

Russian at Eton College

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Peter Reznikov was appointed Head of Russian and Teacher of French at Eton College in 1998, with the task of bringing new ideas to the teaching of Russian at this famous school. And what a change it was from his previous teaching posts in the UK – and from life in Russia for that matter!

In ten years Peter has certainly revitalised Russian at Eton. In 1998 there were just a handful of boys learning the language. Now there are 135 boys on Russian courses from beginners to AS and A2 and Cambridge Pre-U levels, there are two teachers of Russian and a full time Russian language assistant. There is a flourishing Slavonic Society with fortnightly meetings, a popular 'Red Army' football team, and a trip to Moscow and St. Petersburg for boys in Year 11. The prestigious annual Duke of Newcastle Russian Prize is awarded to the strongest Russianist at Eton, with an external adjudicator from a UK university.



Peter Reznikov in front of Lupton's Tower at Eton

Much of the growth in numbers has been achieved from feedback throughout the school about the enjoyable nature of the lessons and consistent good results, but also, as an independent school, Eton is able to make common-sense strategic decisions that support the development of a healthy overall language programme. To this end, from September 2008 French and Latin are no longer compulsory GCSE subjects for boys entering the school in Year 9. Previously Russian was taught intensively with a one-year course to GCSE, after boys had completed GCSE French and Latin a year early. Now boys choose two languages when they first arrive at the school, from French, German, Spanish, Russian and Japanese. All the languages are on an equal footing, and combinations are possible which were not possible before, Russian and German, for example. Staffing difficulties as a result of the changeover were minimised by asking boys to choose three languages and then offering them two of those three. This allowed for a certain amount of juggling to suit staff availability, and most language teachers, of course, teach more than one language.

The result has been 40 boys opting for Russian on a three-year course to GCSE, and 39 boys opting for Russian on a two-year course to GCSE, both with 3 hours per week. There is also change at the higher level. From 2008 the school has started courses for the new Cambridge Pre-U examinations, with their exciting range of set books, films and cultural studies.

Eton uses the Ruslan Russian course, with books 1 and 2 for the GCSE course, and Ruslan 3 for the language work and some of the topic work in Years 12 and 13. It was a surprise to me that Ruslan was being used in Year 9, as it was written for an older audience. Peter confirmed that the boys appreciate the more adult approach, especially the brighter boys. There is a heavy use of IT. The Ruslan CD-Roms are used in the classroom, and boys have access to Russian internet sites and the College intranet site through terminals in their rooms.

Examination results have always been very good but have recently been exceptional. In summer 2008, boys learning Russian at Eton achieved straight A*'s at GCSE, straight A's

at A2 level, and all As - with one B - at AS level, as Peter put it, 'to keep it real!'

There are a handful of native Russian boys at the College, who usually take GCSE and sometimes higher examinations, but who do not usually attend lessons, receiving coaching instead from the Russian Assistant.

Boys are very enthusiastic. Here are a few random comments, from Barnaby Fry, Tom Bolitho and Toby Fisher from the current Upper VI:

'I chose Russian because it is a language that most people don't know, and it is surrounded by something of a mystique. The alien nature of the alphabet, and the rumours that it was difficult to learn made me want to learn something different!'

'Before I started to learn Russian I was warned that it was extremely difficult to learn. I have to say, I have found it easier than I thought I might, but it does require a lot of effort to speak and write Russian well, as detail is crucial, and it takes a long time before you are able to feel intuitively what is right and what is wrong!'

'I wanted to learn a new modern language, and the appeal of Russian made me choose it above all the others. I found the mystery of the language and culture was something that really sparked my imagination!'

'I very much hope to use Russian in my career. I will be studying it at university and hope to achieve a high level of understanding. As regards how I will use it, as of yet I am not sure, but I expect it will involve some kind of financial business!'



The 2007-8 Upper Sixth Russian Group

'Russian offers a completely different and dynamic perspective not found in other languages. Not being a 'routine language' studied to A level, it possesses intricacies and provides more of a challenge than, for instance, French!'

'I definitely expect to use Russian in my career. Still only a minority of people study it in comparison with languages such as Spanish. A quick look around websites shows that Russian-speakers are much in demand!'

'Russian has posed more of a challenge than I initially expected. Although I am by no means a natural linguist, I have still found it to be stimulating. As the language is rooted in a different culture, different methods are clearly used, however much of the basic grammar can be picked up relatively quickly, leading to a grasp of the language after only a short while!'

And there was a supportive comment from the Head Master, Tony Little: 'With the changing nature of global relationships, learning Russian continues to be important. Eton is fortunate to have a strong Russian Department, enabling students to develop a strong linguistic foundation and to gain an insight into Russian culture!'

The school visits to Russia are not run as exchanges, which are difficult or impossible to organise from a boarding school with boys coming from all over the UK and beyond. In Year 11 there is an organised trip to St Petersburg and Moscow with hotel accommodation and a full excursion programme. For Year 12 boys there is a placement arrangement with MGU, under which boys travel to Moscow under their own steam for a two or three week individual placement in the Easter holiday before their examinations.

A large proportion of boys who take Russian in Years 12 and 13 go on to study Russian at University, and there is an impressive list of Old Etonians who have been able to use their Russian both in the UK and in Russia, including people with top jobs in Russian banks and at the Foreign Office, Max Delany, a journalist at *Moscow Times*, and the former British Ambassador to Russia, Sir Roderick Lyne.

The following web links may be of interest. Eton College: www.etoncollege.com.
Ruslan Russian Courses: www.ruslan.co.uk.
Cambridge Pre-U Examinations: www.cie.org.uk.