

Two Revolutions: Teaching History in Fourth Semester Russian
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How do intermediate language learners cross the barriers to reading complex texts?

Studies agree on both the huge benefits of reading for language acquisition, and the importance of motivation and the interest of the material for developing stronger reading skills (on reading and motivation, see Mori 2002). Particularly as students near the end of a language sequence, these are skills we want to give them. But how can they transition from reading very short, sometimes purpose-written texts as an auxiliary to language study, to being able to read in a foreign language for their own interest or for necessary academic work?

In my Spring 2015 BLC project, I aimed to begin addressing this gap in the intermediate Russian classroom by creating a group of materials for reading and reflecting on Russian history.

Our Russian curriculum at Berkeley is heavily literature-focused, and for many students, the opportunity to read stories and poems in the original provides great pleasure and incentive. But over two semesters teaching Slavic 4, I had a number of students whose primary reasons for learning Russian had to do with history, politics, or current events. They were disappointed not to see more materials on such topics in the classroom and as part of their reading and writing assignments at home. Admittedly, there are obvious reasons why most Russian curricula steer clear of this kind of reading before the advanced level. Academic and journalistic Russian prose is characterized by a high frequency of participles (verbal adjectives) and gerunds (verbal adverbs), which most Russian textbooks do not teach before the end of the second year. Such texts also pose many of the challenges that mark scholarly non-fiction in any language – long sentences, complex word order, and new vocabulary, including low frequency abstract nouns.

It is these very challenges, however, that make Russian academic prose an ideal basis for a project on bridging the gap between intermediate and advanced reading skills. How can we prepare and introduce these kinds of readings for fourth semester students so that they can begin to understand and discuss historical and political questions? And what resources or strategies will help them to approach this kind of reading on their own in the future? Guided by these questions, I set out to create two or three units of an intermediate Russian cultural curriculum centered around readings on Russian history.

Because of the special challenges associated with academic prose for intermediate students of Russian, I chose for the backbone of this curriculum an authentic text already geared toward non-native speakers: a lecture on nineteenth century Russian history by the historian Mikhail M. Karpovich (1888-1959). Born in Georgia, and active in the Provisional Government after the February revolution of 1917, Karpovich left Russia for the United States in May 1917 on a diplomatic mission. He intended to return, but the October revolution intervened. Karpovich settled eventually in the Harvard history department, where he taught for most of his life, helping train a generation of American scholars of Russian history – including among others Nikolai Riazanovsky, Martin Malia, and Richard Pipes. In the mid-1950s, one of his former students annotated and published his nineteenth-century survey lecture as a pamphlet for intermediate learners of Russian (Karpovich 1958). It covers the years 1801-1917 – from the reign of Alexander I to the October Revolution.

Pitched at oral delivery to advanced American students, the lecture is a bit simpler than a standard Russian history textbook or encyclopedia article. The version published in 1958 has been annotated with accent marks, a few uncommon words or phrases glossed at the bottom of each page, and a comprehensive dictionary and set of grammar notes at the back (see Figure 1).

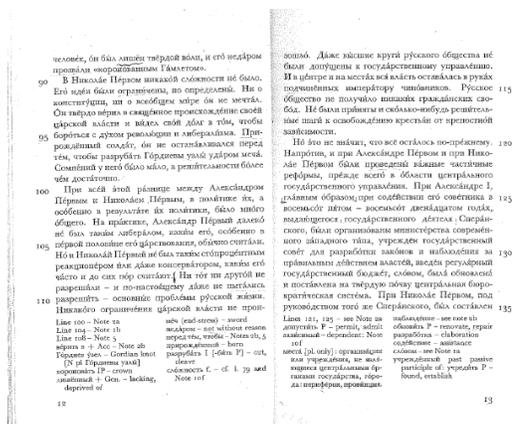


Fig. 1: A page from M.M. Karpovich's "Lecture on Russian History" (1958)

I decided to focus my project on two of the sections from the lecture I thought would be most exciting to students: the Decembrist uprising (1825), and the revolutions of February and October 1917. As a first step, I wanted to experiment with different formats for glossing and annotating these excerpts, incorporating recent research on foreign language reading and reading environments.

