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Students gain insight into Russian Revolution

PLATTEVILLE, Wis. – Seven University of Wisconsin-Platteville students gained insight into the history of the Russian Revolution – including the thoughts of the Russian leaders at that time – during an academic field excursion to the Department of Special Collections at the Memorial Library at UW-Madison.

Students who participated were enrolled in the Modern Russia course, taught by Dr. Andrey Ivanov, assistant professor of history at UW-Platteville, and/or were members of the university's History Club, advised by Dr. Delbert Carey, senior lecturer of history at UW-Platteville.

“I was very happy the students had this opportunity to enrich their worldviews by learning outside the classroom,” said Ivanov. “Engaging with vivid primary sources and with global experts in the field is one of the best ways to experience history and study the importance of the experiences of yesterday for the decisions of today and tomorrow. The students had a blast during their day in Madison and I am hoping for more events like this next semester.”

Student participants included Brian Fiscus, Appleton, Wisconsin; Martin McClure, Marshfield, Wisconsin; Stephanie Prochaska, Mineral Point, Wisconsin; Samuel Dion-Gottfried, Portage, Wisconsin; Abraham Birkholz, Galena, Illinois; Zachary Sherman, Fennimore, Wisconsin; and Kalina Hildebrandt, Woodbury, Minnesota.

The Russian Revolution, the centennial of which is marked in 2017, was a cataclysmic chain of events that started in February 1917 with the overthrow of the Romanov monarchy that ruled Russia for 300 years and the establishment of a parliamentary democratic Russian Republic. The February Revolution of 1917 was followed by the October Revolution of 1917 that overthrew the republic and established “the dictatorship of the proletariat” – the first socialist state in world

history, known between 1922-1991 as USSR or the Soviet Union.

Students toured the library with the expert guidance of Dr. Robin Rider, head of the Special Collections, who organized the exhibition exclusively for the learning opportunity of the UW-Platteville field trip participants. The exhibition featured a number of rare and original documents from the period of the revolutionary upheaval in late imperial Russia, starting from the mid-19th century until the 1920s. Ivanov noted that among those documents were the original typescript writings of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Bolshevik (Communist) Party, and Leon Trotsky, the military mastermind of the October Revolution.

“Since many of these original documents were printed and written by the revolutionaries in exile before 1917, they were banned in the Russian Empire and were smuggled either out of Switzerland (where Lenin lived before April 1917) or out of Vienna (where Trotsky lived in 1907-1914) via clandestine means,” said Ivanov. “Studying these documents, the students learned the stories behind each primary source, their provenance, content, the contribution that these writings had made in appealing to the working masses of imperial Russia and various interesting ways in which they made it to Wisconsin.”

Following the tour, students attended the annual UW-Madison Lecture in Russian History, titled “Russia and 1914: Anything New to Say?” sponsored by the Alice D. Mortenson/Michael B. Petrovich Chair of Russian History, an endowment enabled by the generosity of the M. A. Mortenson Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The speaker was a world-known scholar on Russia, Dr. Dominic Lieven, senior research fellow at Trinity College of the University of Cambridge in England. Lieven discussed the causes of World War I, Russia’s contribution to World War I as an ally of the United States and Britain as well as the effect that the revolution had on the outcomes of the war for the Allies and Central Powers alike.

After the lecture, Lieven met with the students to discuss their educational experience of Russian history, political ideologies, global wars and revolutions,

especially in the context of their roles as emerging young leaders and engaged global citizens in Wisconsin and beyond. Students also had a chance to meet and greet faculty members, experts and generous supporters of the Russian Studies at UW-Madison.

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