

Today marks a week since I returned from Estonia, where I spent a little over two weeks at the beginning of my summer. I had traveled there as part of a Russian-immersion school trip; Estonia has a sizable Russian ethnic and cultural minority, and as such represents the best opportunity to get Russian speaking practice for American high-schoolers.

I am perhaps first thought of as a student of history, and this trip was uniquely interesting on that front. We spent time by the Russian border in Narva, in the much more ostensibly Western capital of Tallinn, and took a day trip to Helsinki across the Baltic Sea in Finland as well. All of these regions have had distinct histories and carry distinct communities, cultures, and in some cases language families — but their relationship throughout the last millennium is a fascinating subject we get frustratingly little insight on (at least in my experience) in the US.

The Russian Empire — from statues of Russian tsars in Helsinki to Narva's 95% Russian-speaking population — is the clearest example of this broader region's fascinating patterns with historical horses. However, visiting these three locations made it much harder to overlook the impacts of Swedish imperial rule that predated the Russian Empire — and the centuries of geopolitical context and conflict between the two powers.

My single greatest impression from the trip was undoubtedly my sheer awe at Helsinki's public libraries. A not-excessively-distant second, however, would have to be the disparity between the decidedly Western European feel of Tallinn and the overwhelmingly post-Soviet atmosphere of Narva. Tallinn's Old Town would not feel out of place in pre-industrial Germany (which figures, given the past influence of Germans on the area), whereas there's no mistaking Narva for anything other than a Russian imperial and later Soviet territory.

I have never been to Russia, and the possibility that I might look further out of reach every day. But Russia will always be a fascinating subject of study. Its people, its culture, and its political environment carry the impacts of a uniquely (in magnitude and other qualities alike) traumatic history. Above all, Russia will — however unfortunately — remain relevant in policymaking and statecraft for generations to come. Spending time in Narva, itself a scar of Soviet mass deportations, social engineering,

and ethnic replacement, demonstrates that more clearly than any reading or analysis I've come across in my now four years of Russian study.

"Russia" has become a major aspect of my identity as a student. It's an interesting feeling to consider that this field of study, whose existence I wasn't quite cognizant of half a decade ago, has taken on a role that — no matter where my studies and later life take me — a general recollection of my life would be incomplete without, and an academic recollection of my life might even focus on.

I predictably get the question, "Why Russia?" rather often. The honest answer is, "Not entirely on purpose." Russia was one of three foreign language courses (the others being German and Classics) I began roughly four years ago, during my two years at Winchester College. The other offerings were Spanish (which I had already studied and wanted a change of pace from) and French (which didn't seem as interesting). Given my overall academic disposition towards social studies, I was drawn to exploring the culture, language and politics associated with each language. Long story short, I've had more than my fair share of wonderful Russian teachers as well, and the subject is full of underrepresented niches to explore.

Estonia gave me a valuable new perspective on the historical and cultural quirks that make Russia as interesting to me as it is. It's also opened up new avenues of related study (people *really* don't talk about early modern Baltic or Nordic history as much as they maybe *should*). Overall, my experience was productive, informative, and I'm looking forward to seeing where my takeaways will lead.