What impact does the recent rise in antagonism between Russia and the United States have on the Russian immigrant community living in Los Angeles? This often-ignored subculture, which identifies as both Russian and American, provides a unique lens through which to compare traditional Russian ideologies with more progressive Western perspectives. Specifically, the diverse neighborhood of West Hollywood is home to a majority of Los Angeles’s Russian immigrant population, and through a series of interviews, meetings, and data collection about the area, I plan to compile research into a screenplay about this unique underbelly of Los Angeles. By employing universally recognized narrative tropes for a typical “dysfunctional family” that owns a Russian bookstore on Santa Monica Boulevard, I hope to create a fictional narrative that catalogues my research in both a critical and empathetic way. The final screenplay should provide an unbiased, humanizing representation of differing, Russian-American perspectives on what is becoming known as Cold War II.

Presently, relations between the United States and Russia are at their most unstable since the Cold War. Russia’s leading pollster, the Levada Center, released a poll in May 2014 showing that 71% of Russians have negative or somewhat negative attitudes towards the US, a nearly unbelievable statistic compared to the mere 7% of the Russian population that when asked the same question in 1990, felt hardly any resentment toward their recent Cold War enemies. The vision of the US as an “unfriendly power” nearly doubled in the year 2014, and this increase is mostly attributed to Russian’s beliefs that the US (and Europe) negatively stirred the crisis in Ukraine (Wall Street Journal). According to a 2013 BBC poll, Americans’ negative perceptions of Russians also increased by 18 points in one year, and rose to a point where 59% of polled Americans reported feeling negatively towards Russia’s influence.

There is no question that Russians and Americans are again feeling a dissonance in sentiment towards the other, and zeroing in on a group of Russian immigrants that personifies these opposing viewpoints is a crucial step in understanding the cause of such tensions. Specifically, the community of Russian immigrants living in West Hollywood, California proves to be a unique blend of American influence and traditional Russian beliefs. Called a “demographer’s delight” (Jewish Journal), West Hollywood has a diverse population that provides a wealth of contrasting perspectives. According to the 2010 census, of its 34,399 residents, roughly 50% are Jewish, 30% are foreign born, 13.6% are Russian speaking, 35% are gay men, 3% are lesbians, and 19% are senior citizens. Additionally, the epicenter of Russian-owned businesses, the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Fairfax Boulevard, grows rapidly gentrified, and almost monthly, a new, high-end boutique pops up between authentic Russian grocery stores, bakeries, and bookstores. Thus, this Russian enclave continues to become a blend of old-world and contemporary culture, and Russian business owners must assimilate to this newness.

Capturing differences in generational perspectives among the immigrant population will be crucial to this project. Many of the older immigrants currently inhabiting this neighborhood were subject to suspicion that they were Soviet agents or spies when they first arrived to America in the Third Wave of Russian immigration after World War II (Magocsi). Yet, because relations between Russia and America have been generally positive for the past twenty years, how does this older group of immigrants feel about the newfound changing temperature between their transplanted home and their native home? What are their opinions on the crisis in Ukraine? Have they felt the all-too-familiar stereotyping and suspicions resurfacing? Hollywood does in fact have an affinity towards making many of the archetypal villains in its films Russian (Fox).
Red Corner: Capturing Contemporary Russian-American Relations through Research on the Russian Immigrant Community in Los Angeles.

Furthermore, how does a younger generation, deemed “New Russians” feel about the US’s rising problems with Russia? The LA Times describes these New Russians as “the cream of the post-Soviet crop—software experts, electronic whizzes, doctors, artists and ballet dancers—more worldly, more Westernized, with higher standards of living than their predecessors.” Do these New Russians find themselves siding with Western perspectives or with the more conservative views of their parents and grandparents?

There are infinite online resources for reading about the growing Russia-US conflict. Notably, a forum funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York has already begun compiling scholarly perspectives on this topic, titled “Perspectives on Peace & Security.” Yet, this small community remains vastly underrepresented in film, and when tensions are brewing at such historic highs, researching the distinct perspective of people who consider themselves both proud Russians and proud Americans becomes crucial. Films have the ability to create and humanize characters that audiences may not normally understand, and this project would aim to represent a community that has a distinct stake in this global issue.

In order to complete my writing of a full-length feature film in eight weeks, I will divide my time into three phases: Preparation, Creation, and Workshop. The bulk of my three-week preparation phase will consist of researching subjects and the neighborhood they inhabit. Luckily, West Hollywood’s notable diversity provides for many city-sponsored, public forums that will aid me in accessing information on the daily lives of its population. One of West Hollywood’s parks hosts a daily program called “Conversation Café,” in which Russian speaking immigrants are invited to come and practice their English with other members of the community. By attending the public Conversation Café, I plan to employ my knowledge of the Russian language to interview community members who attend: both Russian and non-Russian, on their opinions on Russian-American relations. I have also been granted permission to sit in on the Russian Advisory Board meetings, which meet monthly, and invite both new and old immigrants to participate in making decisions that pertain to their civic lives. Furthermore, I have reached out to a Russian business owner: Igor Lerman of Heaven Books, and was granted permission to interview him and spend time in his shop. I plan to find out whether the clientele has changed at all in the past few years since tensions have risen and to use his knowledge as a resource for creating realistic, opinionated characters. Please see the Appendix for confirmation.

Then, I’ll be ready to plow through my Creation phase. I plan to write for about four hours a day, for four weeks. Leaving twelve hours a week for structuring story arc, further research, and for editing already completed work. Following the Creation of the initial draft, I will send out the script to be critiqued by trusted professors and peers, and will spend as much time as I need revising. I am prepared to continuously edit this script: even if it takes longer than the two weeks allotted in my schedule.

This summer proves ideal for me to examine my native city because I plan to go abroad in the fall to study screenwriting in Prague. It’s extremely important to me to work toward unveiling the truth of my own culture, being a first generation American with parents and grandparents who emigrated from Russia, before I travel to explore other cultures. My commitment toward learning about others through writing can be seen through my academic work: I am on track to be part of both the English department’s Creative Writing track and the Creative Writing for the Media Module through the RTVF department. I am also pursuing a Slavic Studies minor and have a deep love for Russian literature. I also hope to take both a class on “Tarkovsky’s Aesthetics in Russian Cinema” and “Writing the Feature Length Film” in the spring, courses that should aid me in completing a thought provoking, Slavic-American screenplay.
Red Corner: Capturing Contemporary Russian-American Relations through Research on the Russian Immigrant Community in Los Angeles.

Works Cited


<http://articles.latimes.com/1997-02-02/local/me-24661_1_american-dream>.


