

# Russian

in the

# Real World

By Paul Richardson

## It begins with a spark.

For Diana Imperatore, it was a love of ballet. For David Swafford, it was the Olympics (and the mystery of “СССР”). Claudia Ricci was fascinated by the Cyrillic alphabet. Sandy Williams turned away from a career in herpetology after a high school trip to the Soviet Union and a semester abroad in southern Russia. Melanie Peyser was “hooked” after a required summer reading of Andrea Gray’s *Russian Memoirs*.

There are as many different reasons for deciding to study Russian as there are people studying it. And now, with a newly-liberalized Russia, there are more opportunities than ever for persons with strong Russian language skills to find excellent jobs in areas that correspond with the “spark” that led them to Russian in the first place.

In an effort to understand what kinds of new career opportunities are open to persons with Russian language skills, *Russian Life* interviewed nearly 40 professionals from all over the world about how they are putting their Russian language study to use in the “real world.” The search led us to a spate of fascinating destinations, from Wall Street to Kosovo, from NGOs to the corporate world to the halls of government. And, the more people we conversed with, the more a distinct pattern began to emerge.



**Karina Shook uses her Russian in her job helping cosmonauts and astronauts prepare for spacewalks. Shook is pictured above with Frank Culbertson, commander of the third International Space Station crew, about to be lowered into the Russian Hydrolab training pool. On their left is a space suit technician and interpreter.**

## How Much is Enough?

A spark of interest is fine and good. But without fuel for the flame, interest in Russian can die out quickly in the face of a strange alphabet, verbs of motion and the perfective/imperfective conundrum. Almost without exception, those who have put their Russian training to use in their careers are people who felt challenged—instead of daunted—by the exotic nature of the Russian language.

Karina Shook began studying Russian while an engineering student in college, after a friend took up the language first. “I remember

thinking, “That’s a unique language, probably not that many people learn to speak it,” Shook said. “Somewhere in there I probably also made the connection that it could be useful to combine it with my interest in the space program.” She was right. Today, Shook works at NASA-Johnson Space Center, as a liaison between US and Russian space programs on spacewalk issues.

“I first studied Russian in order to just learn a language other than French or Spanish,” said Julie Johnson, a grant manager at Sister Cities International. “I was only in Russian 102 when the opportunity to

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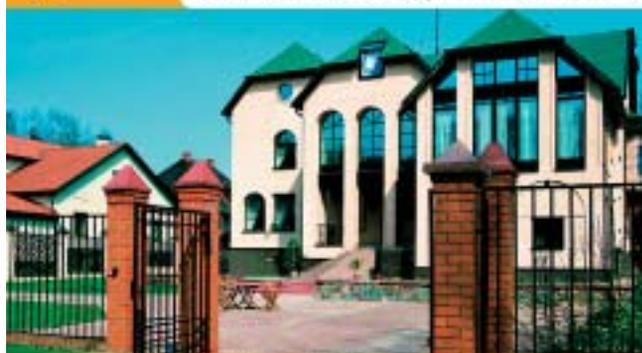
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travel to Vladimir presented itself. After experiencing Russian life and culture, I returned to Ohio State University to pursue a degree in Russian.”

Lisa Kaestner, like many people in the mid-1980s, was fascinated by the cultures on “the other side” in the

Cold War. While she said she did not have a particular career in mind, she knew she wanted to travel and that she “wanted to study something more exotic than a western European language.” After studying Russian for four years at Williams College (including a semester abroad in Soviet Georgia), Kaestner went on to live and work for about 10 years in Georgia, including working as one of the US Embassy’s first employees there in the early 1990s. Today she is a program officer at the International Finance Corporation.

The sympathies of many interviewees were summed up well by Craig Martelle (currently a major in the US Military and working as an Arms Control Implementation Unit Operations Office at the US Embassy in Moscow): “The draw of the Russian language is that you could spend a lifetime studying it and still not know it all.”

While an apt sentiment, this is not highly practical advice for students of Russian who are still in school. Of course you can study Russian all your life, but how much does one need before leaving school?

The majority of professionals interviewed had at least four years of college level Russian on their resumes before beginning a job search, and most had studied in Russia for a semester or more. Many have studied more and many considerably more.

Nicholas Allen studied Russian for four years at Bath University (UK) and then for a month in Novosibirsk, after which he taught English at Kharkov University (he had no particular career in mind, he said, “just a taste for learning an ‘unusual’ language”). Today he is Moscow correspondent for Deutsche Presse-Agentur.

Melanie Peyser was a Russian major at Colgate University, studied for a summer in Tver, and spent a year studying law and living with a family in Voronezh through the American Collegiate Consortium.

Recently, she finished a Masters in Russian at Middlebury College Russian School. She now heads up the Center for Justice Assistance in Moscow, a think-tank on Russian criminal justice reform.

