

W&L After Class

With Guest Rich Bidlack

Episode Transcript

Ruth Candler

Welcome to another episode of “W&L After Class: The Lifelong Learning Podcast.” I'm your host, Ruth Candler. We're now in our third season of After Class and we're so grateful to everyone who has tuned in to hear conversations with Washington and Lee's expert faculty. If you're new to our podcast, welcome! You'll hear from your favorite faculty on fascinating topics and meet professors who can introduce you to new worlds and continue your journey of lifelong learning.

Today's guest is Rich Bidlack, the Martin and Brooke Stein Professor of History at W&L. Rich joined the history department in 1987 and co-founded the university's Russian Area Studies program in 1992. Over the years he has taught many courses at W&L, including Modern European History, Russian and Soviet History, and the History of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Rich earned his BA with honors from Wake Forest University. He received a Master's and PhD in history from Indiana University as well as the graduate certificate from Indiana's Russian and East European Institute. His research focuses on Soviet history. Rich, thanks so much for joining us today.

Rich Bidlack

Well, it's great to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Ruth Candler

So due to the nature of world events, I feel like it's important to note that we're having this conversation on May 24, 2022. It's been a strange few months for us all. So, Rich, you've said that your interest in Russia was kindled when you were a child growing up in suburban New Jersey. What happened back then to spark that interest?

Rich Bidlack

Well, looking back at a couple of things, just in terms of general context, I'm very much a child of the Cold War. I remember very clearly, late October 1962, when I was seven, almost eight years old, the Cuban Missile Crisis. And I lived in a small town called Boonton, New Jersey, about 25 miles from Manhattan. And I remember standing out on a warm October evening, neighbors there, my dad was an

electrical engineering and had a high-level security clearance. My best friend's father was also an engineer. And we were talking about what would happen, how we would be affected, if New York City were hit with a Soviet atomic bomb.

Ruth Candler

What a conversation to have as a young person.

Rich Bidlack

Yeah, that was always in the background. I think that people growing up in the 60s, you know, we had the duck and cover drills in school and that sort of thing. So I think that's one factor. But the other is the nature of the town I grew up in. It was a blue-collar industrial town. Number of factories. I worked in one during one summer, a city carbon factory that made carbon heat exchangers. But there's also high-end electronics there too, and attracted a lot of emigres, particularly from Eastern Europe, from Russia, from the Caucasus area. My best friend in school was a boy named Aram. His father was from Armenia. And one day when his father came home, as a little boy, during the first World Wars, his family had been killed by the Turks. He eventually made his way to United States. Another friend, a girl, Karen's father was Russian Jew. He was the mayor of our town for a while. Another girl also named Karen had a father who was Russian. Her grandparents had emigrated before the First World War. But then in the 30s, the family went back to the Soviet Union because they couldn't find work in the United States during the Depression, Soviet Union had full employment. And a number of Americans did that, incidentally. Well, they got caught up in the Second World War, lost family members there, had a horrific experience. So that kind of background was always there. I was always interested in things Russian and heard these stories. And I was kind of an odd kid I suppose. In grade school. I had a subscription for a while to *Soviet Life Magazine*, this propaganda thing that the Soviet Union put out, a counter to Life magazine, I suppose. So those things were always in the background as a kid growing up.

Ruth Candler

So despite your childhood fascination with Russia, you still planned to major in physics when you went away to college at Wake Forest University. What caused you to change course?

Rich Bidlack

Well, I wasn't certain I wanted to major in physics. As I mentioned, my hometown had high end engineering and electronics. There was an outfit called Radio Frequency labs, another one Aircraft Radio. My dad was an electrical engineer. He had a great career with Bell Laboratories. He had been a fighter pilot in World War Two, an instructor. And then he got a master's in electrical engineering and helped design circuitry for the nation's air traffic control system. In my town if you are going somewhere you want to major in engineering. And in my calculus course in high school, there were five

of my classmates who went to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. And one is a very prominent astrophysicist out at Caltech. He has an international reputation there. But I remember my senior year, my calculus teacher, Miss Pevitas, a refugee from Lithuania, who once showed me the deed for her family's property, which the Soviets took in 1941 when they entered into Lithuania. She asked me and said, "Richard, are you going to study mathematics or write letters?" And I said, "Well, I don't know, Miss Pevitas." But yeah, my first year at Wake Forest, I took three physics courses. But there's always this history side of me that was very interesting, that was really nurtured by my mother. Northern Jersey is an area that is steeped in Revolutionary War history. Washington's troops camped just a few miles from where I grew up. Its headquarters were in Morristown in 1777. So I had this history side too.

What was really transformative were faculty members at Wake Forest. There was a couple, they're a wonderful couple, Anne and Lowell Tillett. Anne taught Russian language and Lowell taught Russian history. And they organized a three-week program in the Soviet Union in the summer of 1976. And that was just transformative. I just really got the Russian bug then and wanted to pursue graduate study in some field related to Russia. I wasn't sure exactly what but then zeroed in on history.

