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Review: *Russian from Intermediate to Advanced*

Cori Anderson

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Olga E. Kagan, Anna S. Kudyma, and Frank J. Miller, *Russian from Intermediate to Advanced*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2015. 448 pages.

Russian from Intermediate to Advanced is a new and innovative textbook designed for students who wish to reach an advanced level of proficiency in all modalities (speaking, listening, reading and writing), according to the ACTFL scale. The book is designed to reflect the ACTFL proficiency guidelines for all four skills, as well as the skills tested in the TORFL. The authors have also produced a companion website, which features audio and video components, as well as grammar exercises. These materials can be used in a traditional one-year course, an intensive summer- or academic-year course, or over multiple years of study, with supplementary materials. This book is well suited for upper-level language courses with both heritage speakers and traditional language learners.

This book's ten thematic chapters provide a variety of activities for reading and listening comprehension, speaking, writing, vocabulary development, word formation, and advanced grammar topics. The first five chapters cover topics familiar to students in their third year of university-level study, such as education, family, and free time. The last five chapters examine more abstract themes including health, politics, and economics. Thanks in large part to the exclusive use of authentic (albeit abridged) materials, students are also exposed to Russian cultural products and practices throughout the book, and often invited to make comparisons with their native culture.

The authors have designed the activities of each chapter in order to develop skills necessary for achieving Advanced proficiency. The authors summarize these skills:

1. "Engage in conversation in a clearly participatory manner in order to communicate information on autobiographical topics, as well as topics of community, national, or international interest."
2. When reading, "understand the main ideas and supporting details of authentic narrative and descriptive texts."

3. When listening, “understand the main ideas and most supporting details in connected discourse on a variety of general interest topics, such as news stories, explanations, instructions, anecdotes, or travelogue descriptions.”
4. In writing, use “a variety of cohesive devices up to several paragraphs in length” and exhibit “control of the most frequently used syntactic structures and a range of general vocabulary” (ACTFL Guidelines quoted in Kagan 2012 vi).

Each chapter begins with an introduction of necessary vocabulary, followed by short written and audio texts for comprehension and summarizing. Some reading activities explicitly limit the time to be spent on a text, in order to practice scanning for the main idea before finding the supporting evidence. This is in line with the skills of Advanced reading proficiency. These activities also develop skills for increased literacy. For audio and video components, activities are designed to encourage note-taking, allowing students to better identify the main idea of a text, as well as supporting evidence. Attention is drawn to connecting devices early in the textbook, allowing for students to create more cohesive summaries in their writing. Throughout each chapter, the texts increase in length and difficulty, ending with argumentative prose and activities that invite students to present their own opinions, with supporting arguments. In the early chapters, special attention is paid to “problematic situations” such as reporting a crime or a car accident. The ability to handle a situation with a complication is a component of Advanced speaking proficiency, and these activities highlight the emphasis on the proficiency guidelines that the authors have placed throughout the book.

The grammar sections focus on many important and problematic areas for more advanced language learners, both heritage and traditional. These include case government (by both verbs and prepositions), verbal aspect, verbal adverbs, verbs of motion, numerals, participles, and word order. Additionally, the book reinforces and expands various types of subordinating conjunctions, such as concession, purpose, cause and result. The grammar exercises provided are limited, but instructors can place additional emphasis on these elements of grammar and syntax as students develop writing skills.

Also worthy of mention is the treatment of vocabulary in the textbook. Each unit features a section dedicated to vocabulary, not only focusing on activation of the particular lexical items related to the theme, but also on word formation, the system of roots and affixes that is essential to increasing one's active and passive vocabulary. Students are exposed to adjective formation and nominal suffixes, and each unit features one verbal root with various prefixes, rather than presenting the meanings of prefixes as applied to a variety of roots.

The companion website, available without a password, contains not only the audio files and links to videos for textbook activities, but also interactive exercises on vocabulary and grammar for each unit. These exercises allow the students to check their own work, and can be repeated multiple times. The website also features links to supplemental videos, such as feature films and television series, as related to a given chapter's theme.

Russian from Intermediate to Advanced has many strengths as an upper level textbook, primarily its attention to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The book is designed to be a stand-alone textbook, with both level-appropriate content and grammar topics in one place, alongside well-structured activities to encourage Advanced proficiency tasks. The use of authentic, non-literary materials is also praiseworthy: the videos are compiled from television news reports pertaining to the themes of the chapters, and many of the written texts are compiled from Russian Internet sources, such as blogs or advice forums. The videos and texts also highlight cultural and social issues in modern Russia.

Despite the book's many strengths, there are some shortcomings. There is no workbook with vocabulary and grammar exercises, and the online interactive exercises do not provide feedback to the instructor on a student's progress directly from the website. Furthermore, the vocabulary exercises rely heavily on definitions, rather than using the words communicatively. The grammar exercises, however, use both multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank type activities. A printed workbook, or more online cloze exercises would be welcome. Additionally, some material in the book may be too difficult for students at this level, particularly those activities focused on opinions and supporting hypotheses, and the abstract topics of the last three chapters. However, such materials are a

useful preview for the type of work required to achieve Superior proficiency.

Notwithstanding these minor issues, I commend the authors for their work in creating a comprehensive textbook for this level of study. Given the variety of activities and texts, instructors are able to easily work with a range of student levels, a common problem in such courses.

References

ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012). Alexandria, VA: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Cori Anderson
Rutgers University

Deborah Martinsen, Cathy Popkin, and Irina Reyfman, eds.,
Teaching Nineteenth Century Russian Literature: Essays in Honor
of Robert L. Belknap. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014.
336 pages.

The late Robert L. Belknap was clearly one of the finest individuals and most creative teachers and scholars in the American profession of Slavic studies. His whole professional life encompassed both the academic and administrative sides of a long and outstanding professorial career at Columbia University. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the present volume consists of articles in the field of Russian literary criticism by some of the best and original literary critics, many of them Belknap's former students. Not only do the articles demonstrate a high level of literary insight—they also show the example of Belknap's remarkable creativity in methods of teaching.

The above remarks are perhaps most clearly shown in words written by the master himself in an article entitled "Text and Context." Belknap starts by immediately diving into the red hot polemics between those who demand concentration only upon the text itself, and those who want to douse it also with relevant considerations of biography, history, politics, psychology, and so forth. With characteristic Belknapian humor, he describes his work in a core curriculum including dozens of authors from the ancient Greeks to the moderns: "For Slavists it can become a course on