

Learning Russian through Art and Visual Culture

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Questionnaires filled out by Berkeley Russian students at the start of each semester show that most students choose to study Russian as a foreign language motivated by an interest in the culture, politics, literature and/or history of the Russian-speaking world. Students thus bring an interest in Russian culture to the language classroom from the very beginning. This suggests that, in many cases, students appear to hope that proficiency in Russian language will grant them access to a deeper understanding of a culture, literature and/or history that intrigues them. Instructors and educational materials, however, often assume that foreign language students must reach a certain (usually advanced) level of linguistic proficiency before they can begin to engage meaningfully with authentic cultural materials and before they can be asked to think critically about their own cultural position vis-à-vis that of the L2 culture. The transition from engaging with Russian language materials in the classroom to those in the outside world can be as intimidating as it is exciting. While language textbooks aimed at the beginning-intermediate level language learners (e.g., *Mezhdru nami* and *Russian Stage Two* currently used in the Berkeley Slavic Department) provide excellent mechanics in Russian grammar and vocabulary, they offer little in the way of contemporary culture or materials created for native speakers.

With the support from the Berkeley Language Center,¹ this project attempts to address this issue by using artifacts of visual culture to embed and enact cultural studies

in the language classroom at a low-intermediate level. This project is guided by the following key questions: How can we more effectively embed cultural studies into beginning-intermediate classrooms? How can we best prepare students to engage with authentic Russian language materials? What skills and information would help empower and encourage students to approach authentic cultural materials outside the classroom? How can we teach foreign language in a way that will most benefit students of various interests and disciplines?

In choosing materials that would best address the above stated key questions, I was drawn to Contemporary Russian political art and works of Russian Sots Art – an art movement often referred to as the Soviet equivalent of American or British Pop Art. Just as Andy Warhol, for example, plays on the capitalist/consumerist visual culture that pervaded Cold War America with his “Campbell’s Soup Cans” (1962) series, the Soviet Sots artist plays on communist visual culture. In the USSR there was little to no advertising in public spaces, but there were many posters depicting ideological slogans and portraits of various national heroes. One of the fathers of Sots Art, Vitaly Komar, explains the movement through a comparison to Dadaist Marcel Duchamp’s signed urinal “Fountain” (1917): “We did the same action in Sots Art as Marcel Duchamp did with the ready made. He took the pissoir and signed it. We did the same thing. We painted slogans and signed them [...] we appropriated them. The only pissoir by this designer which survived was signed by Duchamp. Same thing with the slogans.”¹

¹ Nicholas Herman, ed., *Russian Art in Translation: Rossiiskoe iskusstvo v perevode*, (Brooklyn, NY: ANTE, 2007), 88.

I was drawn to works of Russian Sots Art and Contemporary Russian political art as such cultural artifacts tend to be: a) visually arresting, b) deliberately readable, c) combine text/written language with elements of mass culture and mundane objects of everyday life to convey coded meaning, and d) appear in dialogue with major themes, texts, and events of Russian history. I began by compiling a primary archive of contemporary art pieces, and developed a series of clusters that combine art/visual artifacts and supplementary cultural materials of various genres (such as feature films, government documents, literature, newspapers clippings, etc.). Each cluster on art and visual culture is organized around the following key themes: historical memory/contested histories, the relationship of church and state, censorship, public vs. private life, art as activism and utopian experimentation. These themes are at once culturally specific, but universal enough to be of great value to students interested in Russian history, literature, politics, etc.

I found visual materials and cultural supplements addressed the 3 guiding questions of this project in the following ways:

1. Largely visual materials can encourage maximum analysis with limited written language tools. In other words, images can be used to do a lot of things that would be complicated to do with text/language alone – with a visual text you can compensate for gaps in language.
2. Analysis of artifacts of visual culture trains students to approach cultural materials actively – they must create the language to explain and interpret an object or image themselves.
3. Analyzing and discussing art in a historical and cultural context familiarizes students with important themes and tropes in Russian culture and history more broadly.

During the spring 2016 semester, I piloted two of the clusters created for this project in a second and a fourth semester Russian class (more details below). Each cluster was

designed to offer a visual introduction to a facet of Russian cultural history, to include stylistic as well as grammatical exercises, to incorporate authentic material for reading homework, and to culminate in a discussion of a contemporary art piece that synthesizes and comments on the thematic content of the lesson.

