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Timothy Reagan

The University of Maine (Orono, Maine, USA)

The University of the Free State (Bloemfontein, South Africa)

ORCID Id: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5837-1603

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Abstract

Russian language courses and programs in the United States emerged and developed in contexts which were characterized by the conflicting ideologies and politics of the United States and the Soviet Union (and, more recently, the Russian Federation). In addition, such programs have faced a number of other challenges, some of which are related to world language education in the U.S. context more generally, while others are language-specific and concerned only with Russian as a foreign language. This article provides a review of the current status of the teaching and learning of Russian in the United States, and suggests that among the challenges faced by Russian educators are the difficulties associated with learning LCTLs in general (and Russian in particular), political and ideological tensions, the lack of economic returns from the study of Russian, and the general ignorance of Russian society and culture in U.S. society. It is recommended that the recruitment of students can be increased by focusing on heritage language speakers of Russian, while an effort to improve the general knowledge of contemporary Russian society, as well as its history and culture, could also attract non-heritage language students. Ties to local Russian-speaking communities can also promote the study of Russian by U.S. students. Changes to the Russian language curriculum are also required, including the recognition of the diversity in the Russian-speaking world, challenges the concept of the Русский мир, and the inclusion of critical pedagogical approaches.

Keywords: *World/foreign language education, Russian language, less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), critical pedagogy*

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning of Russian as a world language[1] in the United States presents a fascinating case study in language education in a host of different ways. Russian was a relative latecomer to American education, following not only the classical languages (Latin, Greek and Hebrew), but also a variety of western European ones (notably, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, among others). In his historical study named *America learns Russian: A history of the teaching of the Russian language in the United States*, Albert Parry traced the very earliest efforts to teach Russian to 1659, but he also clearly demonstrated that it was not really until the Second World War and then the Cold War that significant efforts were made to offer Russian language programs in major U.S. colleges and universities (see Parry, 1967). It is thus hardly surprising that Russian language courses and programs emerged and developed in contexts characterized by the conflicting ideologies and politics of the United States and the Soviet Union (and, more recently, the Russian Federation). In addition, such programs have also faced a number of other challenges, some of which are related to world language education in the U.S. context more generally, while others are language-specific and concerned only with Russian as a foreign language. This article offers an analysis of the current status of the teaching and learning of Russian in the United States, and provides suggestions for how the study of the Russian language might be made both more appealing to and effective for American students.

World Language Education in the United States

It is no secret that the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the United States has been, and continues to be, largely unsuccessful (see Osborn, 2000, 2002; Osborn & Reagan, 1998; Reagan, 2004, 2022; Reagan & Osborn, 2019, 2021). In his 1954 book *Teacher in America*, Jacques Barzun rather scathingly commented that,…boys and girls "take" French or Spanish or German . . . for three, four, or five years before entering college, only to discover there that they cannot read, speak, or understand it. The word for this type of instruction is not "theoretical" but "hypothetical." Its principal is "*If* it were possible to learn a foreign language in the way I have been taught, I should now know that language." (p. 119, my emphasis)

If this was the situation in the mid-1950s, in spite of all of the efforts of world language educators since then the situation is even worse today. There is a growing shortage of well-qualified world language teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), budgetary limitations increasingly threaten world language education programs (especially at the elementary and middle school levels) (Skorton & Altschuler, 2012), student enrollments in foreign languages at all levels are declining, sometimes precipitously (Looney & Lusin, 2018; Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011) as shown in Tables 1 and 2). The percentage of universities that require foreign language study continues to decrease (Looney & Lusin, 2018; Skorton & Altschuler, 2012), offerings in many less commonly taught languages are being reduced or eliminated altogether (Skorton & Altschuler, 2012), and program articulation remains a major concern (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). At the K-12 level, only slightly more than 20% of students in the United States study a foreign language (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2016).

Finally, although roughly 20% of the U.S. population report speaking a second language, this is due almost entirely to individuals who grow up in homes in which a language other than English is spoken -- less than 1% of American adults are proficient in a language that they studied in a U.S. classroom (Friedman, 2015). This paradoxical situation is very much a part of the American experience, as Aline Germain-Rutherford has noted: that in a country that throughout its immigration history has absorbed millions of speakers of languages other than English, "the American experience is remarkable for its near mass extinction of non-English languages" (Rumbaut, 2009). In his study analyzing immigrants' native-language retention

rates from 1980, 1990, and 2000 U.S. Census data, Rumbaut (2009) identifies a pattern of language loss in which third-generation immigrants use English as their dominant and preferred language and retain very little of their mother tongues.

