

The Russo-Files

A Montpelier-based magazine brings Russian culture stateside

BY **KIRK KARDASHIAN** [04.22.08]

TAGS: **business, culture, media, montpelier**

For such a small state, Vermont sure has a lot of ties to Russia. Middlebury College boasts one of the top **Russian-language schools** in the world. **Project Harmony**, a Waitsfield-based NGO, has been coordinating professional and student exchanges with Russia since 1985. Exiled Russian author **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** spent 17 years in Cavendish. Vermont is the only state with a “sister” in Russia — the **Republic of Karelia**, which is shaped, incidentally, like an upside-down Vermont. One of Burlington’s sister cities is **Yaroslavl**. And, to top it all off, **Russian Life** — the only magazine about that country written for western readers — is published in the basement of a brick office building on Montpelier’s Main Street.

What gives? *Russian Life* publisher and editor Paul Richardson, 45, doesn’t have any conspiracy theories; he’s too busy putting out the 64-page glossy bimonthly magazine, along with other items sold by his company, Russian Information Services. These include the most up-to-date map of Russia, a book of Russian crossword puzzles, the photographic wall calendar “St. Petersburg by Night,” *A Taste of Russia* cookbook by food editor Darra Goldstein, a new quarterly literary journal called *Chtenia*, which is the Russian word for “readings”; and CD recordings of the Russian National Orchestra.

Like the nation itself, *Russian Life* has a long and interesting history. It was first printed in the United States in October 1956 as *The USSR*, at the same time the magazine *Amerika* appeared in the Soviet Union. The simultaneous debut of a Russian-culture magazine for Americans and an American-culture magazine for Russians was no coincidence. According to the magazine’s own account, it was “one of several cross-cultural agreements designed to sow trust amid the rancor of international politics.”

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A few years later, *The USSR* changed its name to *Soviet Life*. **Kevin McKenna**, professor of Russian language, literature and culture at the University of Vermont, remembers reading *Soviet Life* in the mid-1960s. It was “kind of a version of *Life Magazine* in the United States, though it was never quite that nice or quite that glossy,” he says. With the levity of hindsight, McKenna adds that the magazine was “purely propaganda,” depicting the average Russian citizen as glamorous and urbane and living in a well-appointed, single-family home. The reality, as he witnessed during multiple visits to the country over the past 40 years, was that most people

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resided in communal flats. *Soviet Life*, it turned out, was about as accurate a picture of Soviet life as *Vogue* is of American life.

Soviet Life ceased publication in 1991 with the break-up of the Soviet Union. It re-emerged in 1993 as *Russian Life*, a joint venture between Novosti — the Russian government press agency — and a private publisher in New Jersey. The bimonthly sputtered along for two years before the Russian government pulled out, and the magazine was offered for sale. In 1995, Russian Information Services purchased *Russian Life* and began churning it out from Montpelier, with the help of editors

and writers around the globe.

Richardson, a tall, bespectacled gentleman with dark hair, doesn't seem like the most probable candidate to run a magazine called *Russian Life*, let alone own a company called Russian Information Services: He's from Southern California and doesn't have a drop of Russian blood in his body. However, that's no prerequisite for an obsession with a foreign culture.

Regardless of whether they have Russian ancestors, Russophiles tend to have a facility for foreign languages, an abiding curiosity about history and geopolitics, and an infatuation with intricate yet sweeping works of fiction. Many can pinpoint the moment when they were first drawn to the vast nation. McKenna was a ninth-grader in Oklahoma when he saw the **John Birch Society** TV spots showing Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe on the table in a United Nations meeting, screaming, "We will bury you!" Michael Katz, a professor of Russian language and literature at Middlebury and a member of the editorial board at *Russian Life*, got into Russian culture after **Sputnik** was launched in 1958.

