

Studienfach und -abschluss: B.A. Archäologische Wissenschaften, Kunstgeschichte

Zielland: Russland

Zeitraum: SS 2020 (Feb. 2020 - Jul. 2020)

Universität: Voronezh State University

Identifikationscode: RU-2020-343MP-w



As an Archaeology student with the main focus on the Middle East, studying the Russian culture and the Russian language does not seem to contribute anything to my studies. To be honest, I don't know if I will be able to continue learning Russian nor if I will ever need it but studying the Russian culture and traditions and living in a different society helps being aware of diversity of human societies and that's important in Archaeology. So that was one reason for me to go abroad. Another reason was that I wanted to learn more about Russia - a country which doesn't have the best reputation in western countries. Living in Russia helped me to get my own opinion about Russia and Russians and I'd definitely recommend to do an exchange in Russia/Voronezh.

Before I start with my report I'd like to mention that the Corona virus spread all over the world during my stay in Russia. After six weeks of being in Russia, the government announced self-isolation and a couple of other restrictions. Even though I knew that borders would close, I decided to stay in Voronezh whereas other students decided or had to go back to their home countries. But due to the situation, my stay in Voronezh does not really represent a usual stay in Russia.



The building where I lived.

A couple of weeks before I left Germany, I met a Russian girl at an international event in Freiburg. Luckily, she was from Voronezh and she offered me her help. Since I've heard many horror stories about the student dormitory (especially about the medical checks at the beginning), I wanted to stay at my own flat but it's very hard if not impossible to find a flat in Russia without speaking Russian and without any knowledge

on how it works. I was very grateful that this Russian girl immediately called her father to help me find a place to stay. So when I travelled to Voronezh, her father picked me up at the train station. After having breakfast at his place, we went to my future flat to meet the owner (who luckily spoke English perfectly). In Russia, flats are usually furnished which is very convenient so I only had to buy kitchen equipment (plate, pot, cutlery etc...) and cleaning stuff. The following days I met my buddy who helped me with all the necessary bureaucracy stuff. I was really glad to have a buddy because doing all those things like prolonging the visa would be very hard without a local person (at least if you don't speak Russian very well).

I also started going to the Russian class. At that time, it was a temporary class because not all the exchange students had arrived yet. The class was all about speaking and didn't have any structure. I found that very strange and difficult and I wasn't really satisfied because I couldn't barely speak nor understand Russian (I started learning Russian 3 months before I left) and all the other students in the class had either already been in Russia for one semester or had studied Russian for years. It was frustrating since I expected a class which would teach you Russian starting with the basics in a group of people with the same level. After around 4 weeks we finally got our schedule and the real Russian class started. As you can see, I had Russian grammar and speaking practice twice a week. It was still not a beginner class but I got used to the language quite fast and I studied Russian in my free time so that soon I didn't feel to be that out of place anymore. I actually really started liking the class especially because we were a small group (6 students) and because the teacher Alexandra is a very nice and helpful person (the teachers in general are). The reading and speaking practice is very good especially for those who's Russian level has reached a certain level. Additionally to the language classes, I took the „movie class“ in Russian.

Schedule

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
09:45-11:20		Speaking practice			
11:30-13:05	Grammar		Grammar	Speaking practice	
13:25-15:00		Culture and Traditions of Russia		Public Speaking	Movie class
15:10-16:45			History of Russia		

Apart from the classes in Russian, I took three classes in English: Culture and Tradition of Russia, History of Russia and Public Speaking. I only had 1-2 live classes so it's hard to judge the quality of the classes. But it felt much easier than what I'm used to from Freiburg. However, I especially liked the Culture and Tradition of Russia class because I found it very informative.

I was actually planning to attend a French class as well as a class about Archaeology (in Russian). To join a class which is not taught at the faculty of international relations or international education was a little bit annoying. In Freiburg it's normal that you can basically join any class you want no matter what faculty it belongs to. At VSU I had to ask 2-3 people including the head of the faculty for permission. However, as soon as the quarantine started, I wasn't able to attend those classes anyway. Already after two weeks we had to switch to online teaching and the schedule was changed. It was no longer possible to do the movie class instead we had one more Russian class. We had class on Skype at 11:30 from Monday-Thursday and at 13:30 on Friday. Usually one day was grammar, the other speaking practice and sometimes both together. That worked very well and the quality of the class stayed the same. The English classes were not held via Skype. We only got sent weekly tasks and communicated via e-mail, WhatsApp or Facebook.

Before the quarantine, a usual day looked like this: Getting up around 8 o'clock, going to class, having lunch at home, going to class, doing homework or hanging out with other students. During quarantine I still got up at 8 o'clock but I only had one class each day. After that I usually did homework, studied vocabulary or worked on the weekly tasks from the English classes. But I still had a lot of time left which I filled by doing sports (running outside or working out/doing yoga at home), watching movies, listening to podcasts, talking to friends or the other students via Skype. Only in June, I started to meet people again and to go out for walks.