Further contributing to this paradox are a number of other apparent contradictions. For example, although it is true that a near-record number of students in universities are studying a foreign language, it is also true that in recent years the percentage of such students has been declining by more than 15% between 2009 and 2016, and by more than 9% just between Fall 2013 and Fall 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2018). Although the raw number of students in higher education studying a foreign language may appear to be impressive with almost 1.5 million students engaged in world language study, this number only represents 7% of all university students (Friedman, 2015; New American Economy, 2017). In 2016, only 7.5 of every 100 tertiary-level students were enrolled in a foreign language course (compared with 16.5 of every 100 in 1965 (Looney & Lusin, 2018). In short, as Dennis (1990) has written, Anglo-Americans will continue for the most part to resist learning other languages either in school or after school or they will learn foreign languages imperfectly. Not only do Americans generally not learn world languages, but the problem as Richard Brecht quoted in Friedman, (2015) suggested that it goes even deeper than this.

Table 1: State foreign language enrollments, 2014-2015

State	Total K-12 Enrollment	K-12 FL Enrollment	Percentage of K-12 Students Enrolled in FL Programs
Alabama	821,691	143,069	17.41%
Alaska	134,315	22,187	16.52%
Arizona	1,180,836	107,167	9.08%
Arkansas	507,060	46,095	9.09%
California	6,806,050	946,779	13.91%
Colorado	896,918	110,195	12.38%
Connecticut	614,313	173,580	28.26%
Delaware	149,108	48,218	32.34%
District of Columbia	72,937	34,408	47.17%
Florida	2,981,349	622,451	20.88%
Georgia	1,832,631	407,323	22.23%
Hawaii	216,044	40,198	18.61%
Idaho	308,290	37,584	12.19%
Illinois	2,258,315	294,656	13.05%
Indiana	1,165,262	228,059	19.57%
Iowa	524,775	79,944	15.23%
Kansas	520,583	79,477	15.27%
Kentucky	741,776	83,098	11.20%
Louisiana	806,125	106,987	13.27%
Maine	201,408	38,280	19.01%

Maryland	976,670	344,072	35.23%
Massachusetts	1,048,398	277,048	26.43%
Michigan	1,708,384	384,442	22.50%
Minnesota	928,080	188,018	20.26%
Mississippi	544,498	72,527	13.32%
Missouri	1,021,563	158,111	15.48%
Montana	160,423	16,221	10.11%
Nebraska	331,732	58,832	17.73%
Nevada	483,466	59,003	12.20%
New Hampshire	210,631	57,855	27.47%
New Jersey	1,508,220	771,832	51.18%
New Mexico	373,149	31,732	8.50%
New York	3,153,513	857,958	27.21%
North Carolina	1,668,877	328,918	19.71%
North Dakota	108,163	23,668	21.88%
Ohio	1,973,655	357,474	18.11%
Oklahoma	675,116	82,096	12.16%
Oregon	624,386	67,640	10.83%
Pennsylvania	2,014,442	401,693	19.94%
Rhode Island	160,466	36,023	22.45%
South Carolina	801,798	166,282	20.74%
South Dakota	145,878	27,172	18.63%
Tennessee	1,087,679	240,109	22.08%
Texas	5,080,783	960,911	18.91%
Utah	622,449	131,118	21.06%
Vermont	94,632	33,153	35.03%
Virginia	1,358,037	272,041	30.03%
Washington	1,144,380	168,316	14.71%
West Virginia	279,204	36,380	13.03%
Wisconsin	985,362	357,575	36.29%
Wyoming	97,150	19,477	20.05%
Total	**54,110,970**	**10,638,282**	**19.66%**

Source: American Councils for International Education (2017)

Table 2: Percentage change in foreign language enrollments at the university level, Fall 2013 – Fall 2016

Language	Fall 2013	Fall 2016	% Change 2009-2015
Spanish	789,888	712,240	-9.8%
French	197,679	175,667	-11.1%
ASL	109,567	107,060	-2.3%
German	86,782	80,594	-7.1%
Italian	70,982	56,743	-20.1%
Japanese	66,771	68,810	+3.1%
Chinese	61,084	53,069	-13.1%
Arabic	33,526	31,554	-5.9%
Latin	27,209	24,866	-8.6%
Russian	21,979	20,353	-7.4%
Korean	12,256	13,936	+13.7
Greek, Ancient	16,961	13,936	-21.8%
Hebrew, Biblical	12,596	9,587	-23.9%
Portuguese	12,407	9,827	-20.8%
Hebrew, Modern	6,698	5,521	-17.6%
Other Languages	34,746	34,747	0.0%
Total	**1,561,131**	**1,417,838**	**-9.2%**

Source: Looney and Lusin (2019)