Peyser’s experience is particularly instructive: “I have been able to do the type of work I wanted to,” she said, “because I combine both Russian and professional knowledge (a law degree).”

Melissa Stone concurred: “For me, Russian language proficiency has been a means, a tool for communication to be applied, rather than an end product in itself.” Stone studied Russian for four years at the University of Virginia, plus a year in St. Petersburg, but combined this with education as a social psychologist. “The understanding of the Russian language has been key to my understanding of specifically Slavic cultural filters that influence Slavic language speakers in their construction of a ‘world view,’” she said. Stone puts her training to good use as advisor to the Equal Opportunity and Gender Bureau in the Prime Minister’s Advisor Office of Good Governance within the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo.

And yet, while practical or professional experience in another field is valuable, it is not absolutely essential. Very strong Russian language proficiency is unusual enough in its own right to offer plenty of career opportunities in management, trade and, in particular, the non-profit sphere.

Charles Mixon wanted to learn Russian so he could teach Russian history. But his college did not have a Russian program. Middlebury’s summer program became his introduction: “in eight weeks, I went from only being able to say ‘glasnost’ to dreaming, thinking and understanding Russian fluently.” He progressed quickly and continued his language study at nearby colleges, in St. Petersburg and in graduate school at Indiana University. But the lure of business proved greater than that of

## Where to Study

There are dozens of colleges and continuing education programs around the country where you can study Russian. While we cannot list them all, contact information for many are listed in the directory on the *Russian Life* website ([www.russian-life.com/yellow.cfm](http://www.russian-life.com/yellow.cfm)). Meanwhile, we list below the alma maters of the professionals who took the time to speak with us:

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**Anthony Lauren (center, with camouflage baseball cap) uses his Russian daily as an interpreter in Kosovo. To his right is Lt.-General Marcel Valentin, Commander of the Kosovo Forces and, in the light blue beret, Major Oleg Larin, First Company Commander, 13th Tactical Group, Russian Military Contingent in Kosovo. In the fur cap Colonel Sergei Ziara, Battalion Commander of the 13th Tactical Group.**

history and today he is a vice president at AIG Capital Partners, raising capital and monitoring investment funds in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Melissa Carr started studying Russian because she was “skeptical of Reagan’s description of this ‘evil empire,’” she said. “I’m afraid I had no clue how (or even if) I would use Russian in my career, but knew that I was interested in visiting the country and that I wanted to be able to communicate with people if and when I did.” She studied Russian for three-and-a-half years at Amherst College and for a summer at Leningrad State University. She then worked for Project Harmony (a not-for-profit cultural exchange organization) for five years, spending about 75% of her time living in Russia. Today she continues to put her strong language skills to daily use directing the Caspian Studies Program as part of Harvard Kennedy School of Government’s

Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project.

Eric Johnson majored in Russian and math at Grinnell College (Iowa), and went on to get an M.A. in Russian Studies at Georgetown University. His strong language skills helped him land a job opening Greenpeace’s office in Ukraine. Today he oversees European Operations for Internews, an NGO that helps independent broadcast media in the NIS. Since the early 1990s, he has traveled to over 100 cities throughout the NIS, something almost unthinkable without excellent Russian language skills.

### Which Russian?

Not surprisingly, most of the professionals interviewed said they use their spoken Russian on the job on at least a weekly basis; many use it daily. Most reported reading and translating Russian documents into English fairly frequently. The need to write in Russian came up least frequently.

Melanie Peyser’s experience is typical of Americans living and working in Russia: “I am the only American [in this organization]. I use my Russian all day everyday.” Kara Spangler, who works for ACTR in Odessa (Ukraine), concurred. “I use Russian every day, and my life would be difficult without it. I conduct interviews, give presentations, and interact with officials regularly as part of my job in Russian.”

Gail Buyske, who has worked extensively in East-West banking, most recently for the EBRD, said that Russian was particularly useful in communicating with clients in the regions and “in keeping up with the local press and gauging nuances that weren’t available from English language sources.” She also found her Russian skills “indispensable for reviewing banks and other institutions in which the EBRD invested or to which it made loans, because I could read their internal documents—it would have been impossible to translate all of them.”

Anthony Lauren has his Russian tested daily in the rigorous and often tense conditions of UN-occupied Kosovo, where he works as a Russian

## Yes, There are Real Jobs

These are some of the professional positions occupied now or in the recent past by persons interviewed for this article by *Russian Life*. All were acquired because the individual had strong knowledge of Russian.

Project Manager, wireless telecom joint ventures in Uzbekistan and Tadjikistan  
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interpreter for the US military contingent there.

As Senior Library Assistant at the London Library, Claudia Ricci (4 years of Russian at University of Bologna, Italy) works with the



**Diana Imperatore (pictured here at December's Taste of Russia event, see page 52), fell in love with Russia at a young age through its ballet and studied the language for four years at Boston University. Today she is a director of sales Alpha Bank's New York office.**

library's Russian collection and reads in Russian every day to judge the significance of new acquisitions and to interact with clientele about existing collections.

