



Rhiannon Jones

**WALKS AROUND MOSCOW INFLUENCED  
MY DEVELOPMENT AS A SCHOLAR**



In 2014, I spent five months as an intern at the Joint HSE - NES Undergraduate Program in Economics in Moscow. My duties included assisting in the coordination of an exchange program with American institutions and collaborating on a website for the [Writing and Communication Center](#). Another of my responsibilities was helping undergraduate and master students at New Economic School and Higher School of Economics with their English language skills. Students would come to the Writing Center where I worked part-time as a tutor in order to improve their papers, CVs, and conversation skills. By far my favorite task was the conversation hours I would hold with students, who would practice their research pitches and job interview tactics in ever improving English.

When there was time, they would also speak more casually about their lives as budding experts in mathematics, economics, and finance, as young people studying at most advanced institutions in Russia, and as Russians reflecting on their country's difficult past and dynamic future. Selfishly perhaps, I would try to steer the students towards this latter subject. Most of the students would initially brush aside my questions on Stalin, the Second World War, or the current conflict in Ukraine, explaining with the impartiality of professional scholars that they were not qualified to comment on these matters. When I questioned them further, however, they would gradually open up, sharing stories that their grandmothers had told them about the war, or voicing impressions about their country formed by education, work, and travel both in Russia and abroad. This encounter with people my own age, natives of a country that is little understood in the United States, contributed to a growing fascination within me to understand Russia's unique past, and the legacies of that past in Russian society today.

Beyond my hours collaborating with students and administrators, the internship was generous in that it afforded me a great deal of time outside of work to explore the city of Moscow. These hours, most of which I passed in wandering around on foot, were another catalyst to my decision to pursue the study of Russia. Here I should remark that my attraction to Russian history is in many ways related to a fascination with intricacies – names, places, and events esoteric to the average American whose knowledge of twentieth century Russia extends to a vague awareness of labor camps and the KGB.

The city of Moscow is a wonderful stimulant to those who take an interest in the baroque amplitude of the past. Wandering along its wide boulevards and secluded lanes one wonders constantly, who were these figures whose names now adorn the city's myriad parks, bridges, and theaters? I consider these walks around Moscow to be a major influence on my development as a scholar, in spite of any incongruity there might seem to be between aimless wandering and more rigorous academic training.

It was during my tenure as an intern that I was accepted into the Master's program at the [Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin](#). I began my graduate studies that fall and went on to write a thesis about women and the Holocaust in Poland.

This September, I began a PhD in History at the University of Toronto. I am happy to say that after a two-year sojourn into East European studies, I have returned to research on Russia with a concentration on Jewish history in the Soviet Union. Thus far my reading on Soviet history has been extremely fruitful, leading me to constantly rethink my understanding of the country and its rich history. This continual revising of the questions and intellectual paradigms that frame my interpretation of the Soviet past – a process that really took hold in me during the time I spent in Moscow – represents an approach to my subject that I value and wish to preserve throughout what I hope will be a lifetime of study. Research on Russian history has already benefited from scholars who share my conviction that the goals of scholars should differ from those of policy makers and diplomats.

Among North American national histories, the field of Russian history is perhaps unique in that the contours of our understanding continue to be those of terror, brutality, and privation. Doubtless this one-dimensionality is a legacy of the Cold War and its distorting effects on both academic integrity and the role of the historian in society. Like the students in Moscow, who were generous enough to share their thoughts on Russia and its place in history with me, I hope that my own thinking will benefit from extended months of learning and reflection, both at home and abroad, on this fascinating country.