The Less Commonly Taught Languages

Estimates of the number of languages spoken around the world vary considerably, generally ranging somewhere between 6,500 and 7,500 separate and distinct languages (Summer Institute for Linguistics, 2021). What is especially interesting about these numbers from the perspective of a foreign language educator is how few of this substantial number of different languages are commonly (or even less than commonly) taught in the context of world language education programs. To be sure, although linguists stress the fundamental equality of languages, some languages are clearly "more equal" than others in social, demographic, economic, and political terms (Altmann, 1997), and this is reflected in the numbers of students studying different languages. Using the number of native speakers[3] as the criterion, the ten largest languages in the world are, in order, Mandarin, English, Hindi, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese, Japanese, and French as shown in Table 3. If one takes into account languages that are widely used as *second* languages, then the list changes somewhat, and our focus becomes the languages of wider communication (LWCs), including English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and German.

Table 3: Most commonly spoken primary and secondary languages

Language	Number of L1 speakers	Number of L2 speakers	Total number of speakers
English	379,000,000	753,300,000	1,132,300,000
Mandarin	918,000,000	198,900,000	1,116,900,000
Hindi	341,000,000	274,200,000	615,200,000
Spanish	460,000,000	74,200,000	534,200,000
French	77,200,000	202,600,000	279,800,000
Arabic*	64,600,000	273,900,000	338,600,000
Bengali	228,000,000	36,700,000	264,700,000
Russian	154,000,000	104,400,000	258,400,000
Portuguese	221,000,000	13,400,000	234,400,000
Indonesian	43,300,000	155,300,000	198,600,000
Urdu	68,600,000	101,600,000	170,200,000
German	76,100,000	56,000,000	132,100,000
Japanese	128,000,000	131,000	128,131,000
Swahili	16,000,000	82,300,000	98,300,000

Source: Reagan & Osborn (2021)

**Native speakers of Egyptian Arabic.*

In the context of public schooling in the United States, only three of these languages – Spanish, French, and to a significantly lesser degree German – are commonly offered as foreign languages as shown in Table 4). The remaining languages are labelled "the less commonly taught languages" (LCTLs). In other words, 97% of the students of modern foreign languages in the public schools of this country are studying Spanish, French, and German … In American colleges and universities, Spanish, French and German enroll approximately eighty-five percent of the students of foreign languages … A rough calculation presents a startling aspect of educational practice in the United States: At least ninety-one percent of the academic study of foreign languages is directed toward languages used by twelve to thirteen percent of humanity (Walker, 1989).

Table 4: K-12 foreign language enrollments in the United States, by language

Language	K-12 students enrolled	Percentage of total foreign language students
ASL	130,411	1%
Arabic	26,045	. 3%
Chinese	227,086	2.4%
French	1,289,004	13.6%
German	330,898	3.5%
Japanese	67,909	.7%
Latin	21,306	.2%
Russian	14,876	.2%
Spanish	7,363,125	77.7%
Totals	**9,470,660**	

Source: *The National K-12 Foreign Language Survey Report* (2017)

Although it is not uncommon for the LCTLs to be grouped together in this manner as something of a "miscellaneous" category (Everson, 1993; Gor & Vatz, 2009; Lee, 2005; Ryding, 1989; Walker, 1991; Wang, 2009). This is inevitably misleading on a number of grounds, not the least of which is the problem of grouping together radically different *kinds* of languages. Indeed, Galal Walker suggested that "thinking of LCTLs as a category of language is like thinking of 'nonelephants' as a category of animals" (1989, p. 111). Walton, in attempting to address this problem, has suggested that the LCTLs can be best understood as being divided in practice into three subgroups: (1) less commonly taught European languages; (2) higher-enrollment non-Indo-European languages (such as Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese); and (3) lower-enrollment non-Indo-European languages (1992).

Russian is obviously in the first group, which means that it is indeed taught in K-12 public schools, and more often at the university level, typically in major universities. Nonetheless, enrollments in Russian at all levels in the United States remain exceptionally low, even in comparison to most of the other LCTLs (see Table 5). According to the *National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report*, in the 2014-2015 academic year only 14,876 students in the public schools were studying Russian (American Councils for International Education, 2017), while at the university level, according to the Modern Language Association's *Language Enrollment Database*, in Fall 2016 slightly more than 20,000 students were enrolled in Russian language courses at the tertiary level (Modern Language Association, 2016). In other words, as indicated in Table 5, fewer students in the United States study Russian than any of the other major LCTLs. The fundamental question, then, is why this is the case, and we turn now to an exploration of some of the factors that help to explain this situation.