Recently, a number of Russian instructors have created innovative online reading platforms, on the model of the "flipped classroom," for bringing reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar work home to free up classroom time for more in-depth discussion and debate (see, for two recent and ambitious examples, Titus 2011 and Spektor and Hughes 2015. On the influential idea of the "flipped classroom," see especially Bergmann and Sams 2012). Elements of such websites, usually aimed at advanced students, can include a digital text with a glossary; pre- and post-reading exercises targeting new vocabulary, grammar, or reading comprehension; recorded readings of texts; and English-language contextual material.

At the beginning of my project, I was especially interested in gauging this model's potential for helping intermediate students read a text like Karpovich's lecture. Not only is it possible in an online reader to provide a greater *volume* of lexical, grammatical, and contextual support; this format also, as studies have shown, can help students by making a greater *variety* of

supporting materials available. In particular, multimedia readers accommodate learning differences by allowing for visual, audio, and video glosses as well as (or instead of) verbal ones (Plass et al. 2003, Chun and Payne 2004, Al-Seghayer 2005). When these and other kinds of support – such as introductory materials in the students’ native language, contextual information or images, videos, etc. – are easy to access, students are much more likely to take advantage of them (Lomicka 1998, Roby 1991, Chun 2001, Chun and Plass 2005). Finally, such platforms make it possible to bring some of the interactive work that we often associate with the classroom home, letting students get quick responses to their initial questions about the text.

On the other hand, the potential disadvantages of relying on digital multimedia reading environments rather than paper texts also seem clear (for one of surprisingly few studies focused on this question, see Bowles 2004). Some students find it harder to read online, particularly in a foreign language (Zenotz 2012). Having the reading done online makes it harder to come together over a text in class in a traditional classroom, especially if one is at all wary about allowing phones or laptops. Finally, one of my initial doubts was whether the sheer wealth of supporting materials provided in a multimedia-reading environment could slow down rather than speed up students' progress to reading complex texts on their own. How can the desire to build a bridge to more proficient FL reading be balanced with the desire to let students work out the strategies and gain the confidence to read texts that are not prepared or annotated?

In this sense, I began the project open both to the possibility that digital annotations would ease intermediate students’ paths to reading complex texts, and to the possibility that more traditional paper materials would serve students better. I decided to start with a digital platform, using a text annotation program called TIARA, created and managed by Chantelle Warner at the University of Arizona (read more at: <http://cercll.arizona.edu/projects/hypermedia>). In TIARA, it

is possible to create image, audio, visual, and textual glosses (in any language). They appear in an unobtrusive format in the right-hand column when the glossed word, highlighted in blue, is clicked. It is also possible for learners to turn glossing off entirely, or to turn off one or more kinds of glossing, so that they can see only text, image, or audio glosses depending on their preferences.

The first history and culture unit that I designed, and glossed using TIARA, covered the Decembrist uprising. The unit begins with Alexander Pushkin's haunting poem "Arion," a thinly veiled allegorical reflection on his relationship to the Decembrists, many of whom were his friends, and his chance decision not to participate in the revolt. In-class discussion of the poem gives instructors a chance to introduce the overall story of the revolt and the political conditions that provoked it, before students attempt to read Karpovich's more nuanced account in his lecture. The unit then goes on to the first section of Karpovich's lecture – from his description of the time of Alexander I and Nikolai I to the Decembrist revolt. It continues on to a clip from a 2003 Russian television documentary about Nikolai I, which dramatizes the story of the Decembrists and fills in many details missing from Karpovich's survey lecture.

