

Russian schools suffer, too, prof says

Martin Fisher
Oregon Daily Emerald

Historians are not trusted by the Russian people or politicians, but they could play an essential role in the creation of a democratic Russia, a visiting Russian professor said Thursday.

"Many historians can help the situation in the country by their publications and their evaluation of problems of national conflicts in Russia, relations with other nations in Russian history and the problems of imperial consciousness," said Dr. Viktor Bortnevski, a professor and senior research scholar from St. Petersburg University.

However, right now in Russia, "ordinary people are not satisfied with the work of historians," Bortnevski said. They "don't believe either the pro-Bolshevik or anti-Bolshevik" historians, he said.

One of the greatest hurdles facing Russian historians is their ability to be published, Bortnevski said. The cost of printing a book cannot be recovered by sales, so printing is actually unprofitable, he said.

Because of this, few new textbooks are entering Russian classrooms and even fewer are available to the general public. The books that are published are usually the result of scholars paying printers to produce their books, he said.

One of the methods historians can use to increase their credibility in Russia is to publish documents that were made available after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

However, even this is a problem for many scholars, who often cannot afford to gain access to the documents by paying "fees" to archive staffs. For example, the Soviet Army Archives charges \$3 to \$5 per copied page.

Bortnevski said he believes historians will have a difficult time sorting out the history of Russia in the 20th century. It would be too easy, and wrong, he said, to assume "anything published before 1991 is wrong, and anything published after 1991 is right."

But history is not the only subject undergoing change in Russian universities, Bortnevski, who is also the director for programs in history at the Russian-American Center for International Education, Inc., said he believes U.S. and Russian universities will someday have "the same status"

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— Dr. Viktor Bortnevski, visiting Russian professor

when teaching multiculturalism.

Currently, there are only about a dozen scholars in Russia capable of teaching a non-Russian, non-European class, Bortnevski said. There is currently nothing in Russia that resembles the University's multicultural offerings.

"We don't have so many experts," he said.

Another class that may be added in the future is U.S. history. Currently, U.S. history is taught only in a few short chapters in high school texts and focuses primarily on the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the abolishment of slavery and 20th century America as it relates to Russia.

The situation is similar at the university level, where there are virtually no specific courses dealing with American history. And in the past, Bortnevski said, those classes were usually supported by the KGB and the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

"The ordinary Russian citizen doesn't know anything about American history," he said.

Russian university students are facing the same problems with state funding of higher education that Oregon college students are currently dealing with.

Bortnevski said although Russian President Boris Yeltsin has pledged his support for higher education, he cannot completely back up that support with money.

"There isn't much money," Bortnevski said. "And what is more important, to support the military people or to support the chemical scientists?"

"Maybe the military people will be in a coup," he said. "Or maybe there will be a coup of scholars."

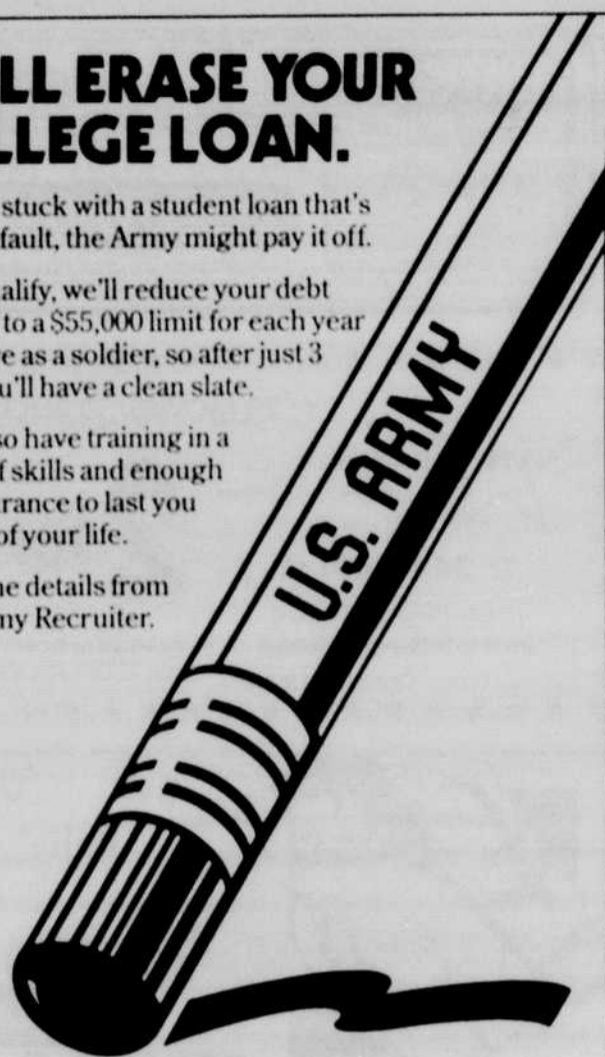
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