Table 5: University foreign language enrollments, Fall 2016

Language	Enrollment
Spanish	712,608
French	175,667
German	80,594
Japanese	68,810
Italian	56,743
Chinese	53,069
Arabic	30,296
Latin	24,866
Russian	20,353

Source: Modern Language Association (2016)

"Russian is *hard*!": The Difficulties of Language Learning

In spite of the many commercial programs that are available to assist individuals to acquire a foreign language – most of which suggest that one can learn a language easily and with little effort -- learning a foreign language is not an easy undertaking. Language learning takes hard work, time, and practice. This is true for all languages, but some languages are demonstratively more difficult than others for students. To gain a rough idea of the relative difficulty of learning another language for native speakers of English, the U.S. Foreign Service Institute has created a "Language Learning Scale," divided into five categories of difficulty, that provides estimates of learning difficulty for more than 60 languages (this contrasts with the Defense Language Institute's "Defense Language Aptitude Battery," which has four levels of language learning difficulty for about 25 languages) as shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6: Foreign Service Institute language difficulty ranking

Category 1: 23-24 weeks (575 to 600 hours)	
Afrikaans	Norwegian
Danish	Portuguese
Dutch	Romanian
French	Spanish
Italian	Swedish
Category 2: 30 weeks (750 hours)	
German	
Category 3: 36 weeks (900 hours)	
Indonesian	Swahili
Malaysian	

Category 4: 44 weeks (1,100 hours)	
Albanian	Lithuanian
Amharic	Macedonian
Armenian	*Mongolian
Azerbaijani	Nepali
Bengali	Pashto
Bosnian	Persian (Dari, Farsi, Tajik)
Bulgarian	Polish
Burmese	Russian
Croatian	Serbian
Czech	Sinhala
*Estonian	Slovak
*Finnish	Slovenian
*Georgian	Tagalog
Greek	*Thai
Hebrew	Turkish
Hindi	Ukrainian
*Hungarian	Urdu
Icelandic	Uzbek
Khmer	*Vietnamese
Lao	Xhosa
Latvian	Zulu
CATEGORY 5: 88 weeks (2,200 hours)	
Arabic	*Japanese
Cantonese (Chinese)	Korean
Mandarin (Chinese)	

**Usually more difficult than other languages in the same category.*

Table 7: Defense Language Aptitude Battery

Category 1: (26 weeks of study)	
French	Portuguese
Italian	Spanish
Category 2: (35 weeks of study)	
German	Indonesian
Category 3: (48 weeks of study)	
Hebrew	Serbo-Croatian
Hindi	Tagalog
Kurdish	Thai
Persian	Turkish
Punjabi	Urdu
Russian	Uzbek
Category 4: (64 weeks of study)	
Arabic	Korean
Chinese	Pashto
Japanese	

Even the easiest languages for native speakers of English of average language learning aptitude require in the neighborhood of 20 to 25 weeks of intensive classroom instruction to develop minimal fluency levels. Spanish and French, the two most commonly studied languages in the United States, are Category 1 languages on both scales, indicating that they are relatively easy languages for English speakers to learn, while Russian is a Category 4 language on the Foreign Service Institute's "Language Learning Scale," and a Category 3 language on the "Defense Language Aptitude Battery," indicating that it is indeed a difficult and time-consuming language for English speakers to learn. Although this may help to explain the reluctance on some American students to study Russian, it is far from sufficient – Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese are all more difficult languages for English speakers to acquire than is Russian as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Comparison of difficulty of LCTLs

Language	**FSI LDR**	**DLAB**
German	2	2
Japanese	5	4
Italian	1	1
Chinese	5	4
Arabic	5	4
Russian	4	3

Russian is, nevertheless, perceived by many students in the United States as an especially difficult foreign language, and in contrast to the more commonly taught languages this is not an unreasonable belief. For most students, the first challenge comes even before their formal study of Russian begins – with the orthography of the language. While the Cyrillic alphabet is especially well-suited to the phonological system of Russian, that does not help the English speaker when they encounter an alphabet that sometimes is the same as the Latin alphabet with which they are familiar (а, к, м, т, etc.), sometimes includes letters that look nothing like any that they know (б, г, д, ж, ю, я, etc.), and finally, letters that look familiar but represent quite different sounds (such as в, н, and р) – and this does not even include letters in italics and handwritten Russian that must be mastered.

The Russian orthographic system, although perhaps initially challenging, is a matter that is certainly not insurmountable. There are also the phonological differences between Russian and English, not the least of which are vowel reduction, palatalization, devoicing of consonants, and consonant assimilation. Russian has a far more complex morphological and syntactic system than English – ranging from grammatical gender, declensions for nouns and adjectives, conjugations and aspect for verbs (not to mention verbs of motion), and so on. Finally, the extent to which the English-speaking learner of Russian can rely on cognates from their native language is nowhere near as great as would be the case in a language such as Spanish or French. None of these matters makes the learning of Russian impossible or hopeless for the native speaker of English, of course, but they do indicate the difficulties that the student will face in their study of Russian.

