I was so unbelievably excited to land in Sheremetyevo Airport. When I finally landed, I passed through the long lines at immigration, picked up my luggage, and checked my phone. At the baggage claim area there was no WiFi to my great dismay. See, I needed WiFi to get an Uber so I wouldn’t have to speak my error-filled Russian to anyone. My aversion for speaking caught me off guard since I’m not one for shyness, but having learned that most Russians don’t speak any English, I knew I didn’t have much of a safety net. People speak of “total immersion” and this was it at its finest. But alas, I had to get a taxi from the taxi stand. I said a little prayer, bit my tongue, and walked up to them. In retrospect, I must’ve looked like a wounded gazelle desperate for shelter. I mustered every bit of courage and told them where I needed to go. Qdemcasdfmwh, she said – I honestly had no idea what she said – as she
handed me a receipt with a “2800” written on it. A month later, I told this story to my friends at the Pushkin Institute where I was studying, and one of the advanced students told me that they were charged 2000. So the bear had taken a bite out of the wounded gazelle.

But things got better with time: About a month into my program, I called an Uber coming back from dinner – there was WiFi this time. When I got in the car, I noticed that the driver was a young man probably only a couple of years older than I was. After telling him the address of the Institute, I asked him if he was a student. He told me that he was a graduate student driving part-time. We somehow started talking about the brands of vodkas and proceeded to rank them. I'm proud to say that this entire conversation was in Russian! By the time we made the list, we arrived. I thanked him for a great conversation and he wished me luck. I walked into my dorm with a smile, having held my ground in a conversation with a stranger in Russian! Total immersion scared me so much at first (imagine living in a sketchy part of Moscow having no phone, rubles, and little fluency), but started paying off as I started seeing and interacting with more and more of the city.

Fast forward another month, and it was time to return, leave behind Mu Mu (a popular chain restaurant) and come home to In-N-Out. I called another Uber to take me to the airport. This time, the driver and I talked about all sorts of random topics ranging from his job satisfaction to his Korean friend who does business in Moscow. I un-

derstood his telling of his life story and his request to pull over on the freeway to urinate behind a land bridge.

There are countless more stories between these three taxi-moments, but I think they encapsulate really well the level of personal growth and language improvement that happened in two short months. Like the first story, studying abroad in Russia for the first time isn’t a breeze. In fact, it’s pretty difficult, with many things to get used to and figure out as you go. This includes dealing with non-English-speaking bank tellers, getting public WiFi, and much, much more. But if you go in with an open mind and willingness to push through any hardships, you’ll be rewarded with so much that is difficult to learn learning stateside. If you decide to study abroad or go over the summer, congratulations! It’ll be one helluva journey and you made the right call.
This past summer I studied at the Kathryn Wasserman Davis School of Russian at Middlebury College, and I cannot recommend it highly enough to those students who want to get a lot better at Russian very quickly. The program lasts eight weeks, during which every student pledges to speak and consume all media only in Russian. This task is daunting on its own, but the program becomes even more challenging once classes start. Classes meet four to five hours each day, and there is an average of three to six hours of homework each day as well. Finally, there are tests and oral exams every Friday. It really is a lot of work, but the payoff is enormous, especially if you already have the solid foundation that our Williams Russian professors give us. I entered the program having taken Russian 101 and 102 at Williams, so I was surprised — and, at first, quite nervous — when I learned that I was placed in the fifth out of seven levels. I was so sure that this placement was a mistake, since most of the other people in my class had been taking Russian for two, three, or four years. I quickly learned, however, not to underestimate the sheer quantity of grammar and vocabulary Юлия Романовна and Жанна Антоновна were able to fit into my first year of Russian.