Example cluster #1: Yuri Gagarin, The Space Race, Ilya Kabakov

The first cluster focuses on the space race as it was experienced and reflected in visual culture in the USSR. The full cluster was piloted over one and a half 50 minute class periods in a Russian 4 class, with a reading and a composition assignment as homework in between the two class periods. A condensed version of this cluster was piloted in one class period in 2nd semester Russian course.

We began this cluster by looking at an image (fig. 1) as a means of introducing the lesson in a historical context and opening up discussion of imagery:



fig. 1 Cold War image

I asked the students the name of the war between the USSR and the USA and we worked together to name the various elements of this layered image. We look together at the above image and begin a discussion using a basic script adapted from Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS): What do you see? What else do you see? What is going on in

this image? What keys to understanding this image can you identify?² Since this image is presented to them without context, I ask: where do you think this image came from, the USA or the USSR? We note the various objects in the picture and turn our focus to the figure of the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin – why does an astronaut, rather than a soldier represent a war? We reflect on the peculiarity of the Cold War as an ideological rivalry, a main component of which was the space race. We then move to focus on how Gagarin was represented in Soviet visual culture. I give the students an image of posters (fig. 2) depicting Gagarin or other cosmonauts and we discuss how the captions correspond to the images, and make note of stylistic conventions (such as the common construction “glory/слава + dative case object of glory”).



fig. 2, cosmonaut posters

Students are then shown a series of posters connected to the Space Race, but presenting diverse messages. They are asked to work in pairs or small groups to match the caption with the most fitting image. Before I reveal the answers I call on different

² Karen Møller, “Cultural Literacy through Art,” Spring 2015 BLC Fellows Instructional Development Research Projects, 1 May 2015, Berkeley, California.

students report and explain their answers. Students invariably come up with different answers, so they are asked to explain which visual clues helped them arrive at their conclusion and to try to convince the class as to why a given choice is correct.



fig. 3 caption-image matching exercise

Students match image 4 with the caption “Happy New Year!” relatively easily because they recognize the figure of Ded Moroz (Russian Santa Claus who brings presents on New Year’s Eve); while the caption “In the name of peace” elicits varied responses. In the pilot classes, students paired this phrase with images 1, 2, 3, and 5. Varying answers here presents an opportunity for students to defend their own caption choice referring directly to and analyzing the visual materials. In order to convince the class, students must articulate what about each image suggests peace. One student argued the relaxed posture of the cosmonaut inside the rocket suggests peace, while another argued that the brotherly embrace of these two figures in image 2 best conveyed a message of peace. By comparing the images to one another one student argued that the maternal figure in image 1 was incongruous with more aggressive

slogans such as “we will conquer space.” After this discussion, I reveal the correct answers and we reflect briefly on how the messages correspond to the images. I ask how the meaning of a message might change when matched with a different image. For example, slogan a, matched with image 5 – would be read as an ironic warning alongside the image of the precarious missile.

Students are then supplied with 2 new images and asked to write their own subtitles/slogans.

Ваша очередь!

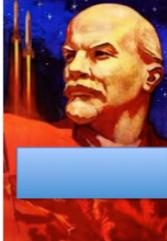
	
<p>«Дети покорят космос!» “Children will conquer space!”</p> <p>«Советское молоко – топливо нашей ракет!» “Soviet milk is the fuel of our rockets!”</p> <p>«Молоко – детям космоса!» “Milk to the Children of Space!”</p>	<p>«Во имя нашего отца!» “In the name of our father!”</p> <p>«Наш бог» “Our God”</p> <p>«Ленин еще жив, но в космосе» “Lenin is still alive, but in space”</p>

fig. 4 caption-writing exercise with example answers from piloted Russian 2+4 classes

Many of the captions by Russian 2 and 4 students, such as those above in fig. 4 reflect cultural knowledge of the space race in the USSR and demonstrate a grasp of stylistic conventions of Soviet posters. Caption 1.a. parodies the militaristic posters they have just seen, while 1.b. jokes about how seemingly unrelated objects and topics are tied into the Space Race in such posters, and 1.c. mirrors the common dative case construction of something (glory, or in this case milk) to a collective group in the dative case (in this case children of space). Captions 2.a., b. and c. poke fun at how Lenin’s cult

of personality is reflected in Soviet posters. Caption 2.b. suggests an interpretation of this poster as presenting miracles of science as a kind of alternative to religion.