Politics, Ideology and Loyalty

The identification of Russian as the language of a hostile foreign power has, throughout the past century, created an almost schizophrenic approach to the teaching and learning of Russian in the United States. On the one hand, like German during both the First and Second World Wars (see Holian, 1998), Russian has been closely identified with a belligerent political entity, and thus seen as the "language of the enemy." Competence in Russian, and, often, even study of the language, has raised suspicions about one's patriotism and loyalty (see Reagan, 2021). At the same time, there is an ongoing need in many areas for speakers of the language. The U.S. government (and the FBI, CIA, and National Security Agency in particular) remains the primary employer of university graduates fluent in many of the so-called "critical languages," including Russian (Koning, 2009), and active efforts to support the teaching and learning of Russian have been undertaken by the U.S. government, including the Critical Language Scholarship Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Defense's Defense Critical Language and Culture Program. The same is true, of course, in the case of a number of other languages.

Teachers of Arabic today are constantly reminded of the strategic importance of Arabic. Many students are drawn to Arabic to enhance their competitiveness in seeking a career in politics, diplomacy, security, or intelligence work. The United States government acknowledges the need for more expertise in Arabic language, and a better understanding of people who speak it. In 2006, the Bush administration launched the National Security Language Initiative … which included Arabic and Farsi among the languages critical to the nation's security and prosperity.

At the same time, even as speakers of these "critical languages" are serving to further the agenda of the State (a controversial matter in its own right) (see Wiley, 2007), they continue to be viewed with suspicion, especially in the cases of languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Farsi, Pashto, and Russian. Indeed, when Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman was presenting testimony related to the impeachment of President Donald Trump in 2019, his loyalty and

patriotism were repeatedly questioned – both because his family immigrated to the United States when he was a young child, and because of his ability to speak Ukrainian and Russian (skills, it should be noted, that were essential for his job) (Bump, 2019; Stolberg, 2019). This suspicion (which could credibly be labeled paranoia) goes well beyond individual and idiosyncratic cases – it often permeates views of virtually all aspects of languages and those who study them:

Critics of academics in Arabic language and related fields [and this applies to many of the other "critical languages" as well] have become increasingly active in working to control what they perceive as an unpatriotic sympathy among academics and students of Arabic toward the criticism of American foreign policy typically found in Arabic political discourse (Nimis & Nimis, 2009)

And yet, there is a fundamental paradox here that needs to be recognized. Merely speaking a language does not automatically lead one to be sympathetic to and supportive of a particular national political or ideological régime, nor does it in any way threaten a person's loyalty and patriotism toward their own country. Nevertheless, "the dilemma *is* real: It is impossible to 'understand' in the sense of being able to decode words and actions without also learning to 'understand' in the sense of seeing a different worldview as human and containing its own logic" (Nimis et al., 2009).

While it makes little sense to conflate political events with a particular language, such conflation is nevertheless common. Recent events in Ukraine, and the growing criticisms of the Russian Federation in the West generally, have only served to exacerbate the already existing tensions and suspicions about Russia, the Russian government, the Russian language, and, ultimately, speakers of Russian. Resistance to studying Russian in the United States – like resistance to Russian speakers and the Russian language in the Baltic nations and elsewhere (Blauvelt, 2013; Mustajoki et al., 2020a, 2020b; Pavlenko, 2008, 2013, 2017; Strozewski, 2022; Vihalemm & Hogan-Brun, 2013)

The Economic and Commercial Returns

One of the most common rationales in the United States for studying a foreign language in general, and a particular language in particular, has been the economic or commercial value of learning a world language. Such reasoning was clearly articulated almost half a century ago by Sylvia Porter, who wrote that,

With a language skill added to your other skills, you might double the chances of getting the job you want. There are openings for an auto mechanic who also speaks Arabic, an electronic radio expert who knows Japanese, a chef (even a woman chef) who understands French. It even could be a foreign language would be more useful to you during the next ten years than a college diploma … Language is, in fact, your hidden job insurance (Quoted in Jarvis, 1980)

Although this was intended to provide a compelling case for the study of foreign languages, like many such arguments it has several fundamental flaws in the U.S. context (Reagan, 2022; Reagan & Osborn, 2021). Claims about language skills being job insurance are often viewed with considerable skepticism in a society in which monolingualism in English is normative. One major problem with such arguments is the issue of language competence: the level of language competence required in jobs that do require language skills are far beyond what students can be expected acquire in a typical world language program at the secondary school level, or even in a few years of university study. Even if a student had been fortunate enough to study Arabic for two or three years at the high school level, and had also had the benefit of appropriate automotive training, it is hardly likely that they would be able to function as an Arabic-speaking.

