Gamiltona, Dzheimsa Medisona, i Dzhona Dzheya* (The Federalist. Political essays by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay) (Moscow, 1994); Thomas Jefferson, *Avtobiografiya. Zametki o shtate Virginiya* (Autobiography. Notes on the state of Virginia), trans. V. M. Bolshakov (Leningrad, 1990). E. A. Ivanyan, comp., *Istoriya SShA. Khrestomatiya* (History of the USA. Reader) (Moscow, 2005); E. A. Ivanyan, comp., *Inauguratsionnye rechi prezidentov SShA* (Inaugural addresses of the presidents of the USA) (Moscow, 2001). John D. Rockefeller, *Iskusstvo razbogatet: Memuary amerikanskogo milliardera* (The art to growing rich: Memoirs of an American billionaire) (Moscow, 1992); John D. Rockefeller, *Bankir v XX veke: Memuary* (Banker in the 20th century: Memoirs), trans. G. G. Gauze (Moscow, 2003); Henry Ford, *Moya zhizn, moi dostizheniya* (My life and work) (Moscow, 1992); Andrew Carnegie, *Istoriya moyey zhizni* (History of my life) (Moscow, 1994). An important novelty was Alexander A. Fursenko, ed., *Slovar amerikanskoi istorii* (“Thesaurus of American history”) (St. Petersburg, 1997). Eduard A. Ivanyan prepared *Encyclopaedia of Russian-American relations* and regularly updates its Internet version. Eduard A. Ivanyan, *Entsiclopediya rossiysko-amerikanskikh otnoshenii XVIII–*

XX veka (Encyclopaedia of Russian-American relations) (Moscow, 2001). The Center for North American Studies, under the leadership of Vladimir V. Sogrin, is preparing a statistical reference book on U.S. history. [5] Max Lerner, *Razvitie tsivilizatsii v Amerike: Obraz zhizni i myslei v Soedinennykh Shtatah segodnya* (America as civilization: Life and thought in the United States today), trans. V. Borisov et al. (2 vols., Moscow, 1992); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Tsikly amerikanskoy istorii* (Cycles of American history), trans. P. A. Razvin and E. I. Buharova (Moscow, 1992); Daniel J. Boorstin, *Amerikantsy: Kolonial'nyi opyt* (The Americans: The colonial experience), trans. V. T. Oleinika (Moscow, 1993); Daniel J. Boorstin, *Amerikantsy: Natsional'nyi opyt* (The Americans: The national experience), trans. Y. A. Zarahovich and V. S. Nesterov (Moscow, 1993); Daniel J. Boorstin, *Amerikantsy: Demokraticeskii opyt* (The Americans: The democratic experience), trans. V. T. Oleinik (Moscow, 1993); Louis Hartz, *Liberal'naia traditsiia v Amerike* (The liberal tradition in America), trans. G. P. Blyablin et al. (Moscow, 1993). Vernon L. Parrington, *Osnovnye techeniia amerikanskoi mysli* (Main currents in American thought: An interpretation of American literature from the beginnings to 1920), trans. V. Voronin and V. Tarhov (3 vols., Moscow, 1962).

[6] Howard Zinn, *Narodnaya istoriya SShA: s 1492 goda do nashikh dnei* (A people's history of the United States, 1492–present), trans. G. P. Blyablin et al. (Moscow, 2006).

[7] I. P. Dement'ev and A. I. Patrushev, eds., *Istoriografiia istorii novogo vremeni stran Evropei i Ameriki* (Historiography of the modern history of European and American countries) (Moscow, 2000).

[8] There are, in fact, examples of new scholarship that deal with business history. There is still a shortage of such books, however. For the most substantial example of this scholarship, see B. M. Shpotov, *Genry Ford: Zhizn i biznes* (Henry Ford: Life and business) (Moscow, 2003).

[9] G. N. Sevostianov, ed., *Istoriia SShA* (History of the usa) (4 vols., Moscow, 1983–1987), IV, 4.

[10] On American studies in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, see Victoria I. Zhuravleva and Ivan I. Kurilla, “Problemy razvitiia amerikanistiki v postsovetskoy Rossii” (U.S. studies in post-Soviet Russia), in *Amerikanskiy ezhegodnik 2005* (American yearbook 2005), ed. N. N. Bolkhovitinov (Moscow, 2007), 80–93; and Alexander I. Kubyshkin and Ivan A. Tsvetkov, “Universitetskie uchebniki po istorii SShA kak indikator sostoianiia rossiiskoi amerikanistiki” (University textbooks on U.S. history as an indicator of the state of Russian U.S. studies), in *Russia and the United States: Mutual Representations in Textbooks/Rossiia i SShA na stranitsakh uchebnikov: Opyt vzaimnykh reprezentatsii*, ed. Victoria I. Zhuravleva and Ivan I. Kurilla (Volgograd, 2009), 181–206. The last work is a bilingual collection with parallel titles.

[11] B. D. Kozenko and G. N. Sevostianov, *Istoriia SShA* (History of the usa) (Samara, 1994); V. V. Sogrin, *Istoriia SShA* (History of the usa) (St. Petersburg, 2003); E. A. Ivanyan, *Istoriia SShA* (History of the usa) (Moscow, 2004). The textbook by Vladimir Sogrin, while less detailed on specific events, is more theoretically interesting, as is his book on U.S. political history, V. V. Sogrin, *Politicheskaya istoriya SShA* (Political history of the usa) (Moscow, 2001).

[\[Return to Top\]](#)

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