Through these exercises, the students of the pilot classes demonstrated that they internalized and reflected on various aspects of the cultural atmosphere of the space race (the proliferation of Soviet posters, the scale of national enthusiasm (shown through the diversity of the posters), the cult of Gagarin and the public, collective dream of space travel), and gained a basic understanding of the generic conventions of Soviet slogans.

With this base we move to the second half of the cluster, in which we analyze the installation “The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment” (1986) by Moscow Conceptualism by Ilya Kabakov. I present the first photo of Kabakov’s installation with the title concealed. Since I do not supply the title of the piece, I tell them that we will discuss the installation as a work of art later, but first we will approach this image as if we are a team of detectives who have just arrived on the scene of a very strange incident.



fig. 5 Kabakov installation, exterior view

Kabakov's installation was built to look like a very realistic room in a communal apartment, where something very strange occurred. I start with an image of the outside of the installation and read an excerpt from the artist's own description of the installation, explaining that you must peer through the boards to see into the room. I show the second image of the room and together we first take stock of the different objects in the room with a grammatical exercise using location verbs. This exercise (fig. 6) integrated the grammatical material they are working through in the 2nd semester textbook the day I visited. The exercise asks: What lies on the floor? What hangs on the wall? What stands in the room? What stands in the room?

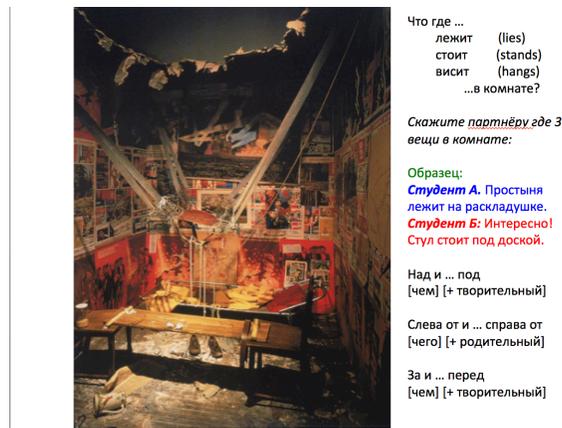


fig. 6 Kabakov installation, interior view with location verb exercise

We then begin our discussion following a basic VTS script. I ask: What do you see? What is happening in this picture? What kinds of clues to understanding can you find here? Who do you think lives here? Where is he now? We view images showing the installation from a few different angles, and continue our discussion. We end here and the students take home for a reading assignment of some texts that accompany this installation in the form of 3 (fictional, but realistic) police reports given by the neighbors

of the resident of this room. I gave the 4th semester students all of 3 texts (glossed minimally), and gave a two-paragraph excerpt to the 2nd semester students. Once they completed the reading, students were asked to write an explanation of what occurred in the room and what kind of man was living here (fig. 7).

СОЧИНЕНИЕ

PICK ONE of the following options and write a composition 8-10 sentences in length:

1. Imagine you are the “*chelovek*” who lived in this room. Tell us about yourself! What is this mysterious contraption? Why did you build it? Where are you now?
2. Imagine you are one of the neighbors of the “man who flew into space from his apartment.” Write a statement to the police investigators in which you describe your relationship to the “man”: Where is your room located in relation to his? Did you know the man well? Did you ever see into his room? What did you see? What did you think about him? When did you see him last?

Your composition should include:

- The indefinite particles –то/-нибудь
- Reference to a specific date
- The verbs: *сидеть, лежать, стоять, висеть*
- The prepositions: над, под, за, перед, слева от, справа от
- A comment on someone’s marital status

fig. 7 writing assignment to accompany Kabakov installation

The writing assignment asks students to imagine themselves either as the absent occupant of the room, from the perspective of “the man who flew into space” or to write an additional police report from the perspective of another neighbor, using the reading assignment as a stylistic template. The 4th semester class was asked to do the same, and also to comment on the stylistic peculiarities of the 3 different neighbor’s accounts. I attempted to align the tasks of the assignment with the material simultaneously covered by the textbook for each class.

At the beginning of the second day of the piloted class, students were asked to summarize aloud for the class the stories they had written to explain what happened to “the man” in their composition assignment. One student wrote that “the man”

discovered he was from Neptune and built a contraption to successfully return home; another wrote that he grew up idolizing Yuri Gagarin and built a machine to launch himself into space to prove that he was a “real Russian”; another wrote that he had grown weary of seeking God on the earth and hoped to touch the hand of God somewhere in the heavens.