The second rationale for the economic or commercial value of world language education in the U.S. is not so much individual as social in nature. As globalization increases, it would seem that the need for bilingualism would be of considerable value in many occupations. In *Lost in Translation,* a report about the need for foreign language competence in the workforce produced by the New American Economy think-tank, it is suggested that, "Foreign language skills represent an advantage for individuals who possess these abilities, the businesses who employ these workers, and the American economy as a whole" (2017). This is true as far as it goes as a general claim, but the reality of the workplace does not provide particularly compelling empirical data to support it. In its examination of nearly 27 million job positions that were advertised online in 2015, for instance, *Lost in Translation* determined that only 2.3% of these positions indicated a desire for an individual with bilingual skills (New American Economy, 2017). That works out to under 630,000 jobs but given the total number of positions available, perhaps less than an overwhelming one.

The languages for which there was the greatest demand were Spanish, Chinese, French, Korean, and Arabic as in Table 9. It is also important here to note that for these positions, bilingual skills were desired – but not, in many cases, actually required. Further, in many of these cases, a fairly low skill level in the language other than English was deemed acceptable. Finally, the location of jobs for which language skills were desired was not only strongly skewed, but was also reflective of parts of the country where large numbers of non-native speakers of English are concentrated – which suggests both that many of the positions that have such requirements are service positions for jobs that involve working with local, often non-English-speaking, populations rather than with international business positions, and that for many of these positions there are native speakers who may well be more qualified than native speakers of English who have learned the language as a second language. In terms of the mid- and senior-level language requirements in business, it is far more common for both employers and employees in the business world to believe that while language competence is certainly a good thing, it is not in fact really necessary for most employees.

Ready or not, English is now the global language of business. More and more multinational companies are mandating English as the common corporate language – Airbus, Daimler-Chrysler, Fast Retailing, Nokia, Renault, Samsung, SAP, Technicolor, and Microsoft in Beijing, to name a few – in an attempt to facilitate community and performance across geographically diverse functions and business endeavors …. Adopting a common mode of speech isn't just a good idea; *it's a must*, even for an American company with operations overseas …. A global language change takes perseverance and time, but if you want to surpass your rivals, *it's no longer a matter of choice*. (2012, my emphasis)

Table 9: Number of online job listings for workers with bilingual skills

Language	Number of job postings
Spanish	454,771
Chinese	36,582
French	22,296
Korean	22,296
Arabic	8,026

Source: New American Economy (2017)

If the economic rationale for world language study in general in the U.S. is not terribly powerful, then it is even less so for the case of Russian. The most common languages typically considered for commercial and economic purposes, in addition to French and Spanish, include German, Japanese, and Chinese, but rarely Russian – and, with the current sanctions regime imposed on the Russian Federation by the United States and other Western powers, this is even true now than in the past.

Cultural and Historical Ignorance

Not uncommonly, students begin the study of a foreign language because they already know something about the people who speak the language and the places where it is spoken, as well as about the culture, history, literature, and so on, associated with it. In other words, students study a language for precisely the reasons that world language educators often advocate for foreign language study – out of a desire to learn more about the people and societies that use the language, as well as about the culture, history, literature, and so on, associated with the language. In the case of the Russian language, such justifications should be incredibly powerful from almost any perspective. The history of Russia, from the time of Kievan Rus' through the time of the tsars and imperial Russia, the 1917 October Revolution and the period of the Soviet Union, to the post-Soviet era in which we are now living is not simply fascinating on its own account. The overlaps and is related to the history of the rest of the world – including the United States – in a variety of interesting and extremely significant ways. There is, in short, much to be learned from any serious study of Russian history. Russian literature is one of the great literary traditions of the world, and includes such figures as Dostoyevski, Tolstoy, Chekov, and of course Pushkin – authors and poets with whom any educated person should be familiar. In the sciences – astronomy, biology, chemistry, earth sciences, linguistics, mathematics, and physics, among others – Russian speakers have made major contributions not only in the modern era, but have been doing so for centuries. The same, of course, is true in such fields as archeology, history, the arts and music, philosophy, religious studies, and so on. In every academic and cultural area, in short, there is a huge body of work available and accessible to the speaker of Russian.

