

CDIPS Final Project

2021-22 Cohort

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“Decentering Moscow and St. Petersburg: Developing Student Understanding of Multilingual and Multicultural Russian Speaking Populations Around the Globe”

### **Executive Summary**

Whereas our Russian textbook centers Moscow and St. Petersburg, with less discussion of Russia’s Far East, Siberia, the Arctic, the North Caucasus, or Central Asia and Eastern Europe, I want students to learn more about multicultural and multilingual Russian speakers in the less commonly taught regions (e.g., Dagestan, Kalmykia, Tatarstan, Crimea, Buryatia, etc.) of the Russian Federation, as well as around the world. For example, Israel is home to the world’s 5th largest Russian speaking population in the world, yet is rarely, if ever, included in Russian textbooks. For my project, I’m relying on current research in critical cartography, Russian language speaking communities in and outside of Russia, and critical pedagogy. I also am collaborating with my school library staff and colleagues at Feline Day who teach geography, history, and other social sciences at Feline Day School to help with researching demographics and geographies of the Russian speaking world, and will require students to do the same on a geographic region or specific religious or ethnic multilingual minority, towards the goal of presenting a more fully representative picture of Russian speakers around the globe, improving information literacy skills, and developing critical consciousness (Freire 1970) through analysis of textbook content, and in the final group project, students will approach the interpretation and creation of maps through the lens of critical cartography.

### **References**

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### **Analysis**

My project, “Decentering Moscow and St. Petersburg” invites students as individuals to conduct an ethnographic investigation into a Russian-speaking country, city, region and/or group (internal or external to Russia) that is multilingual and/or non-Slavic and/or of a Russian-speaking group that is underrepresented or altogether unrepresented in students’ Russian II textbook.

Students at Feline Day who take Russian II represent a wide variety of cultural and linguistic identities, with ~60% or higher who identify one or more languages other than English as the primary spoken at home. Subsequently, our students are eager to deepen their understanding of multilingualism, and what it looks like in other parts of the world. Feline Day strongly emphasizes culturally-relevant pedagogies, and fosters a supportive school climate for all students, and we strive to affirm and fully develop students’ culturally- and linguistically-diverse identities in both curricular and extracurricular contexts.

In Russian I, which is for middle schoolers considering taking Russian, we focus on development of language skills, and we introduce content about Russia’s natural and political geographies. Students who take Russian II are usually 9th or 10th graders at the Novice Mid to Novice High level, and after the course, students have typically reached Intermediate Low to Intermediate Mid proficiency.

Russian II is a language-centered class in which we emphasize communicative competence, rely on comprehensible input and output, and judiciously employ immersive strategies for language learning. However, cultural content is often presented in English, with associated, supplemental Russian language vocabulary. Classes are small at Feline Day, with 20 or fewer students across grade levels, so personalized attention and structured cooperative learning strategies are regularly part of our classroom routine. Students have school-issued Google Chromebooks for internet research, and the school library has access to age-appropriate databases for additional research. The school librarian and staff have worked successfully with students in Russian classes and are extremely resourceful and good at locating and securing materials in a timely fashion for class projects like this one. One of our school librarians earned a BA in Russian Studies, and this, of course, is an extraordinarily fortuitous situation for this project.

The goals for students in completion of this lesson are:

- a) to deepen their understanding of linguistic and ethnic diversity among Russian speakers all around the world, as well as in the Russian Federation;
- b) to conduct an ethnographic investigation and present findings about a specific

- Russian-speaking community to the class;
- c) apply principles of critical cartography toward a large group project that will create an online digital map of Russian speakers and Russian-speaking regions outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg.
  - d) learn to talk about cultural identity, nationalities, and ethnicities, country names, city names, monuments, works of literature, art, or architecture in Russian, and label maps in English and Russian (criteria TBD)

Smith (2021) offers the following, which serves as a guiding philosophy for my project: “One of the concepts through which Western ideas about the individual and community, about time and space, knowledge about research, imperialism, and colonialism can be drawn together is the concept of distance. The individual can be distanced, or separated from the physical environment, the community” (63). In our teaching of Russian, particularly now, given the invasion of Ukraine, we must learn to study the region from a distance. Simultaneously, the distance between how Russian culture is presented in Russian language textbooks is often the result of imperial and colonial influences from Russia, and the result of the largely homogeneous identities of the framers of the field starting in the post-World War II period.