I prepared the written materials for this unit in TIARA by glossing key words in the readings, using text and (where possible) images and audio. I also wrote comprehension questions that reviewed key points of the lecture to students in simpler, more direct language. The pages ended up looking like this (figure 2):

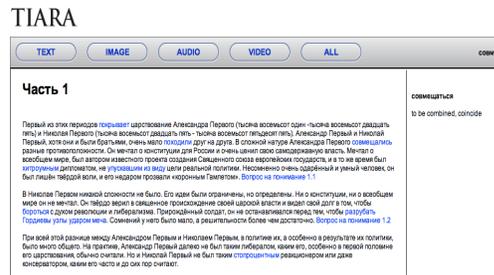
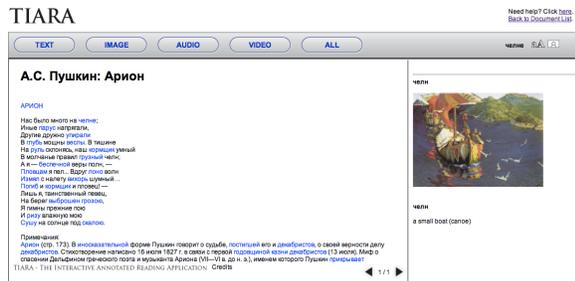


Fig. 2: Pushkin’s “Arion”

Karpovich’s “Survey of Russian History”

Once I had finished these materials, I had a chance to try some of them out over three days of a Slavic 4 class.

Students came in on the first day, when we discussed “Arion,” very excited about TIARA. They loved being able to see image as well as text glosses, and to hear the poem read aloud by a native speaker as they worked on it (though one student commented that a less “passionate” reading would have been easier to understand!). I had handed out paper copies along with instructions for logging into TIARA, and many students noted down the words they had looked up in the glossary on the paper version, facilitating classroom discussion and also, perhaps, vocabulary recall. Surveys handed out after the last class suggested that many of the students had found the format of TIARA helpful for their reading, though in a six-person class, the sample size was admittedly small.

On the second day of the unit, we discussed the first half of an excerpt from the Karpovich lecture, focused on a personal and political comparison of Alexander I and Nikolai I. This time, students came to class noticeably discouraged. Most had only gotten halfway (or less) through the assigned reading. It seemed that the comprehension questions and glossing help provided in TIARA had not been enough to help them understand this unfamiliar material (one student said she had used an online dictionary to look up three words per line, and all the students who responded to the survey mentioned their difficulties with vocabulary). Discussing

the reading in class, I got the sense that the students had missed the forest for the trees: employing “bottom-up” reading strategies that led them to focus on individual unfamiliar words, they had not been able to use the selective glossing and comprehension questions, or the context provided the previous day in class, to achieve a global understanding of what this section of the lecture was about.

The lecture seemed to come more alive for the students through in-class exercises that encouraged them to reconstruct Karpovich’s portraits of Alexander I and Nikolai I together, as a group. A warm-up exercise in which I asked students (in pairs) to guess which of two images was Alexander, and which was Nikolai, and to justify their opinion, encouraged them to go back to the text to find adjectives to describe each tsar. As a warm-up the following day, they described and compared modern-day politicians to one another, supplementing Karpovich’s adjectives with others that I had asked them to brainstorm the night before for homework. This conversation about politics and politicians helped give the students a framework for more in-depth discussion of the political discontents that led to the uprising. By the final day of the unit, most students were able to use vocabulary from Karpovich’s lecture to describe Alexander I and Nikolai I, to explain what the Decembrists wanted, and to recount the story of their revolt. With the help of English-language comprehension questions, some students could also roughly follow the rapid and complex narrative in a section dealing with the revolt in Parfenov’s documentary.

Not only did all the students say, at the end of the unit, that they had enjoyed discussing this material; at least some of the vocabulary and information also seem to have stuck. Ten Russian-language true/false questions about Alexander, Nikolai, and the Decembrists were included on their unit test the following week, and the six students answered an average of 85% correctly. But clearly, vocabulary remained a major obstacle. All the students who filled out the

final survey commented that they would have liked more of every kind of gloss provided in the digital texts in TIARA.

What I found, then, was that preparing these materials in an interactive electronic format was not, in itself, enough to make them manageable and approachable to the students. There are several possible explanations for that outcome in this particular case. It proved difficult to take advantage of all the resources of TIARA when glossing a scholarly text like Karpovich's – one for which there was no audio component and distinctly fewer opportunities to provide visual or video glosses (How do you come up with an unambiguous image gloss for "autocracy"?). A more flexible annotation platform that allowed for hyperlinks might have helped mitigate this problem. In addition, students may simply have needed more preparation before being asked to read on unfamiliar subject matter in a new genre. As a novice at glossing, visiting these students' class for only a few days, I also found it difficult to predict which words they would not know, and which they would consider the most important to understanding a sentence.

