Professor Raleigh's lecture “Russia’s Cold War Generation and the End of the Soviet Dream”

REEEC was pleased to welcome Professor Donald J. Raleigh from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on April 11 for his fascinating lecture titled “Russia’s Cold War Generation and the End of the Soviet Dream: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives.” Professor Raleigh has many notable publications such as *Revolution on the Volga: 1917 in Saratov* (1986), *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917-1922* (2002), and *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia’s Cold War Generation* (2012).

Professor Raleigh’s lecture focused on his latest book pertaining to the baby boomer generation in the Soviet Union. In preparation of this book, he had conducted a series of interviews in Russia with the post-war generation seeking to understand their conceptions and feeling towards life under a communist system. He stressed that this particular generation differed significantly from the previous one in that they grew up in a freer atmosphere. His overall goal was to understand the “twilight years” of the Soviet Union through the post-war generation. They came of age during a time when momentous change permeated Eastern Europe. Therefore, he highlighted the importance of oral history as a method to understand what shaped their views.

Professor Raleigh was particularly interested in the events and people which contributed to defining the viewpoints of this generation. He wanted to know what this “tells us about the Soviet dream” and “how Cold War society worked.” First, he discussed the importance of the family in defining the baby boomers’ conceptions of the Soviet past. Essentially, history told from the point of view of a relative could be in direct conflict with the Soviet state’s projection of history. For example, this generation heard stories from relatives about the brutality of the 1930s collectivization drive and the immense suffering it created. However, the Soviet authorities projected collectivization in a positive light. Events like these allowed the baby boomers to begin questioning the authenticity of their government. Secondly, Professor Raleigh discussed the importance of the Thaw in instilling new values and tastes in this generation. With more relaxation and freedom, a flood of material poured into the Soviet Union from the West. The baby boomers grew to love the Beatles, J.D. Salinger, Western films, and radio broadcasts from outside the USSR. In addition, the baby boomers had the opportunity to travel abroad. Through these trips outside of the USSR, they were able to see how much better life was for people living in Eastern Europe, and at the same time, to understand the deteriorating conditions which existed back home. Lastly, Professor Raleigh explored how the USSR failed to deliver on its promises to create a new and wonderful life under communism. By the 1970s, the USSR faced severe economic problems and the baby boomers eventually lost faith in the idea of “the Soviet Dream.”

This lecture allowed me to better understand the use of oral history in interpreting the past. It was interesting to get a firsthand perspective on life in the Soviet Union as told by the baby boomer generation. This lecture also underscored for me the extreme discontent that emerged in Soviet society and the extent of western influence was in molding this generation’s character. It was particularly enlightening to find out that the Beatles enjoyed so much popularity. Above all, this lecture provided me with a more thorough understanding of the way in which obtaining “the Soviet Dream” was in actuality an impossible goal.
Ryan Eavenson is a first year MA student. He is particularly interested in democratization, human rights, and European integration in the post-Soviet world. His additional interests include Imperial and Soviet Russian history. He received a AB in History/Russian and East European Studies from Lafayette College in 2010. After completion of his MA, he hopes to find employment focusing on international affairs or continue his education.