In an article published in 1986, the historian Aurele Violette wrote that, "in the last decades of the nineteenth century American knowledge of and interest in Russia were virtually nonexistent" (p. 69). Unfortunately, what was true in the last years of the nineteenth century is still today true for large numbers of Americans. The history, culture, language, and accomplishments of Russia are rarely taught in K-12 or university curricula beyond fairly superficial mentions of historical and literary figures at best. When coupled with the historical and ideological hostility toward the U.S.S.R. and more recently the Russian Federation, this situation has been a deeply troubling one with respect to both general knowledge about and interest in Russia. For most students in U.S. schools, almost all things Russian are essentially *terra incognita*, a situation that clearly works against any possible interest in studying the Russian language. The contrast with the situation in the Russian Federation with respect to the teaching and learning of English is noteworthy: "According to a Levada center poll from 2014, only 11 percent of Russians speak English. Even with such a small number, it's still the most popular foreign language in the country – many Russians study it at school and in universities. However, not many use it often" (Sorokina, 2017). In other words, of a total population of almost 145 million, nearly 16 million people in the Russian Federation (virtually none of them native speakers) speak English, while fewer than 950,000 in the United States (with a total population of slightly more than 330 million) speak Russian – the overwhelming majority of them native speakers.

***What is to be done?* Possible Solutions**

In 1902, Lenin published the pamphlet, *Что делать? Наболевше вопросы нашего движения,* and the question, "What is to be done?" is one that very much applies here. The reality that faces teachers of the Russian language in the United States is a fairly grim one. This is really nothing particularly new, of course. In a chapter entitled, "Ruminations on Teaching Russian," Thomas Magner (1984) noted: As I write these lines … I find it hard to be optimistic about the present state or near future of Russian studies in this country. A letter in hand from a colleague in a once vibrant Slavic department at a large midwestern university describes in harrowing detail the damage done to the teaching program and faculty morale by financial retrenchment. Almost as if by some sinister plan a letter arrives a day later from a colleague in a large eastern university with similar grim details about the gutting of his institution's Russian program. And it was not long ago that *The New York Times* featured on its front page a story about a professor of Russian literature … who is now doomed to spend all his time teaching remedial English. If in the past we could speak about the educational establishment's "commitment" to Russian studies, it is now the time to speak about a "decommitment."

Magner's ruminations took place nearly half a century ago, but they feel all too close to contemporary reality. Indeed, a decade before Magner's comments, Howard Aronson had written that the "golden age of Russian as a growth field is over, and we appear to be entering the смутное время [time of troubles] of our field's history" (1973, p. 437). And yet, there has never been a time when the relations between the United States and Russia require more understanding, sensitivity, and awareness than at the present time.

There are no silver bullets that will quickly and easily resolve the situation faced by Russian language educators in the United States. Nor, it is important to note, can the situation be resolved by them alone; many steps require active collaboration with other constituencies, at least some of whom may require convincing. Underlying the fundamental challenge, of course, is the need to increase student motivation for studying Russian. There are three potential ways in which this might be accomplished:

- There are many school-aged heritage language speakers of Russian in the United States. Active efforts to recruit them to maintain and improve their language skills, paralleling efforts with other heritage languages, might make a significant difference in the numbers of students studying Russian (see Aalberse et al., 2019; Brinton et al., 2008; Fairclough & Beaudrie, 2016; Geisherik, 2004; Kagan, 2005; Lee, 2009; Wiley et al., 2014)
- The lack of knowledge of Russian society, culture and contributions to human civilization continues, as noted above, to reduce interest for many students in the United States to the study of the Russian language. The provision of a more accurate and complete picture of Russian history and culture in other subject areas (especially history and social studies, English and language arts, STEM disciplines, and the fine arts, among others), perhaps through integrated and multidisciplinary units of study, would be helpful in this regard (see Almazova et al., 2021; Osborn & Bratkovich, in press).
- The development of meaningful and positive ties to local Russian-speaking communities – already called for as "Standard 5: Communities" in the *National Standards for Foreign Language Education* (see National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) -- might also be advantageous in encouraging students to undertake the study of Russian (see Comber, 2018; Overfield, 1997; Sharkey et al., 2016), as well as providing students already studying Russian with opportunities to use the language in real-world settings.
- Within the Russian curriculum itself there are also a number of possible changes that might encourage students to continue their study of the language. Three important curricular

changes that come to mind here, some extremely relevant given recent geopolitical events, include: An explicit recognition of the ethnic, religious, geographic, and cultural diversity present in the Russian-speaking world in instructional materials (Kolstø, 2010; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004; Stauffer, 2020; Mustajoki et al., 2020a, 2020b). As Nigora Azimova and Bill Johnson observed in a study of nine "widely used Russian language textbooks aimed at university-level learners … [in which] particular attention is paid [in their analysis] to representations of Russian speakers other than white Orthodox Christian ethnic Russians. Findings indicate that there are virtually no representations of such "other" speakers in the materials under investigation. This absence is framed as an erasure … a violent removal that significantly misrepresents the actual diversity of speakers of Russian and restricts putative ownership of the Russian language… not only is this inaccurate portrayal pedagogically problematic; it is also politically so, as it coincides with a rising tide of ethnic Russian nationalism in the Russian Federation" (2012)