A highlight of my time in Russia were the evenings we spent together at the student dormitory (during the first weeks). We used to have one dinner each weekend cooked by students coming from the same country (Russian dinner, Turkish dinner, Estonian dinner, ...). These events were always very convivial evenings with lots of people.



I didn't really know how to picture Russia and Russian people before coming to Russia. Of course, I knew about the common stereotype but they are rarely true. Now after having lived in Russia for 5 months, I can tell that life in Russia is not that different to the life in Germany (at least in my opinion) except when it comes to recycling. It was really hard for me that something like this does not exist in Russia meaning that you throw everything in the same bin (glas, paper, plastic, cans, tins...). Also, it's much more common to communicate via social media like WhatsApp, Facebook or VK for serious/official matters (e.g., with teachers from the university).

In the beginning, I also struggled with people being unfriendly. Not the people you deal with at the university but for example people in the bus or if you go grocery shopping. The general interaction between strangers tends to be ruder than in Germany (no one ever smiles, no one says hello, goodbye nor thank you). So it's actually surprising that Russians are very helpful at the same time. Apart from my Russian friend and her family, the owner of my flat was super kind, too. He invited me for lunch, recommended me many restaurants, places and things I should try and he offered me his help if I should ever need it. And there are many more people I met who were like this.

Also many Russians in Voronezh are very interested in English-speaking people or foreigners in general (at least if you're from Europe). It happened several times that a person joined our conversations just because they wanted to practice speaking English.

Russia in general or at least Voronezh is a place full of contradictions. It's beautiful and ugly at the same time, modern but also very obsolete. So you can for example find many very nice places in Voronezh including very fancy restaurants and cosy bars and coffee places but then you'll also find run-down, depressing buildings and bumpy streets. Or there are very old buses but no matter how old they are you'll always be able to pay by card.

What I found particularly interesting was to experience how the Russian government and Russian people dealt with the Corona virus. Rules were imposed and during the first couple of weeks strictly followed by most Russians but after the first restrictions were repealed, it seemed as if the virus didn't exist anymore. Even though there were signs in buses and in shops saying that you could only enter if wearing a mask, no one cared about it anymore. Because of this behaviour, I actually had a hard time feeling comfortable in Voronezh after the outbreak. Also, I wasn't sure if I could trust the numbers which were published and I couldn't get any information on how to behave and what rules applied. Only after a few weeks and reading online newspapers recommended by my buddy with detailed every day information about the situation, I got used to the new situation and I felt at ease again.

To conclude, despite the difficult situation and the lack of environmental awareness, I really enjoyed living and studying in Voronezh. It's hard to describe what I like so much about Voronezh/Russia because it's the small things which make it adorable for me (e.g., the cold and the snow in the winter months, street vendors, the ticket sellers in busses, the flower pattern on pots, etc...).



I also like that Russians don't care about noises. It's totally normal if your neighbour hammers on a Sunday or listen to very loud music after 10 pm. And it happened to me twice that I woke up in the middle of the night because someone was singing outside. As a rather active person, you'll also find plenty of sport activities to do. There's for example a park where it's possible to do cross-country skiing in winter and cycling as well as skating in summer.

I am happy that I had my own flat because it gave me a lot of freedom. But I believe that it can also be difficult for some people. Most students stay at the dormitory. Not staying there means that you can miss out on many things (because non-residents are not allowed to be there after 11 p.m.). Also, in times of quarantine it means that you live totally isolated because you're not allowed to enter the dormitory. It's also more expensive because the rent is higher and you have to spend money on the equipment. If someone decides to stay at their own flat, I recommend to look for a flat close to the university and dormitory and to pack a sleeping bag or blanket (my flat had a bed but no blanket nor pillow). It's also very helpful if the owner speaks English because you have to register in the first 7 days and the owner needs to do this with you.

When it comes to Russian: I stayed in Russia for one semester and I already learned a lot during that time. But I actually regret that I'm not staying for one year because leaving after 5 months means to stop when you just started to feel comfortable with the language. I think it's a great help if you learn vocabulary (and maybe also conjugate verbs because like this you get a feeling for the different types of verbs) in your free time since you don't get this kind of homework but it's essential if you want to get better. If you really want to profit and improve your language skills, I strongly recommend to stay for one year and to start learning Russian at least one year before going. Also, it could be a great input to live with a host family but you have to consider that host families aren't always families but single-person households, that they might not live close to the university and that they probably cook Russian food which is mainly based on meat. So as a vegetarian that could be rather difficult.