Ruth Candler

Do you think those two teachers were instrumental in you also wanting to teach?

Rich Bidlack

Oh, very much so. Yeah, they were great models for teachers. Lowell would come into the classroom and he had a three by five note card, and just a few notes and would just give a wonderfully articulate, organized talk. And I asked him one time how he did that. He said, "Well, I've done this 31 times." But I just liked that environment. It was very stimulating. And then there are other faculty members there, too. I mean, Wake then, it's probably the same now, was very much a teaching institution. The faculty really worked with their students, worked individually with them. I did an independent study with Lowell Tillet and wrote an honors thesis actually in English history, not in Russian history. But it was very much a teaching institution. And yeah, they were great role models.

Ruth Candler

So I'd like to transition a little bit and talk about your research. Winston Churchill famously described Russia in 1939, as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." You've told me that your attraction to Russian history was due in part to the fact that so much of it, particularly Russia, during the Second World War was unknown. What is it about that period of Russian history that interests you so much?

Rich Bidlack

Well, the fact that it made an enormous impact on the country and its development. I really think the watershed, if you had to pick one watershed moment, during the 74 years of Soviet history, it would be the years 1941 to 45. You know, the United States lost slightly over 400,000 killed in World War Two fighting on several fronts in the Pacific, North Africa, Europe. Soviet were dead, the most recent reliable figures 26.6 million. Just a staggering figure. It's hard, I tell my students. It's hard for them to get their head around it. You do the arithmetic, about 64 people in the Soviet Union died for every American who died in World War Two. And it really hadn't been studied in great detail. I mean, Americans know about our invasion of North Africa in '42, invasion of France in '44, and the defeat of Imperial Japan. But the bulk of World War Two in Europe was fought on what we call the Eastern Front. Something like 75% of German soldiers died during World War Two died fighting against the Red Army. So that's something I was became interested in. I read Harrison Salisbury's work *On the Siege of Leningrad*. He was a famous New York Times journalist who spent about 25 years writing this book. He was in the Soviet Union World War Two. And so I became really fascinated with the history of Leningrad, which was horrific. They lost within the city, close to a million during the war. And in fighting around Leningrad, if you add up the numbers that died within the city and those fighting and several battles in the near proximity of Leningrad, more Soviets died, than Americans have died in all wars put together, from about 1776 up to the present. And they said, you know, really not much had been written about this. And so that drew my attention.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, those are pretty staggering numbers. Well, given that so many Soviet materials were off limits to westerners during the Cold War, how did you go about finding the materials you needed to conduct your research?

Rich Bidlack

Yeah, that's a good question. I had a fellowship to go to the Soviet Union in '83-84, for the academic year '83-84. My wife, Nancy, went with me and we lived in a pretty rundown Soviet dormitory in Leningrad. Although the state and party archives were closed, libraries were open. I could read full runs of newspapers from the war years as well as journals that were published. As Soviets devoted a lot of attention to the Second World War and the Leningrad blockade, something like 400 books were published in the Soviet Union by that time. Now, they had heavy censorship, to be sure. But the material that they brought out, I've never found it to be inaccurate, it was just limited in terms of what they could cover. I was looking particularly at factory workers. The southern part of Leningrad is very industrialized, it produced about 10%, of all the output in the country, very industrial city. And there were individual factory histories that were interesting. And I could get nuggets of information from published Soviet works from newspapers and journals from the war years, as well as firsthand accounts that had made their way out of the Soviet Union. A lot of people fled from the Soviet Union during the

Second World War, particularly in Germany with retreating, and they left their materials, some made it to our shores. Columbia University had a good archive of materials. There were a couple of sociologists at Harvard in the 1950s, Inkeles and Bauer, who realized there's this kind of flood of immigrants coming in, we should pull them, find out what life was like. And so they had a systematic interview campaign, to interview people from the Soviet Union to learn about that country during the Cold War. And so I'd use those materials. They're also captured German materials. I found in our own national archives very detailed and interesting aerial reconnaissance photos that the Germans took of Leningrad. And I was interested in individual factories, and I saw when they view the factories, what they knew about them, say, identified the various workshops and so forth. So I had to be kind of a detective and look at, you know, a wide range of materials. But up until the collapse of the Soviet Union in late '91, the archives were closed on this topic.

Ruth Candler

Did the fall of the Soviet Union in '91 Change your research in any way?