After our discussion of their compositions, I revealed the title of the installation, “The Man who Flew into Space from His Apartment,” and we moved on to discussion of the installation as a work of art. I ask the questions: What is the tone of the piece? How do you feel when you look at it? What are the components of the composition? (For example, we note the diorama within the installation.) What major themes does the installation appear to engage with? Can you identify any sources of tension?

The students identified a tension between the fantasies depicted on the posters (used here as wallpaper) and the squalid reality of the apartment, as well as the contrast between the collective Soviet dream represented in the visual culture of the Space Race and the squalid isolation of this man’s private life. We note the confluence of public and private spheres: the collective national dream, here concentrated in the mind of one man. For some students, the piece is tragic and suggests that the fantasies of Soviet visual culture are just that: fantasies. Others were moved by the power of the dream of space travel, which has literally transported “the man” from his dismal reality to an unknown place in Kabakov’s piece.

Example cluster #2: Ivan the Terrible, Sergei Eisenstein and art-group Mit'ki

This cluster was piloted over two class periods in a 4th semester Russian class. Before the first day of our piloted lesson, students were asked to watch a clip from the second part of Eisenstein's Stalinist era film *Ivan the Terrible* (in which Ivan is especially villainous) and were asked to reflect on the depiction of Ivan IV in writing. We start the lesson with a discussion of two images of Ivan IV (fig. 8).

Иван IV (Иван Грозный)

Великий Князь всея Руси, Великий Царь всея Руси (1547-1584)



A *parsuna* portrait of Ivan IV (the Terrible), painted in the beginning of the 18. century.
Царь Иоанн IV (Грозный).
Парсуна. Начало XVIII века.



Still from Sergei Eisenstein's film, "Ivan the Terrible," 1945, 1958
Сергей Эйзенштейн, «Иван Грозный», 1945, 1958

fig. 8 Ivan IV visual introduction

We compare the gentle expression on Ivan's face and ease with which he holds the symbols of sovereignty in the 18th century portrait, to Ivan's erratic, wrathful behavior in the film clip they watched as homework and the severity of his expression in the above still. Discussion of these two images introduces the theme of historical memory: we consider how the image of historical figures changes in dialogue with contemporary culture and politics.

We then focus on Ivan IV famous moniker as Tsar Ivan the Terrible (Иван Грозный). We look at the etymology of the word of the word "tsar" (from the Latin "Caesar") and note that unlike some European monarchs, read a list of

popular/traditional ways to address the tsar (ie: “the little father” “our father”) and note that the tsar is “divinely ordained” and thus acts as a religious authority as well as a governmental authority. We read an entry from Vladimir Dahl’s classic 19th century Russian Dictionary on “грозный” (terrible) particularly as it pertains to tsars. We talk about the nuanced, seemingly contradictory meanings of “грозный,” which can also be translated as “awe-inspiring,” “imperious” or “imposing,” and its etymological root in the word for “thunderstorm.” Once we’ve established the ambiguity of the moniker «Грозный», we segue into a game which asks students to place value judgments on various facts of Ivan’s legacy and decide if Ivan IV should be considered a positive or negative figure. Students are given 20 slips of paper with a fact about Ivan IV on each and a paper divided into two columns – students must decide if a given fact builds the case that Ivan is a positive or negative figure in Russian history. Some facts, like “Ivan IV killed his son in a fit of rage” are universally considered negative, while other elements of Ivan IV’s legacy garnered some disagreement among the students. With the Russian 4 class we discussed the assumptions underlying each choice: From what perspective is “laying the foundation of the Russian army” a positive? From what perspective is expanding Russian territory a negative accomplishment? What kind of perspective might consider this a positive accomplishment? Questions such as these prompt students to consider the context of the material in front of them vis-à-vis their own cultural and historical position and engage with broad moral and historical themes.

Based on their new knowledge of the tsar, they are asked to come up with other possible monikers for Ivan. Some examples they class came up with were Ivan “the

bloody,” “the murderous,” and “the religious.” Students are then given a worksheet for homework showing portraits of some more- or lesser-known Russian leaders and asked to supply monikers for each. In choosing a moniker, students can respond to the image presented in the portrait, reflect on their knowledge about various figures, or may be inspired to research unfamiliar figures (fig. 9).