Once I found my footing and became more comfortable in my abilities, I was able to enjoy the challenge and excitement of spending each meal speaking Russian with other students around a noisy dining hall table — extreme русский стол! — and spending so much time memorizing hundreds of new vocabulary words, nailing down the trickier parts of verbal aspect and verbs of motion, and learning useful new syntactical constructions. Eventually, I was reading Bulgakov, watching films without subtitles, and writing three-page essays. I don’t want to downplay the difficulty of the work, though; this program might not be for you if you usually experience significant academic burnout by the end of the spring semester.

That being said, the program is not all work! Most students join one or two clubs, which is a great way to make friends, take a break from homework, and learn more about Russian culture. I did the Russian choir, which was led by Золотой плёс, a trio of singers and performers who study Russian folk music as well as other Slavic folk music at various conservatories throughout Russia and Central Europe. They taught us eight to ten folk songs and dances, and we ended the program with a show complete with sets and traditional costumes. Other students chose to act in the play, play volleyball and soccer, learn Russian cooking, read Russian poetry, or write a program newsletter in their spare time. I also spent my free time attending concerts and talks by guest performers and presenters. Perhaps the most memorable speaker was Дмитрий Быков, a journalist, poet, and literary critic, who is a bit of an intellectual celebrity in Russia. He gave long, rambling talks, and his points of view were at times controversial and difficult to find common ground with, but his passion, rhetoric, and breadth of knowledge were fascinating. As a student in the fifth level, I was also able to audit the school’s graduate courses in Russian literature, history, and political science.

All in all, my time at the School of Russian was fun, grueling, and ultimately rewarding. It has made me so much more confident in my Russian skills and has given me the tools to keep pushing myself to learn more. If you want your Russian to improve quickly, I highly encourage you to apply! There are ample scholarships and financial aid opportunities, so давай, давай, давай!
I’m home now after spending six of the past seven months in Russia, and I can’t say I cracked the country that Churchill called “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” The language is still challenging to me, the history ancient and mysterious, the politics inscrutable. (Despite Putin’s dominance, the country is hardly unified under him like is sometimes portrayed over here.) The cold and darkness is no joke, especially in the northern parts of the country. But because of all this and more, Russia is an exhilarating and gratifying place to live. It didn’t take too long before I became comfortable with my status as a foreigner there, and even started to enjoy it.

Russians aren’t used to foreigners as much as people in Europe are, especially from far-away places like the U.S., especially people actually trying to speak Russian. So even though I got the occasional glare at my terrible pronunciation or grammar mistakes, more often I’d get compliments just for being able to introduce myself. And as fascinated as I was with Russian culture, many people I met wanted to hear about America, about life here and our opinions on Russia. The general assumption was that we have it easier than they do. People constantly asked—Why are you in Russia? I’m studying Russian, I explained. They asked, But why would you do that?

Back in the states, people are asking me about Russians’ opinions on Trump, on Putin, on Crimea, and I’m finding it difficult to answer—partly because I never felt like I understood these issues myself, and partly because I want to do justice to the many opinions I encountered in Russia. But while I was there, I had no problem being an expert on America for any inquiring Russians. The perspective I gained on myself and my culture back home came easier than any understanding of the place I was living.

One day, a few months into my stay in Moscow, I was having a movie night with friends, American and Russian. During a break in the movie I wandered out to the balcony, where my friend Anya, who is from Moscow, was smoking a cigarette. The window was open and it was very cold.

“How’s it going?” I asked in Russian.

“Didn’t you see me five minutes ago?” she said in English. (We both tried to practice our language skills on the other) “I’m still good, I’m smoking.”

“Yes,” I said knowingly, “well, it’s very American to ask how you are.”

“Story,” she said. She sounded annoyed. “Can we not talk right now about the differences between America and Russia? I was talking with Ben and Peter earlier about movies, music. But with you it’s always America and Russia. Let’s talk about books or something.” I didn’t know what to say. I saw she was right: all our conversations did turn into how Russians act this way, why Americans do that. A few minutes later, still thinking about this, I interrupted her.

