

Combined Research and Language Grant, 2007-2008.

Final Report, Auri Berg

My dissertation, tentatively entitled “Nikita Khrushchev and the Fate of the Russian Peasantry: 1950-1959,” will examine 1950s rural reform in the Soviet Union and its impact on the countryside. I originally set out to study the local impact rural reforms in the “Khrushchev era.” As I focused my research on the Soviet project of “urbanizing the countryside,” I decided that a more appropriate timeframe would be roughly 1950-1959. In December of 1949 Khrushchev was promoted to Moscow and as First Party Secretary of the Soviet capital, he played an important role in a reform that one prominent historian has referred to as “the second and most important stage of collectivization:” the merging of small kolkhozes in an effort to create large modern farms, and the subsequent desertion of “small” [*melkie*] villages. Though the comprehensive planning of rural space was only gradually introduced in the 1950s, and not without resistance, this outlook was central to how authorities dealt with issues of rural reform, especially during “the Thaw.” In the Russian archives I have examined the measures taken by rural modernizers at the central and regional level, the local impact and reception of their efforts in Arkhangel’sk province, and the 1950s discourses that shaped the way reformers thought about the countryside. My research project is one of the first in both American and Russian/European scholarship to study the social dimensions of Soviet rural reform in the 1950s, and should therefore make a valuable contribution to my field and to current historical debates about Khrushchev’s “Thaw.”

My first research goal was to account for how the small “non-perspective” village emerged as a problem for reformers during the 1950-1951 campaign to merge small collective farms (*ukrupnenie melkikh kolkhozov*). The image of resettling villagers in “agro-cities,” which for a time in 1950-1951 could be found in leading Soviet newspapers, has long been associated with the activities and naïve idealism of Nikita Khrushchev. For my project I need to be able to provide a much more comprehensive explanation of the campaign. I therefore studied the social dimensions of the amalgamation campaign (I made extensive use of F. 9476, the Council for Collective Farm Affairs, F. 7486, the Ministry of Agricultural for the Soviet Union the National Archive of the Economy (RGAE), as well F. 17, Op. 138, the Agricultural Department of the Communist Party in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI).

While in Moscow I also drew on Party materials to find out how the state under Khrushchev responded to resettlement and rural development proposals. Most useful were the Departments of Agriculture (F. 5, Op. 24, Op. 46) Propaganda and Agitation (Op. 34), and Party Organization (*otdel po partiinym organam po RSFSR*) in the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI). In order to gain a perspective “from below,” I also examined petitions and complaints from villages preserved in fond 5446 (The Council of Ministers) op. 88, 89, 90 (1954-1957) at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF).

In the regional archives of Arkhangel’sk I studied both the short and long term impact of kolkhoz amalgamation, especially on the social landscape of the countryside. There is no contemporary history of the Soviet impact on rural Arkhangel’sk, and

therefore my pre-dissertation research meant gathering a wide range of published materials: regional and local newspapers, local history and ethnographic literature, as well as existing historical surveys. In the archives I gathered materials (correspondence, draft legislation, reports and assessments and transcripts) that reveal the regional perspectives on and implementation of rural reform that are essential for my project, and that moreover paint a detailed picture of rural life in the region.

As part of my grant American Councils organized weekly language lessons for me for the periods when I was in Moscow. As I had hoped, the lessons were tailored towards my specific needs and interests: oral communication, often on rural themes in both academic and colloquial registers; reading Village Prose; and formal and informal written correspondence. Though time consuming, the classes were very rewarding and most certainly have enhanced my experience of the archives and interactions with my Russian colleagues.

My research plan was ambitious and I am very grateful to American Councils for the financial as well as excellent administrative support that they provided. The staff in Washington D.C. was exceedingly responsive to my rather complicated travel requests and took very good care of my visa arrangements in a year in which a number of changes were introduced to the Russian Federation's visa regime. I especially appreciated the local support during my first week in Moscow, including convenient accommodation and general orientation assistance. I settled in to life in Russia quite quickly, thanks in many ways to this initial aid. Though few issues arose during my stay, both the Washington D.C. and local office were always very responsive to my inquiries.

I consider my research trip an unqualified success because I was able to carry out my research plan efficiently and without unnecessary obstacles. This research was essential to my dissertation project, the first draft of which I plan to complete at the University of Toronto by the fall of 2009.