- Related to the need to address the diversity present in the Russian-speaking world is the need to challenge the concept of the Русский мир (the "Russian World").[6] As Fiona Hill has noted, "this idea of a Russian World means re-gathering all the Russian-speakers in different places that belonged at some point to the Russian tsardom" (quoted in Wolf, 2022). In many ways, the invasion and ongoing war in the Ukraine is an outgrowth of just such views – for Putin, "Ukrainians and Russians are one and the same" (Hill, quoted in Wolf, 2022).
- A valuable shift in existing Russian language curricula might be the inclusion of critical pedagogical approaches, especially those focused on issues of language and social justice (see Bigelow, 2016; Glenn et al., 2014; Osborn, 2006). Such developments are already common in Spanish and French education, and the use of curricular nullification[7] to add such perspectives in the Russian classroom could prove quite valuable.
- The teaching of Russian as a world language in the United States is in many ways at a crossroads, characterized by the concomitant decline in student enrollments at all levels and a dramatically increasing need for individuals who can speak the language fluently. This is, of course, nothing new – it is a place where we have been before on many occasions, and those dedicated to teaching Russian and Russian studies can be forgiven if they have a sense of "here we go again." Perhaps, though, this time we can strive to provide more answers to this new смутное время that will move the field forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the arguments presented here, the complex set of factors that impede both U.S. students' decision to study Russian and their relative success at doing so require a number of changes in current practice. The recruitment of students might be increased by focusing to a greater degree on heritage language speakers of Russian, while an effort to improve the general knowledge of contemporary Russian society, as well as its history and culture, could also attract non-heritage language students. Ties to local Russian-speaking communities, where possible, can also promote the study of Russian by U.S. students. Changes to the Russian language curriculum are also required, including such additions as the recognition of the ethnic, religious, geographic, and cultural diversity present in the Russian-speaking world, challenges the concept of the Русский мир (and its related nationalistic manifestations, such as the invasion and ongoing war in the Ukraine), and the inclusion of critical pedagogical approaches, especially those focused on issues of language and social justice.

NOTES

1. In the United States, the phrase "foreign languages" has been widely replaced with "world

languages." The argument for this shift is that the languages most commonly taught in U.S. schools (Spanish and French) are not actually "foreign" to many students – both (and especially Spanish) are spoken natively by large numbers of students in U.S. schools (see National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015; Osborn, 1998). Further, these languages have both been spoken in North America for longer than English. However, given the focus of this article, it seems to me that there are numerous places in which the traditional "foreign language" is more appropriate, and I have thus alternated between "foreign language" and "world language" as makes sense to me.

2. The data used in this article is drawn primarily from two recent, and very important publications: the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' *The state of languages in the U.S.* (2016) and the American Councils for International Education's *The national K-12 foreign language enrollment survey report* (2017) as well as the Modern Language Association's 2016 *Language Enrollment Database, Fall 2016*. More recent, aggregated national statistical information on enrollments in world language classes in K-12 settings is not yet available.

3. I recognize and acknowledge the growing body of literature questioning the use of the term *native speaker* (see, e.g., Cheng et al., 2021). I support the challenge to such terminology and agree that it is problematic both due to conceptual ambiguity and because of potential harm it may cause. However, at this time, I see no widely accepted and recognized alternative. For my purposes in this article, I would most likely see "native speaker" along the lines of *nativeness-as-proficiency* as defined by Cheng et al. (2021).

4. The phrase "languages of wider communication" (or LWCs) is used in sociolinguistics to refer to a language used across linguistic and cultural barriers. Such an LWC – also commonly called a *lingua franca* – need not be the native language of anyone involved in using it. There have been LWCs throughout history; further, there are LWCs that function internationally, regionally, and nationally. The LWCs listed here are those that are currently used internationally.

5. Latin, it should be noted, is also still offered in many school districts, and has enrollments that are generally comparable to those of German.

6. For further critiques of the concept of the Русский мир, see Feklyunina (2016), O'Loughlin et al. (2016), Suslov (2018), and Zevelev (2016). A contemporary explanation and defense of the concept is provided in Makarova et al. (2019).

7. Curricular nullification is an analogous process to "jury nullification," in which a jury chooses to ignore legal mandates in coming to a finding that they believe to be more just and appropriate (see Osborn, 2000, pp. 98-103). Curricular nullification refers to the teacher's ability to reject the set curriculum (whether this means the textbook or more formal and established institutional curricula), either to exclude certain features or units, or to include features or units that were absent in the original textbook or curriculum (that is, both additive and subtractive curricular nullification) (see Osborn, 2000, 2006; Reagan, 2016).

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