“Anya,” I said, “I just wanted to say thanks for what you told me.” She stared at me quizzically. “About the America and Russia thing,” I continued. “You’re right, it is all we talk about, it was good for me to hear that.”

“Oh,” she said, tossing her cigarette butt out the window. “You’re still on that?”

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 illuminated a growing rift in Russian politics. After the takeover of the peninsula, the Russian Ministry of Culture released a petition comprised of cultural figures – actors, musicians, writers, and others – who supported the annexation. Dissident cultural figures, in response, released their own petition in protest. These two petitions offer a stark snapshot of a deepening divide in Russia’s cultural sphere, which has historically represented a political counterweight to Russian regimes throughout history.

As a research assistant this past summer, I complied a database of over 800 signatories of these petitions using online biographies. During the fall semester, I statistically analyzed this data as part of an independent study course. The results of the analysis offer a glimpse into those aspects of cultural figures’ personal and professional backgrounds that influence political leaning, including demographic information, institutional allegiance, union membership, and other attributes. The results further illustrate a growing state presence in the Russian cultural sphere. Supporters of the annexation, for example, are more likely to be employed by the state and work in large, expensive facilities dependent on state funding; opponents, on the other hand, are more likely to work abroad or in the private sector and have more mobile professions, such as creative writing.
geographical spread of signatories indicates that opponents of the annexation are concentrated in Moscow, the historical hub of the intelligentsia, or abroad. The government’s supporters, on the other hand, are widely spread across the Russian Federation as the Ministry of Culture seems to have mobilized upper-level bureaucrats in state-funded museums, theaters, universities, and other institutions. Supporters are far more likely to have state decorations and accolades.

These findings speak to an emerging status quo in Russian cultural sphere under Putin. As the government exerts political pressure over the cultural institutions that employ members of the intelligentsia, it is able to engineer the composition of these bodies and thus mitigate the creative and political potential of this stratum. Financial power, in other words, allows the Russian state to undercut its opponents in the cultural intelligentsia by exploiting these figures’ dependence on institutions. Statistical analysis of the petitions surrounding the annexation of Crimea thus point to a contradiction between the bureaucratic and creative dimensions of the Russian cultural sphere. The outward appearance of political and creative freedom belies an increasingly bureaucratized cultural sphere beholden to the central state.

The Putin regime has a reputation for amassing power based purely on bureaucratic and financial influence. Its growing involvement in the cultural sphere, however, indicates an effort by the state to establish a more meaningful source of authority. By displacing and silencing political opponents and creating its own intelligentsia, a loyal intelligentsia, the regime creates the impression that it is deeply connected to Russia’s cultural roots. In doing so, the Putin regime can claim a more organic connection to the Russian people. Ironically, it is through bureaucratic channels that the regime is fighting back against its reputation as a bureaucracy.

**Using Russian Language Skills in a Summer Internship**

*Greg Steinhelper ’17*

Students often wonder when their language skills will mature, or at least at what point their language skills will be considered useful. In my first two years at Williams, I certainly wanted to know when employers would start to pay attention to my language abilities. And after a third year that included one semester in St. Petersburg and another semester of language instruction back at Williams, I found that my language skills did finally matter - my knowledge of Russian secured my internship for this past summer. From June to August, I worked as a research intern at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), a non-partisan, non-profit public policy research organization in Washington, D.C.

Each think-tank or research organization has unique qualities, ISW more than most, so my experience is unlikely to exactly parallel the experiences of other students, but nonetheless could be useful to hear. ISW, as its name suggests, is concerned with military, security, and political problems around the globe, and while the focus has been and remains on the Middle East, ISW’s Russia/Ukraine Team has grown in size and importance to the organization. I worked with another intern and a few Russia analysts on these issues and helped the other teams’ analyze their own problems when Russia became relevant in their areas of responsibility.

