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research article

Toward a New Era of Russian–American Collaboration on Railroads

—Andrew Langsner (Edited by Matthew Kingston)

*“Go West, young man; go West to the Far East”
—Harper’s Weekly, 1899*

I arrived in Russia on May 28, 2008 to the bewildering rush of the Moscow airport and a chorus of different languages, none of them English. I planned to spend eight weeks exploring railroad engineering opportunities for Americans in Siberia and helping rebuild the Russian-American friendship that existed before the Cold War. With the support of an International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) grant from the University of New Hampshire, I found that despite decades of animosity there remains a strong desire among the Russian people and in Russian railroad education circles to renew its once great collaboration with the United States.

Serving as inspiration for this trip was an article that appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1899 titled “Siberia as a Field for Americans.” The article begins by suggesting that the phrase, “Go West, young man; go West to the Far East,” would become the slogan for the twentieth century (1). At the time the article was written, American and Russian relations were in their golden age. Their collaboration on railroads began in 1842 when one of America’s best West Point–trained railroad engineers was hired by the Russian government to advise the construction of the first major Russian railroad from Moscow to St. Petersburg. The completed railroad was one of the best in the world and set the stage for what became several decades of mutually beneficial Russian–American collaboration. By 1899, Russian–American collaboration had spread to Siberia and to the Far East where Baldwin locomotives were being unloaded to serve Russia’s new Far Eastern railway lines, which were being built using American methods and technology.



The author in front of the Siberian Transport University (STU)

I became interested in the prospect of renewed cooperative relations between Russia and the United States after reading a presentation made by American economist Lyndon LaRouche to the Russian Academy of Sciences in May 2007 entitled “A New Order of Relations in the World.” He described how Russia’s unique culture, advanced scientific capability, and important status in Asia made it essential for the United States to reengage Russia on the friendly and productive terms which existed prior to the end of World War II (2).

My research aimed to gauge the opportunities available for American civil engineers to become involved in Russian development as they had a century before. In preparing for my IROP project, I was fortunate to come

across the work of an American railroad engineer, Dr. Hal Cooper, who has written several proposals for the development of railroads in Siberia, including a proposal for a tunnel under the Bering Strait connecting Alaska to Russia's Far East. Dr. Cooper played an integral role in helping me narrow my research to railroads because of his experience in the railroad industry and connections in Novosibirsk, the city in Siberia where I planned to conduct my research. These connections were at the Siberian Transport University (STU), one of the leading railroad universities on the Asian continent. With Dr. Cooper's help, my research became focused on the potential for collaboration within the engineering academic community.

Moscow to Magnitogorsk

When I arrived in Moscow, I was struck by the vast expanse of concrete apartment buildings that circle the entire city. I could see this from the plane and then from a friend's apartment window soon after arriving. I spent the first few days with fellow IROP students admiring the architecture of inner Moscow before taking a train to St. Petersburg where I did the same for another three days. After my first week of being a typical American tourist, I returned to Moscow to take a 36-hour railroad journey to my first destination, the industrial city of Magnitogorsk, which lies on the border between Europe and Asia. From this point on, the great potential that exists for Russian-American collaboration began to reveal itself to me.



Map of a proposed rail linkage between Russia and Alaska (Cooper)

Before this trip, I had heard stories that Russians did not treat Americans well, but on my first solo train ride, with a very limited understanding of the Russian language, I was treated very well. I naively did not bring any food with me and was forced to eat in the dining car. During my third attempt at ordering from the Russian menu, the wait staff asked a businessman who spoke some English to translate for me. The businessman was very excited to meet an American student; and after a short talk in broken English, he treated me to dinner with him and the waitresses, whom he invited to eat and drink cognac with us. He was very generous, and his kindness confirmed to me that the Russian people are indeed open to friendship with Americans.

In Magnitogorsk I was met by several Russian railroad engineering students. Some of these students spent time in the United States and spoke fondly of our country. They were unanimously open to the idea of American-Russian collaboration on rail development. When I showed them Dr. Cooper's map of a proposed railroad between Siberia and the United States, they became excited because it was the first time they had seen such a proposal. Later on I was introduced to a railroad professor who was not only surprised to have an American student in his office but also eager to look at the proposal. The professor and I, along with a few of his students, spoke for a while about the proposal. He offered to stay in contact so as to build a future relationship, which was indicative of the kind of responses I would receive later on in my trip.

Magnitogorsk to Siberia

From Magnitogorsk, my next destination was the Siberian capital, Novosibirsk. I went to Novosibirsk where I planned to hold a series of meetings at the Siberian Transport University (STU) and participate in a conference that was to occur at STU. There were a lot of logistics that still needed to be worked out, but the initial contacts were made and I boarded the train full of expectations for what I would be able to accomplish.



Learning how to play Durak on the way to Novosibirsk

On the 36-hour train ride to Novosibirsk I was better prepared with rations, so I spent more time getting to know my fellow passengers. This train is notorious for being uncomfortable and smelly, and I was riding third class where the whole car is relatively open. I shared an open compartment with a university student, a young schoolboy, Duma, and his mother, Lyuda. The student and Duma, who knew his colors in English, teamed up to teach me the basics of the Russian card game Durak, while Lyuda chatted with the babushkas across the aisle. The ride was long but pleasant and, despite the fact that all of our communication was carried out in gestures and a few simple Russian sentences, my traveling companions were as eager to try to understand me as I was them.

After experiencing the good will that Russians have for Americans on my first two train rides and from the students at Magnitogorsk, I began to expect the same from the Russians of Novosibirsk, and I was not disappointed. First, my home stay mother Irina turned out to be a very good person and she did many things to make me feel at home. She helped me make connections to English speaking students and even brought me to museums and operas. Also, in my first week there I quickly became comfortable with my arrangements because the Russians I met and continued to meet became a network of English-speaking friends and acquaintances that I could rely on during my stay.