My hope is that this project, and perhaps future iterations of it, as an ongoing source of information for students of Russian at Feline Day, will introduce students to and sustain their interest in the region, with less of a whitewashed, Western gaze, by including and richly describing diverse communities, cultures, and multilingual Russian speakers, rather than separating them out as ‘other’, in contrast to monolingual, ethnically Slavic Russian speakers as typically presented in our Russian II textbook. As Paris and Alim (2017) write, culturally-sustaining pedagogies “must extend the previous visions of asset pedagogies by demanding explicitly pluralist outcomes that are not centered on White middle-class, monolingual/monocultural norms and notions [ . . . ] and that call out the imposition of these norms as harmful [ . . . ] and discriminatory [ . . . ]. CSP must also resist static, unidirectional notions of culture and race that center only on longstanding cultural practices of communities without also attending to continual shifts and cultural reworkings” (12). By conducting carefully structured ethnographic research with a great deal of support, the goal for my project is to expand my own and my students’ depth of knowledge about Russian speakers’ diverse identities around the world, while also developing new instruments for disseminating that knowledge to future Russian students at Feline Day School.

## **Design**

### *Performance Objectives*

- students will deepen and learn how to further enrich their understanding of languages and peoples of the Russian Federation that are less commonly represented (e.g., Tatar, Bashkir, Buryat, Kalmyk, Ingush, Abkhaz, Tajik, Ukrainian, migrant communities like Brighton Beach, etc.)
- students will demonstrate information literacy, media literacy, and technology literacy skills (as defined in the Feline Day School curriculum);

- students will produce a web-based geography resource called, “Languages and Peoples of Russia” using principles of ethnographic research, critical pedagogies, and critical cartography;
- students will be able to use a map to locate and describe the languages and peoples under consideration, and will learn associated identity terminology in English and Russian;
- students will apply principles of critical analysis and critical cartography to content about minority groups in the Russian Federation in the conducting of ethnographic research and the creation of the web-based map.

*Learning Assessments*

- each student will create and deliver to the class an infographic, slideshow, or video presentation that richly describes their specific region or group (Individual Project)
- Languages and Peoples of Russia mapping website (Class Project)
- Map Quiz (Quiz #1 in English, Quiz #2 in Russian)

*Strategies, Activities, Methods*

- individual research will be guided with pre-selected websites and other materials through instructor collaboration with school librarian and upper school social studies faculty
- principles of critical cartography will be presented to students, with many different types of maps from which they can choose to create their materials (e.g., *art map*, *eco-mapping*, *ethnocartography*, *indigenous mapping*, *participatory mapping*, etc.);
- students will work cooperatively in the planning and creation of the Languages and Peoples of Russia map website;
- students will assess one another’s presentations, and will give evaluations of their group’s contribution to the map project;
- students will take two map quizzes based on the final project - Map Quiz #1 in English, and Map Quiz #2 in Russian.

*Alignment*

Performance Objectives	Learning Assessments	Strategies/Activities/Methods
deeply research a less commonly taught Russian-speaking group or region, demonstrating information literacy skills	Individual Project	pre-selected materials and links through collaboration with library and other faculty; basics of ethnographic methods
collaborate to create a Languages and Peoples of Russia website	Class Project	cooperative whole class research and planning in the library
students will be able to use a map to locate and describe	Map Quiz #1 (English) Map Quiz #2 (Russian)	independent studying; review and practice quizzes in class; introduction and practice with

the languages and peoples under consideration, and will learn associated identity terminology in English and Russian		new vocabulary for Quiz #2 in class; multiple attempts; due by the end of the term when students feel ready
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### *Grading*

I will use a rubric for the Individual Project. The group project will be peer-assessed, using a short questionnaire. (If you'd like to include specific grading criteria, feel free to do so!)