Сейчас вы знаете немало о том, почему Иван IV «Грозный». Посмотрите на портреты, и напишите прозвища для каждого русского правителя и себя:

Рюрик I (“the Brave”)

Ольга (“the Gloomy”; “the Controversial”)

Святополк I (“the Decisive”; “the Damned”)

Владимир (“the Powerful”; “the Suspicious”; “the Eternal”)

Александр I (“the Indecisive”; “the Paranoid”)

Вы?

Anya “the Promising”
 Объясните коротко пожалуйста, почему вы выбрали это прозвище:
 “I chose the moniker “the Promising” because I hope that I will become someone like Mother Theresa helping the world through my own experience. I believe I can change the world. I have hope for the future.”

fig. 9 Monikers for Russian leaders with select student answers translated into English

Above are some of the answers supplied by the Russian 4 pilot classroom (fig. 9).

In order to complete this exercise, which asks students to participate in a Russian stylistic convention, requires only knowledge of the adjectival form. As such, this exercise would be ideal for students at a lower level, who can look up and learn a new word while practicing the adjectival form. This exercise provides an example of how using visual text can elicit maximum analysis of cultural material with minimal linguistic proficiency. In addition, by assigning themselves a moniker, students must translate their own identities into Russian language and partake stylistic convention.

At the beginning of the second day of class on this cluster, students present their chosen monikers and we turn to representations of Ivan IV in art. As with the Kabakov installation, I present an image of an art object (Ilya Repin's famous painting of Ivan IV – fig. 10) with the title concealed and encourage students to approach the painting as detectives arriving at the scene of a crime.



Илья Репин,

1883-1885

fig. 10 Ilya Repin, "Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan, November 16, 1581," 1883-1885, student view

Again we follow a basic VTS script: What do you see? What is happening in this picture? What kinds of clues to understanding can you find here? Students quickly guess that the bleeding figure is Ivan IV's son, I reveal the title of the painting ("Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan, November 16, 1581"), and together we piece together the narrative of the painting. We note the fallen throne on the left, the staff in the lower right corner (apparently the murder weapon), the pool of blood surrounding the young Ivan's body just above the staff in the lower right corner, and – of course – the expression of horror on Ivan IV's face.

Once we have assembled the narrative depicted in the painting using visual elements, we discuss the painting as an art object. What are the dominant colors? How can we describe the composition? Where can you locate the focus of the painting? What is the tone of the painting? How do you feel when you look at the painting? What is the main emotion evoked by this painting? In their responses, students note the gloomy tone in contrast to the central focus on Ivan's glassy eyes. They report registering the primary emotions of the piece as horror, regret, or pain.

I then press the students to consider possible symbolic meaning of the painting. I ask: What universal themes appear important here? Can you identify any intertexts? In order to help students to push beyond considering the painting as a representation of a historical event (which Repin depicts from a temporal distance of 300 years), I show them a possible intertext with clear metaphorical connotations: Francisco Goya's "Saturn Devours His Son" (1819-23) (fig. 11).



Франсиско Гойя, «Сатурн, пожирающий своего сына» (исп. [Saturno devorando a un hijo](#)), 1819-1823

fig. 11 Francisco Goya, "Saturn Devours His Son," 1819-23.

We note the similar compositions and physiognomies between Repin's Ivan and Goya's Saturn. This helps students to consider the painting in more universal terms since the visual similarity between the two is quite striking and the mythological subtext of Goya's painting is overt. I ask if anyone knows the myth of Saturn and why he eats his children. Two students (of 4) knew the myth well enough to recount it in Russian and report that Saturn eats his children as a means of ensuring his own power into the future. I ask how this myth might bear on the Imperial Russian context. We are reminded that the tsar is called "the little father" by the common Russian people and compose together a possible reading of the painting as an allegory of state repression of the common people.