Concretely, I kept up with openly available, day-to-day Russian military and foreign policy announcements, news coming out of Donbass, and assisted in both short-term and long-term research tasks (one on Moldova, and a longer on the Ukrainian Order of Battle). The daily work and longer term research usually occurred in Russian, and occasionally Ukrainian, so my reading skills improved more than anything. ISW values language skills for a reason, and I got to know first-hand, for example, the significant differences between what you can find on the English versus Russian versions of the same website. Concerning the difficulty of the work, although Williams’ Russian and Political Science departments prepared me well for this internship, the demands placed on interns at ISW were considerable due to the small size of the organization. But that was one of the advantages of my internship — I actually had the opportunity to do constructive work and learn an immense amount about subjects that fascinated me.

My experience this past summer speaks to the concrete payoffs you experience after pursuing the Russian language for a sustained period of time. While I’m sure that studying Russian for only one or two years also confers benefits to those who choose that route, I strongly believe my time at ISW shows how beneficial continued study, especially in an immersive home-stay environment, can be. So for any first or second-year students reading this, register for Russian next semester and look for opportunities abroad.
This past July, following a year of several Russia-related classes (including Russian Food and Society and Post-Soviet Gender and Sexuality), I spent much of my time traveling in Moscow and St. Petersburg. While I was romanced by each destination's wide boulevards, stunning architecture, and outstanding fine arts scene, sometimes a specific city calls you home, and for me, one such city is Moscow. Simultaneously respectful of a turbulent past and poised for an exciting future, it resonated with a unique combination of vivacity and determination; the city's populace seemed, at large, to synthesize stark realism with a true joie de vivre and profound appreciation for beauty. Moscow, defined as ever by both tradition and ambition, is propelled by an inspiring undercurrent of Russian pride. Perhaps it is such pride, manifested by a two-hour-long line at Lenin's closely guarded tomb, and the ten-minute standing ovation at an opera gala celebrating Sergei Prokofiev's 125th birthday, that makes the city so magical.

Here is a sample day of Moscow memories:

9:00 AM: I spent an enjoyable morning at Sanduny Baths with three hockey coaches from Chelyabinsk, using a unique combination of broken Russian and broken English to talk about SKA St. Petersburg and their stars Pavel Datsyuk and Ilya Kovalchuk. A shared love of hockey precluded the need for comprehensive vocabulary knowledge; if one person proclaimed “Kovy can still snipe” another could keep the conversation going with an enthusiastic “каждый день.”

2:00 PM: Lunch was at Chestnaya Kuhnya, where dishes reminiscent of imperial Russia are re-interpreted through a modern lens. Highlights included game terrine, braised reindeer, and an exquisite vanilla, caramel, and amaretto dessert. The precisely-executed food was a testament to the meteoric rise of Russian dining that has taken place over the past decade.

5:00 PM: I spent several hours touring the World War of 1812 Museum, which, at the cost of over four hundred million rubles, was opened four years ago in a brick Red Square building. A cherished project for the State Historical Museum, the exhibition (and investment in such) can be viewed as a repudiation of Soviet values and an attempt to renew pride in the heroism that originally defined Russia’s identity (indeed melding with the modern view that the 1917 revolution created not a lasting new system for the country but instead a “75-year detour”).

11:30 PM: Moscow’s molecular cocktail scene, undoubtedly one of the most dynamic and visionary in the world today, quickly won my heart. Perhaps my favorite drink was called Midnight Rain, comprised of such ingredients as vodka, lychee, egg white, angostura bitters, violet syrup, and orange blossom water, topped with a perfectly-prepared layer of vanilla foam. The cocktail blended a melancholic name and sophisticated palette with a sumptuous and sensuous flavor. It required the synthesis of extensive experience with the willingness to boldly innovate, and, as I enjoyed the final product while overlooking the Moscow river, I realized that this combination of traits speaks as much to the city as to the libation. So here’s to a rich history, dynamic present, and future of wonderful possibilities. Here’s to Moscow.
Многие люди и в особенности студенты, решая провести время в России, обязательно побывают в одном из двух самых известных и крупных её городов - Санкт-Петербурге или Москве. Какой же из них выбрать? Чем они отличаются друг от друга?

