Two ECU Students in the Russian Heartland
by: Justin Wilmes

At a time when most American college students were at the beach or catching up on lost sleep, two ECU undergrads spent their Spring Break in March 2016 on a service trip to Vladimir, Russia, a small town near Moscow on Russia’s historical “Golden Ring.” Jason Port, a freshman Russian and Security Studies double major, and Mac Carneiro, a junior studying Russian and Criminal Justice, decided to experience first-hand the language and culture they learned about in classes this year. They took advantage of an “Alternative Spring Break” service trip run by the Vladimir-based American Home, and spent 10 days in the Russian heartland, helping children in an orphanage and pre-school, and elderly military veterans in a retirement home.

The time Jason, Mac and the other American participants spent cleaning and refurbishing the orphanage and retirement home left a big impression on those living there. No less important were the conversations and personal connections the students made with the Russian children and veterans. “They loved us. They never get to meet Americans, so they were very interested,” Jason said. Despite some re-emergence of Cold War-era prejudices and political tensions between the US and Russia, Jason and Mac experienced no anti-Americanism at all, feeling that it is aimed at the government rather than American citizens. As geopolitical tensions rise, these sorts of real-life interactions between ordinary Russians and Americans are more important than ever.

During their stay in Vladimir—a town of 350,000—Mac and Jason each lived with Russian host families. These families shared with them their relatively small apartments, provided meals, and treated them as family. Both students were struck by the hospitality they encountered, a Russian trait often noted by foreigners. Upon leaving, Mac was shocked to find that his host family had asked a friend to make a special painting of a Russian landscape for him: “They were so generous, they put my small goodbye gift to shame.” The long conversations that Jason and Mac shared with these families gave them a more intimate sense of everyday Russian life and views. It also improved their language skills immensely.
“The host family was definitely the best part of the trip,” Jason remarks. Both students were struck by the simplicity of Russian living conditions, but noted how much care was put into their modest living quarters: “They don’t have a lot of unnecessary things, but they take great pride in their homes. They are very clean and nice inside,” Mac recalls. Despite initial language challenges, by the third or fourth day both students felt they were already communicating well. They credited the language instruction they receive at ECU for preparing them: “We were much more communicative in Russian than most of the other Americans, some of whom had studied it much longer than us,” they point out. After only one year of Russian language classes, having three meals a day with a Russian host family gave Jason and Mac a crash course in survival Russian, and they found their language improved dramatically in a short period of time.

In addition to time spent volunteering and with host families, Jason and Mac experienced a number of remarkable excursions to historical and cultural sites. One afternoon in Vladimir, the students completed a 13-kilometer hike through the snow-covered countryside to the world-famous Church on the Nerl. This UNESCO World Heritage site was built around 1165 AD and is an iconic of Medieval Russian architecture. The beauty of the vast, snowy landscapes and the ancient churches left a lasting impression on Mac and Jason and brought to life things they had learned about in their Introduction to Russian Culture course at ECU. They captured a number of remarkable photographs during these excursions that are currently on display on the first floor of Joyner Library in a photo exhibit: “Study Abroad: Moscow and Saint Petersburg.”

Before their service projects began in Vladimir, the group of American volunteers spent two days touring world famous sites in Moscow—visiting the Red Square (where Vladimir Lenin’s body is still embalmed and on display), the Moscow Circus, and exploring the city’s beautiful and ornate subway system, one of its most popular tourist attractions. One moment on the first day struck them in
particular for what it suggests about Russia’s political mood today: On the Red Square, a quiet gathering of people stood in line to leave flowers on a monument to Joseph Stalin, honoring the anniversary of his death. The legacy of Stalin—whom historians have found responsible for a staggering number of deaths in the form of political executions, famine, and other crimes—and the Soviet experience in general, remains unresolved today and continues to be debated by the Russian people. Only a few minutes later during their walk around Moscow, Jason and Mac witnessed another quiet gathering of a rather different political persuasion. Presumably liberal-leaning citizens were gathered to lay flowers on a bridge where, only last year, the well-known member of the political opposition Boris Nemtsov was mysteriously murdered. Viewing side-by-side these expressions of nostalgia for Stalin and the Soviet Union and those sympathetic to the opposition demonstrated for Jason and Mac the complexity and diversity of political and cultural values in Russia today.

Jason and Mac are two of the best students in first-year Russian at ECU this year and both are interested in pursuing government careers as specialists in the region of Russia and Eurasia. Since the geopolitical importance of this region has resurfaced in the last decade, a new generation of specialists is needed to help guide American foreign policy, from diplomats in the State Department to regional analysts. Any number of agencies put a premium on a strong command of the Russian language and knowledge of the region.

When asked, “Do you think you will go back to Russia?” there was no hesitation. Jason and Mac couldn’t be more excited to return, and are already planning to participate in ECU’s Study Abroad trip to Russia next summer. Perhaps through increased real-world interactions and relationships between Americans and Russians, the growing tension in their geopolitical relations can be overcome in the future.