Confirming the Potential for Russian–American Collaboration in Siberia

I next went to Academgorodok, a small university city attached to Novosibirsk, to gauge the potential for renewed cooperation on railroad development and education. Despite a few bureaucratic barriers that greatly hindered my access to many individuals who could have expanded my knowledge of Russian railroads, I determined that there is a great willingness within Russian academic railroad institutions to collaborate with their U.S. counterparts. I am greatly indebted to my mentor and facilitator at the History Institute in Academgorodok, Julia Uzbekova, and a researcher at the Siberian Transportation University, Veronica, for their assistance in helping me attempt to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles.

Despite the efforts of Julia and Veronica, I was granted access to the STU for one day only. (I learned later that there was a rumor in the bureaucratic circles that I was a spy.) On that day I met with Dr. Vladimir Nekoroshkov, a vice rector of STU and head of international affairs. Dr. Nekoroshkov shared my interest in the potential for a Bering Strait rail tunnel and in forming a relationship with American academic institutions. As proof of this he showed me stacks of curricula and explained that whatever was needed could be translated into English for such a purpose. Because the Russian government heavily monitors STU, his willingness and desire to work with an American institution represent more than just one completely independent academic institution reaching out to another. This also indicates that there is a sense in the Russian railroad community that there is something valuable to be gained by collaborating with the United States.



The Siberian Transportation University

Challenges to Siberian Development

A week before my meeting at STU, a student named Ilnur at the Moscow Institute for Demography, Migration and Regional Development sent me an economics paper that had been written by one of his mentors, Yuri Krupnov. This paper focused on a new concept of development for Asia based on the principal of a linear corridor composed of a wide range of infrastructure elements, such as railways, fiber optic cables, and pipelines,

called a development corridor. Since Asia is such a large landmass, one of the biggest challenges in developing it is access to transportation and basic human infrastructure. This problem is particularly acute in Siberia. The paper described a new system of development that could be used to solve many of the problems associated with developing Siberia; the only problem was it was written in Russian.

I was able to team up with Olga Chaschina, a physics student from the Siberian State University, to translate the first four chapters of this lengthy paper. It took two weeks to complete but by spending several hours each day discussing the paper's ideas in broken English, we were able to produce a rough translation, which I refined on returning to the United States. Since then the translation has been edited by Ilnur and sent to Krupnov and is now the only English translation in the world.

The paper outlined the need for Russia to create new institutions that could guide the integration of new technologies being developed in the science sector into the actual physical economy of Asia as a whole. The authors envisioned a grid of linear development corridors crisscrossing the continent that would make possible the development of Asia's interior while providing meaningful work to unemployed workers and also the means for a positive cultural exchange.

I learned from this paper that the development of the Asian continent is a huge task that can only be accomplished by the concerted efforts of many nations. America is in a good position to help Russia meet these challenges because of our experience tackling many of the same problems when establishing our transcontinental railroads, which in fact function as a form of development corridor.

Toward a New Era of Collaboration

From my experiences in Russia I found that great potential exists for renewed collaboration with the United States. My social experiences showed me a culture that is friendly to Americans and open to furthering relations between our two countries. Academically, I received direct offers from engineering professors to collaborate and to work to build Russian and American academic relationships. From the paper on development corridors, it is clear that projects exist that would benefit from the input of American engineers and students.

Back in the United States, I've confirmed that U.S. academic railroad institutions also are interested in working with Russia. In applying to graduate school, I've had the opportunity to speak with the heads of two of the major railroad degree programs in the U.S.; both expressed willingness to correspond with Dr. Nekoroshkov about forming the connections he had in mind. It is clear that the Cold War is over and a new era of Russian-American cooperation is ready to begin.

I would like to extend many thanks to all of those who made this "adventure" possible: the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research staff and donors, who provided my Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship abroad; Professor Cathy Frierson, my UNH mentor who championed my proposal and opened important doors for me along the way; the Prusevich family; Dr. Julia Uzbekova and Dr. Evgeny Vodichev for hosting my visit to Russia and providing me with all the logistical resources I needed while in Russia; and Dr. Hal Cooper for his invaluable assistance in making connections. I would also like to thank Professor Bykadorov, Veronica Youchenka, Pavel Kovalenko, Olga Chaschina and Irina Polkova for their friendship and assistance while in Russia. Finally, I would like to thank all the students and Russian citizens who took me in and offered a helping hand every step of the way to and from Siberia.

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Author Bio

*With funding from the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) at the University of New Hampshire, **Andrew Langsner** traveled to Russia in summer 2008 to explore the state of Russian–American relations in the railroad industry. Born in West Lebanon, New Hampshire, Andrew will graduate from the University of New Hampshire in May 2009 with a bachelor's of science in civil engineering. He plans to attend graduate school for engineering and hopes to someday reconnect with the Russian professors he met who were interested in working with American engineers on the development of the Siberian Railway, including a rail line connecting Russia to Alaska under the Bering Strait. Andrew chose to publish an article in *Inquiry* to support his larger goal to "contribute to the process of changing the way we think about Russia now that the Cold War is over."*

Mentor Bio

*Dr. **Cathy A. Frierson** is a professor in the Department of History at the University of New Hampshire, where she has been teaching for seventeen years. Her research and teaching interest focuses on Russian history. Although she co–founded the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) in 1997 with Dr. Donna Brown, Dr. Frierson's first experience as an IROP mentor came in 2008 when she mentored three students, Andrew Langsner being one of them. Andrew's project is just what Dr. Frierson hoped IROP would make possible when she first envisioned the program: an opportunity for students in the sciences to learn about the international aspects of a scientific career by exploring their field in another culture.*