Выбирая Москву, вы получите город огромных масштабов, в котором наиболее широко представлена русская культура. Как никак, этому городу целых 870 лет! За почти 9 веков его существования в нём произошло многое - сменялись эпохи, правители, город несколько раз сжигали (чего только не было!). В нем чувствуются огромные пласты истории как самой страны, так и её народа. С другой стороны, поскольку этот город является центром и политическим и экономическим, его также уместно назвать прогрессивным. Именно поэтому в нём можно увидеть не только исторически важный центр с Кремлем и Красной Площадью, многочисленными соборами и музеями, но и стремящиеся ввысь небоскребы Москвы-Сити.

Этот город никогда не спит, как поётся в одной русской поп песне. В нём происходит настолько много вещей, и в нём живет такое количество людей, что движение не замирает никогда - только лишь меняется его темп. Утром удобное и быстрое метро этого мегаполиса будет перегружено, на дорогах в центре будут пробки, а на улицах толпы людей будут спешить по своим делам.

Сам город крайне многообразен - в нём каждый найдет что-то своё и познакомится с самыми разнообразными аспектами русской культуры. Прогуляться вечером по Арбату, после посещения Третьяковской галереи или же сходить в Парк Горького (в любое время года) - бесценный опыт.

Более строгий и европейский на вид Санкт-Петербург сильно отличается от своей “конкурентки” Москвы. Он моложе на 500 лет, строился на берегу Балтийского моря с целью сблизиться с Европой и расширить выход в море. Из-за этого, климат в нём более влажный и, соответственно, по ощущениям, в нём несколько холоднее, чем в Москве. Он гораздо меньше в своих масштабах и количество людей, живущих в нем, составляет всего лишь половину московского.

В России за Санкт-Петербургом стоит репутация так называемой “культурной столицы”. В нём вы найдете массу музеев, включая всемирно известный Эрмитаж, квартиру самого выдающегося русского поэта А.С. Пушкина и сможете познакомиться с Россией во всей красе её имперского периода. Конечно же, этим облик исторической части города не ограничивается. Его сильно коснулся и советский период с его пятиэтажками, коммунальными квартирами, метрополитеном, в котором всё ещё используются жетоны в качестве билетов и зарождением рок-музыки из позднего СССР.

Город этот в сравнении с хаотичной, густонаселенной Москвой более умиротворенный. В целом темп жизни в нём гораздо спокойнее -
даже поезда в метро ходят медленнее. Жизнь более размеренная, а цены чуть-чуть ниже. Центр города испещрен каналами, красуется своей рафинированностью и уникальными белыми ночами в середине лета.

Различий в речи москвичей и петербуржцев почти нет. В обоих городах слышен один и тот же акцент, однако названия некоторых привычных россиянам вещей различаются. Например, край тротуара, выложенный бетонными блоками, в Москве известен как ‘бордюр’. В Санкт-Петербурге, же, вы услышите ‘поребрик’. Ролл с мясом и овощами - восточная нотка в уличной кухне России - в Москве называется ‘шаурма’, в Питере - ‘шаверма’.

В целом, если вообразить оба этих по-своему особенных города, как людей, то Москва представит очень мудрым человеком, повидавшим многое на своём веку, однако всё ещё имеющим “порох в пороховницах”, задор и массу энергии. Санкт-Петербург, же, покажется человеком сдержанным, манерным, даже педантичным, который щеголяет своим аккуратным обликом.

Эти два города - визитная карточка России, но, конечно же, она не ограничивается ими. За их пределами лежит огромная страна с бесчисленным количеством открытых, которые ожидают каждого путешественника.