We then return to our theme of contested histories and censorship by discussing the history of the painting itself. I tell the class that this painting banned from public display by the Tsar Aleksandr III in 1885, but the ban was lifted a few months later and the painting was put on display (where it still hangs) at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

We then move to the reading portion: together we read 2 news clips from 100 years apart. The first news clip from 1913 relays how a "clearly disturbed" icon painter entered the gallery and slashed the faces of Ivan and his son apparently in protest of the negative portrayal of the tsar (fig. 12).



fig. 12 Clipping from Niva 5, January 1913 showing the vandalized Repin painting

The second news clipping from 2013 reports that a small, but loud minority of Russian Orthodox activists had sent an open letter to the Ministry of Culture requesting that Repin’s painting be removed from the Tretyakov Gallery on the grounds that it offends the feelings of religious believers. This harks back to our theme of the relationship between church and state in Russia. Here we see a group appealing to the government for special protection of the Russian Orthodox community.



убрать= remove
 общественник= activist, person active in public life
 заявлять= to declare
 оскорблять= to offend
 содержать клевету= to constitute slander
 благочестивый= devout, pious
 полотно= canvas

шедевр= masterpiece
 изъять= to remove
 доступ= access
 недоумение= bewilderment, perplexity
 заместитель директора= deputy director
 рассмотреть= to examine, consider
 дополнительный= additional

fig. 13 Glossed news clipping from Ekho Moskvy, 3 October 2013

I tell the class that the art group Mit'ki heard of the petition and decided to paint a new picture to hang in place of Repin's, should it be removed. We then watch a video clip of the art performance at the unveiling of Mit'ki's painting.

Что вы видите?



© РИА Новости. Владимир Астанкович

fig 14. Still from the Mit'ki performance via RIA Novosti, photo by Vladimir Astankovich

We begin analyzing this still image as before using our VTS script. Students recognize immediately the rug, the figure of Ivan, the staff and note the painting concealed in the background. Students noted that the men in traditional Russian undershirts are cleaning up the blood spot (here represented by a felt cloth) and removing the murder weapon with a long hook. We continue to watch the performance, in which the men shown in fig. 14 and a group of people (all wearing the striped Russian undershirts) walk in in a kind of mock religious ceremony and hand Ivan an infant child. Then the play is over and the painting is revealed.



Митьки,
«Митьки
дарят Ивану
Грозному
нового сына»,
2013

Mit'ki, "Mit'ki
Gives Ivan the
Terrible
a New Son,"
2013

fig. 15 Post-performance, Mit'ki poses with the painting "Mit'ki Gives Ivan the Terrible a New Son," 2013

We look together at the painting depicting the performance we have just watched. I ask: How do you interpret this painting? What do you think they artists might be saying? Is it a joke? If so, on what or whom? What major themes does this piece appear to engage with? What do you think about giving Ivan IV a new son? We identify themes of cleansing/rewriting history, or sanitizing the past and of offering (arguably undeserved or risky) second chances. Together with the pilot class, we came up with a reading of the performance and painting as a warning against the dangers of "scrubbing clean" history. We note that, in the Mit'ki performance and painting, such a process sets up a situation that places the innocent (here represented by the infant) in dangerous hands.

Each cluster includes the following elements:

1. A visual introduction to a facet of Russian history. *For example: digital collage of Cold War, contrasting portraits of Ivan IV*
2. Creative exercise wherein students participate in a particular stylistic convention. *For example: writing captions for propaganda posters, assigning monikers (ie: "the Terrible") to Russian leaders*
3. Reading assignment of related authentic cultural material. *For example: texts from Kabakov's installation, newspaper articles on the Repin painting controversy*

4. Analysis of a contemporary art piece that engages with the broader themes of the cluster. *For example: using script inspired VTS, incorporating close-reading technique to approach art piece as detectives, reflecting on piece in context of the thematic material covered in the lesson*

Conclusion:

Through considering, discussing and reading about works of art in relation to larger themes within a cultural and historical context, students of diverse interests can develop the skills to recognize and interpret the culturally weighted images and artifacts that intersect meaningfully in contemporary Russian visual culture. These clusters of visual, cultural and linguistic material are designed to help students to develop a vocabulary and to practice speaking about broad meaningful categories of Russian culture. The goal of this project is to help students develop the skills to engage with and interpret authentic cultural materials so that they will be empowered and encouraged to join on the cultural conversation more readily and approach authentic cultural materials on their own with more confidence and ability. Furthermore, this project was an experiment in how to embed and enact cultural studies in the foreign language classroom by infusing grammatical exercises with richer cultural content. It is my hope that future instructors will use, adapt or be inspired by these materials in their own language teaching. These materials and others are currently being developed for open access online at serpimolot.org.

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