Richardson was "bit by the bug" while studying in Wales as a college sophomore. He enrolled in a Russian language and culture program with a teacher who "brought Russian culture and history alive," he says. It was the mid-1980s, the peak of the Reagan era and the Cold War. The combination of hearing about Russia in and outside the classroom intrigued Richardson enough to make him get his Master's degree in political science and a certificate in Russian studies from Indiana University in Bloomington. In 1989, this son of a print-shop owner — by then fluent in Russian — persuaded the national design-print-copy company AlphaGraphics to send him to Moscow to set up and operate the first Western franchise business in the Soviet Union.

When he got to Moscow, Richardson met Montpelier native and former Vermont Republican candidate for governor David Kelley, who was already running a T-shirt printing business there. They became friends and partnered to write *The Moscow Business Survival Guide*, a book for Westerners looking to start companies in the USSR. After they formed Russian Information Services to sell books and maps, Kelley urged Richardson to move the operation to Montpelier.

The current version of *Russian Life* started out as a monthly, Richardson explains; "then we realized we were just too small to do that." Kelley eventually left the venture, leaving Richardson and his wife the sole owners. Richardson acknowledges that it may seem odd to publish a magazine about Russian culture and history in Vermont, but says, "With developments in desktop publishing and the Internet, you really can do this sort of thing anywhere. We could be doing this in Southeast Asia."

The magazine, which is printed on 100 percent recycled paper, has the look and feel of *Vermont Life*, with vivid photographs and four or five features per issue. It's funded primarily by subscription fees from its 10,000 regular readers, but advertisements for premium vodka, language tutorials, visa companies and the like are sprinkled throughout. The "Notebook" section at the front of the magazine offers easily digestible facts and figures, including results of polls of Russian citizens on a variety of topics — the most recent edition asks for their opinion of Vladimir Lenin's legacy. The Notebook also has sports scores, travel notes and event listings. "It's our entry-level drug, so to speak," Richardson says, only partly kidding; the magazine, he explains, is often the stimulus that turns dabbling Russophiles into full-fledged addicts.

That's exactly why Kevin McKenna uses it in his beginning and intermediate Russian classes at UVM, and purchased a subscription for the Russian House, one of the school's Living/ Learning residences. McKenna says he learned about 15 years ago that the best way to persuade American students to study Russian grammar and literature is to "hook them with culture." So he sets aside the first 10 minutes of class to talk about "things Russian." Students can ask, for example, "why Catherine is called The Great and why Ivan was called The Terrible." Undergrads who are more interested in Russian pop culture usually get their first taste of it from *Russian Life*.

Nordica Gill, one of McKenna's students, is a junior majoring in Russian and Eastern European studies, with a concentration in Russian language. Originally from Gray, Maine, she admits she didn't expect to be pulled into the Russian world. Gill started as a French major, but took Russian to get a feel for a non-Romance language. Before long, she was hooked. "You want to know more about the culture, literature and history, and you just kind of get drawn into it," Gill says. "You can't really explain it; it just kind of happens."

And that warrants further intensive study. Gill is taking a comparative politics course this semester and offers, "The Russian case is something that people will be studying for a long time — the way they immediately transitioned to democracy overnight."

Middlebury's Michael Katz could have predicted the rising popularity of Russian studies exemplified by people such as Gill. "Since the Yeltsin debacle, we've seen an upswing in attention under Putin," he says. Katz has a "wave theory" of Western interest in Russia: it swells during some decades and ebbs in others. A big wave came with the **space race** in the late 1950s. Another one hit during the Brezhnev-Nixon détente period in the 1970s. "Then there was another batch of Americans who got into it under Gorbachev and **perestroika**," he says.

Now the spotlight is on Russia again. With its vast oil and natural-gas resources — and its ownership of most of the Arctic ice cap, where more of those resources may reside — Russia will most likely be a superpower before the end of the next decade.

So much the better for *Russian Life*, the English-language magazine covering Russian people and places that, according to Richardson, the mainstream media don't touch. In his view, the popular current image of Russia can be summed up as "the Mafia, Putin consolidating power, and environmental degradation." Though he acknowledges those aspects of modern Russia and includes them in the magazine, Richardson asserts that they're only part of the picture. "Let's tell the whole story," he says. "Let's talk about the history, let's talk about the culture, let's talk about the booming Internet."