However, I was struck by two reactions in particular: first, the desire students expressed to have *every* unknown word glossed; and second, the reluctance that a number of them seemed to feel about reading online in a foreign language. (Indeed, in a shorter trial of the same material in a Slavic 3 class later in the semester, I found that none of the students chose to read the digital text in TIARA, when given the option of a paper text with a glossary.) Combined, these two observations pointed me in a new direction. It seemed that what would help students most would be to learn strategies that helped them read more globally – not just word by word – and identify words they could guess without (or before) looking up, like English cognates or words with known roots. And it also seemed that they were more enthusiastic about coming together over this material in class than about deciphering it on their own at home, using digital tools.

So in my own project, I decided to shift focus to preparing these materials in a paper format – so to speak, to flip the classroom back. I turned my attention away from glossing per se, to a broader exploration of what kinds of auxiliary exercises and materials would help students gain the knowledge and strategies they need to read these complex texts. There were a few major categories of gaps in knowledge or understanding that, as my experience with the Slavic 3 and 4 students suggested, needed to be bridged.

The biggest category, of course, was simply unknown words. Some words important to Karpovich’s lecture are rare in everyday reading or conversation – for example, *перемирие* (truce) or *коронованный* (crowned). Others, like *событие* (event) or *развитие* (development), have a good chance of coming up more often in intermediate students’ interactions. I decided to pull a list of ten to fifteen key, fairly common words out of each excerpt, and to ask students to memorize these words before beginning to read, if they do not already know them. As well as easing the reading itself, this task is meant to ensure that the class has a common lexicon of basic terms for discussing the events Karpovich describes. I glossed other, less common words in the right-hand margin of each reading, aiming to provide enough support that an average Slavic 4 student would not need a dictionary to follow the “plot” of the lecture. Words with glosses were bolded in the main text.

A smaller category, but vitally important for making progress with reading in Russian, includes unknown words with roots that students probably do know (e.g. *царствование* – a tsar’s reign [cf. *царь* – tsar]; *военный* – military [cf. *война* – war]). For some words, where the connection with the root is quite direct, I underlined the root without providing a gloss, to see if students would recognize it themselves. For most such words, however, I provided an English translation, along with the note “cf. [root].” My hope was that drawing students’ attention to the

prevalence of this kind of word in complex texts would alert them to the strategy of looking for the root (on the importance of this strategy in reading Russian, see Comer and Keefe 2000).

Another key category, which proved surprisingly complex for both groups of intermediate students who tested these materials, includes cognates with or borrowings from English, German, or French (e.g. *конституция* – constitution; *реальная политика* – *Realpolitik*). In Russian, audio glosses or stress marks may be most important for helping students “hear” these cognates, since there are few patterns to make it clear how unfamiliar words should be stressed (though some advocate leaving out stress marks to get intermediate students used to authentic formatting – see, for example, Rosengrant 2000). Strategies like attempting to read an unknown word aloud, which I tried to encourage through pre-reading exercises, are perhaps an acceptable compromise. But with texts on history, as with much nineteenth-century fiction, there is another complication: students may not understand the cognate word in English. (One student who read a section of the Karpovich lecture, for example, was confused by the word *реакционный* – reactionary – because she associated it with *реакция*, reaction – with being quick to react and eager to change.)

Such unfamiliar concepts – both general knowledge (like *Realpolitik* or “reactionary”) and specific to Russian political history (like the divide between Slavophiles and Westernizers) – offer an opportunity for students to do their own research. Wherever possible, I reinforced this idea using comprehension questions that ask students to be ready to explain a particular concept in Russian in class the next day. As with the texts I had glossed in TIARA, in these paper versions I also used comprehension questions as a way of presenting students with the main point of each paragraph in simpler language, and of breaking the text into shorter and more manageable segments.