### **Development**

#### *Resources, Materials, Technologies*

There are so many things I need to consult to complete this section. The references list has several items. Although I don't have my ideas fully fleshed out here, some of them include: Guest speakers - I have some colleagues and friends who speak Tatar, Ukrainian, Georgian, and other minority languages and now live in the US. I'd love to invite them to give presentations in Zoom to supplement the material as we go through the course and these projects (and maybe even, for example, give us a Tatar, Ukrainian, or Georgian language lesson!).

#### *Addressing Resistance from Admins or Caregivers*

Feline Day School is private, and has a transparent policy in the parent and student handbook about the teaching of what some consider divisive concepts, or concepts that some parents would prefer to discuss with their children free of school influence. Parents and students sign a pledge to participate fully in class activities, and if such activities fail to align with their values, they may opt out. However, most parents at Feline Day choose our school because we have a well known curriculum that focuses on topics of social justice, and has a strong restorative justice-centered behavioral program in place. We do not often meet resistance, but if it happens, fortunately, we have a clear plan of solutions in place. I have also discussed this project with my department chair and principal, and both have expressed their full support.

### **Implementation**

#### *Course Policies*

Classroom policies for Russian II are generally connected to Feline Day School's behavior management plan, which has clear definitions of school rules related to standards of attendance, participation, engagement, citizenship, community unity and belonging, and individual identity. In Russian II, students are made aware that to be successful in the course, toward the end of learning Russian well, it is important to attend consistently, keep up with

assignments, study outside of class, and find ways to stay personally, individually motivated, and also to model these behaviors in the community. Because Russian is an elective for most students, it's important to have policies that offer structure and support for success, without making students feel micromanaged, or lacking agency in the classroom. Policies aren't really impactful insofar as this project is concerned, but perhaps in subsequent iterations, if we wanted to have a field trip, or something else related to this project, they may become important later on.

### *Policy Philosophy*

Feline Day School's approach to policy and classroom behavior is rooted in best practices of antiracist and anti-oppressive education. Teachers are required to give students choices and alternatives for assessment. Students are not penalized for arriving late to class. Students help determine the types of things they want to learn in Russian II, as well, since our instructional materials are older, they do not often reflect enough of the vocabulary that students need in terms of describing identity, technology, and current geopolitics. This project speaks directly to student requests to break free of textbook characterizations of source and target culture that they see as homogenous or stereotypical. Feline Day Students are accustomed to flexible classroom policies and student-centered approaches.

### *Logistical Concerns or Potential Challenges*

This is a new endeavor, and a bit experimental, particularly when it comes to the digital mapping part of the project. I need to identify a free or low-cost web-based tool that 9th and 10th graders can use effectively to generate the map and make it available online. The school library staff may have some ideas, as well as faculty who more routinely teach geography, so I plan to consult with them about this idea also. The school has an instructional technologist on staff, so she may also have a suggestion.

Guest speakers in-person would be relatively simple, but if our guest speakers are coming to us from the region, we may have trouble aligning our schedules. Fortunately, many of the people I have in mind are currently in the US for the foreseeable future.

## **Evaluation**

### *Feedback from Students*

Student feedback on their experience of the project will be an important part of the project. I get formative and summative feedback already from students in a variety of ways. Probably the best feedback is watching their level of engagement - if students are busy and excited - the feedback is probably good. For formative feedback, I will ask students to respond to a poll or a quick survey from time to time at the end of class, at several points throughout the duration of the

project. At the end of the school year, I will ask students to give feedback about their experience of several of their assignments and projects throughout the year.

### *Reflective Practice*

Student feedback will be used to review the strengths of the project and the areas where different procedures, strategies, or resources are needed. The formative feedback will be used in real time to make adjustments as students are working on the project. The summative feedback will be used to resolve any larger issues with the process as described by students. I also hope to have my department chair and principal involved with some occasional observations so they might be able to add expertise. I will also be collaborating with colleagues in the CDIPS program who might be able to offer suggestions and share resources if I run into some issues with the project that are too challenging for me to resolve independently.