NASA liaison Karina Shook noted that, although NASA is never short on interpreters, "I prefer to actually listen in Russian because the interpreters can't always keep up with the discussions and I find that I miss details if I'm just listening to the interpretation ... It's a huge thrill for me to be able to understand things that no one else can, to be able to talk with the crew in their own language."

David Swafford reported similar side benefits from his knowledge of

Russian. A Flight Controller for the International Space Station Payload Operations Control Center, he does not "officially" use Russian in his present position, but it has enabled him "to understand Russian operations products and some of their space-to-ground communications." He has also been able to help co-workers unravel strange Russian acronyms.

A third space-related Russian professional, Aimee Roebuck, has taught Russian to astronauts and English to cosmonauts and flight engineers. She studied Russian for about five years, including a year in Russia, plus studied in graduate school at the University of Texas, Austin. Needless to say, as a teacher of Russian, she uses all aspects of her language skills on a daily basis.

Several interviewees reported that a number of their positions drew unexpectedly on their ability to use "logistical" Russian—making hotel reservations for colleagues, arranging meetings and negotiating deals with subcontractors. One professional (who requested anonymity) pointed up a serious lacunae in this respect in her intensive language study: "I studied Russian very intensely for over five years, but I did not realize until I sat down for the first time in a Russian restaurant in Moscow that my many wonderful teachers had forgotten to teach me basic menu vocabulary. I could discuss politics or business in detail, but I could not order lunch!"

### Landing the Job

Since the early 1990s, a spate of interesting new career opportunities have opened for individuals with Russian language skills (see box, page 39). Whereas twenty years ago, only two career tracks might have been possible—academia or government, today there are jobs available in the NGO sphere, in science, business, trade and journalism, to name but a few. Of course, the knotty question is "How do you get that first job?"

The short answer from our thirty-odd interviewees is "not without

Russian." By definition, these professionals sought and received jobs because of their strong proficiencies in Russian, often a requirement for the position. "Management wanted someone who could establish credibility with Russian employees and be sensitive to cultural issues," said Ted Barral about being hired as human resources manager for an American company in Moscow. "Language was a main factor in achieving these objectives." Barral had studied Russian for three years, plus a semester in Leningrad. But critical to his cultural education in the language was volunteering for work with Russian refugees.

Even in the cases where persons said Russian was not a prerequisite for their current position, several noted that Russian language skills listed on their resume gave them an edge—it showed they could and had tackled a very difficult, long-term challenge. "I have always found Russian language knowledge useful for job interviews," said Gail Buyske, "because it attracts the interviewer's attention and gives us something interesting to discuss."

That, as anyone who has interviewed for any job knows, can sometimes make all the difference. **RL**

.....  
*Paul Richardson is Publisher and Editor of Russian Life. He studied six years of Russian at Indiana University, Bloomington before living in Moscow for two years.*

*Special thanks for referring Russian language alumni for this article are due: Darra Goldstein, Williams College, Jerzy Kolodziej, Indiana University, Ben Rifkin, University of Wisconsin Madison (and director, Middlebury College summer Russian program), Alexandra Baker, Middlebury College, Natalie Kononenko, University of Virginia, Laurie Iudin-Nelson, Luther College.*

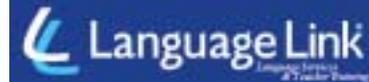


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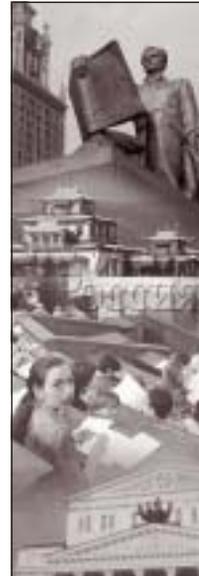
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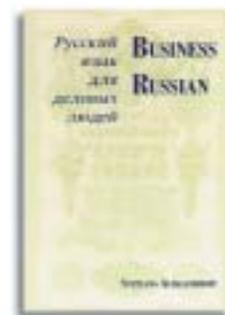
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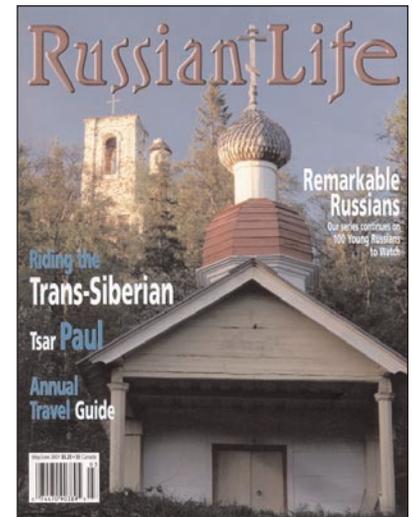
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