Associated with each excerpt is a two-to-three page worksheet with pre- and post-reading exercises. For before reading, there is a short list of key vocabulary words to memorize, and fill-in-the-blank or sentence writing exercises that introduce and reinforce “metatextual” words and phrases. For after reading, a brief grammar section hones in on one topic relevant to the text (for example, time expressions or participles) for explanation and review. The worksheets end with questions and exercises to help students prepare for class discussion, often aimed at reflection on their own attitudes toward the ideas and events presented in the lecture. In some cases, I was able to incorporate supplemental visual or audio material into these discussion/reflection questions – for example, a WWI-era Bolshevik propaganda poster, or an excerpt from a radio program (including a written transcript) about Karpovich’s own biography and career, which gives students a better sense of his personal perspective on the events his lecture describes.

This aspect of the worksheets brings me from the *how* of the materials I prepared for this project, to a brief concluding discussion of the *why*. In the words of Erin Kearney's fascinating recent study, "engagement with historical narratives is a natural site for the kinds of interpretive and meaning-making practices that foster . . . deep cultural learning" (Kearney 2012; see also Kearney 2010, Kramsch 2010, Perón 2010). By reading not just Pushkin's "Arion," but also an account of the historical and political circumstances that moved him to write it, we expose students to a fuller picture of the culture they are encountering through the Russian language. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that the account students are reading was written by a real person, with a strong individual perspective – Karpovich, an émigré involved in liberalizing revolutionary activities, but bitterly disenchanted with the Bolshevik government that followed.

Thus, each of the units I put together for this project explores how Karpovich's lecture can be juxtaposed, at home and in the classroom, with materials that present other sides of the picture he draws. Capstone writing and discussion exercises, in particular, encourage students to engage with alternative points of view. For example, students are asked to read an account of the Decembrist revolt from a 1945 Soviet textbook and compare it to Karpovich's, and to their own understanding of the values and problems that were at stake. Another assignment asks them to read a portrait of a typical Decembrist, published in 2012 on the popular news and content site <http://lenta.ru/>, and then to write a diary entry from that Decembrist's point of view describing either the day before or the day after the revolt. A third asks them to read an expression of exuberant excitement about the October Revolution, V.V. Mayakovsky's poem "Order to the Army of the Arts," and then to write their own "Order to the Army of the Arts," in either poetry or prose. By bringing these other readings and perspectives into the classroom, and encouraging students to actively reflect on their own perspectives and create new narratives, teachers will be able to help their students engage with Russian history not just as a story, but as a story told in a particular way for its audience – a story which the students themselves can begin to participate in telling.

All the materials from both units – poems by Pushkin and Mayakovsky, glossed using TIARA; excerpts from Karpovich's lecture, glossed in paper form and also available in TIARA; pre- and post-reading worksheets; a guide to relevant clips from Parfenev's documentary films on the history of Imperial Russia; and capstone reading, writing, and discussion exercises – are compiled and organized for teachers of Slavic 3 and 4 on a project site in bCourses:

<https://bcourses.berkeley.edu/courses/1315993>. It is my hope that other teachers will continue to add to these materials and to adapt glossaries and exercises to the particular needs of their class,

striking a compromise between the various kinds of support students need to bolster their foreign language reading skills, and the goal of making them stronger readers on their own. Taken as a whole, my project aims to contribute to the ongoing shift in our professional approach to glossing foreign language texts. But I have attempted to update the 1958 methods of Karpovich's former student by surrounding Karpovich's lecture not so much with a digital, as with a *paper* cloud of supporting resources, intended to enrich students' interaction with the many different levels of his narrative.

In a sense, then, this project has been an exercise in juxtaposing big concerns with very small ones. Before intermediate Russian students can read literature in historical context (and vice versa), we have to find a way of presenting both kinds of texts in a manageable and meaningful form. Before students can express their reflections on political history, they must become more comfortable working with the language of argument and analysis in a non-native tongue. I hope to have begun a set of materials that will balance these goals for our intermediate Russian curriculum – enabling students and teachers to create a wider range of opportunities for storytelling, both in the classroom and at home.¹

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