Rich Bidlack

Oh, yes, it did. And I'm glad I didn't publish my dissertation right out of graduate school because when the archives opened there were a number of topics that I could add to what I had already researched. I worked extensively in the Communist Party archives. And you could learn all sorts of things--how the party functioned, how the party assessed the mood of the people in the city. The Communist Party is very much afraid that the city will fall to the Germans. German troops are only three miles outside of Leningrad, they could look right into the city, and continually shelve it for close to 900 days. The siege lasted what is the 872 days. So you could use Communist Party materials to learn about how the party function, how they assess the popular move. They had armies of informants. Wherever there were large groups of people, there were informants, just overhearing what people were saying and writing it down. Learned a lot about crime and punishment too. People were arrested for theft. There's a lot of theft in a city where there's massive starvation. Most of the starvation was in that first winter of the war, 1941-42. Temperature got down to 40 below zero and the city is running out of food. It was just a horrific situation. But they also arrested people for political crimes. I mean, if you just really got steamed and said, "You know, Stalin's an SOB," and someone wrote it down, you could be arrested for anti-Soviet agitation, is what was actually a line in the criminal code, and you get 10 years in jail. You get a 10 year jail sentence in those conditions, there's a good chance you're gonna die. So learned about that, learned about starvation, learned about the very grim topic of cannibalism. About 2,000 people were arrested for cannibalism during the blockade. So all sorts of things became open with the party archives. Now the security archives, the archives of the institution that went by the initials NKVD, the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, which is the predecessor of the KGB, those were off limits to me, but I could read the correspondence between the party and the NKVD, so I could learn indirectly about the NKVD through the party archives.

When I was working on this project, Yale University Press had started a wonderful series as a brilliant idea called the annals of communism, where they wanted to rewrite Soviet history using new information from Soviet archives. And the project was brilliant in the sense that it matched a Western historian, generally an American historian, with a Soviet historian or Russian historians in the post-Soviet period for the Russian historian. And what's beautiful about that is the Russian archives wanted to give their own people kind of first crack at the archives, and they opened up. And keep in mind the early 90s was a terrible time in Russia in terms of the economy. The economy, the Soviet economy had collapsed, and nothing really functioning had replaced it. Inflation in 1992 was 2,000%. And people were selling their personal possessions on the street. And they didn't want well-heeled Americans, even graduate students are living on a shoestring. You know, we're living much better than the Soviet people. So they wanted their own people to have access to materials first, often. And so the Yale project linked a Russian historian with Western historian and I met this fellow Nikita Lamagin, way back in 1993. And we had interests, we had similar research interests. So Yale came to us and said, "Look, you want to do a book on the Leningrad blockade?" And we said, "sure." And so we collaborated a good long time on that and eventually produced a book over 500 pages in length. And the idea that the whole project was, each book was not only a narrative covering some event, but also a collection of documents. And my idea was to write a comprehensive history of the blockade, but give attention in particular to some 66 documents that we selected. I wrote the entire text for the book, but Lamagin provided a lot of the information, and he could work in the security archives, so we got access to the NKVD materials that way.

We found information on tensions between Leningrad leaders in Moscow, it was a very tense relationship. The Leningrad blockade didn't end till January of '44. Took a long time. Much of the rest of the Soviet Union had been liberated by that time. But Leningrad was locked in blockade for a long time. There's a particular controversy over why Moscow did not devote more resources to developing an ice road over Lake Ladoga. Leningrad is right at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland. There is Europe's largest freshwater lake just to the east. The one exit route that Leningrad had during the blockade was over the lake, either in the summer surface, or in the winter when it froze solid, and it became a highway. Well Moscow really dragged its feet in trying to provide relief to Leningrad. And so that's tense. And at the end of the war, there's this purge of Leningrad's leadership, the top leaders are taken and executed. And the origins of that has always been somewhat mysterious, but it goes back in part to the blockade years. So we could get insights into all these topics.

Ruth Candler

You just shared an amazing amount of material that you've learned about through your research. Are you still discovering things that surprise you?

Rich Bidlack

Well, that project, after we published that book, and that was actually in 2012, I've worked on other projects. I edited a textbook that covers Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union. But with regard to Leningrad I kind of veered in a different direction, a project I'm currently working on deals with materials from Leningrad, but not from a Russian archive. There's a small archive in New York City called the Blavatnik archive. It's located just a block or two north of Times Square. And what it is, it's a repository that has over 100,000 items pertaining primarily, but not exclusively, to East European Jews, Jews who lived in Russia and the Soviet Union. And one part of their collection is a remarkable group of postcards, some 1300 that were published in Leningrad between 1941 and 1944. And the Blavatnik archive has gathered a group of a small group of international scholars, Russians, Americans, there's a woman from Lithuania, to analyze the postcards, to look not only at the content, the message that's on the cards, but the form. And this is kind of a new departure for me because I'm not trained in graphic arts at all, and the others I'm working with have done a lot with visual images. I'm interested more on the content side. But postcards are an interesting vehicle because the mail system worked in the Soviet Union during the war and families would write to their fathers, husbands, brothers at the front. Some of the postcards were used, many weren't. But in producing these postcards, they know that the postcard could end up anywhere in the Soviet Union. So the Soviet state's very careful about the content of the cards. And there were a number of famous artists in Leningrad. Leningrad was a big cultural center in the Soviet Union, musicians, artists, and so they commissioned famous artists to draw a number of these postcards, but they had to treat some topics very sensitively. For instance, there's one card and actually I'm working on a piece on this particular card right now, that shows women planting gardens in front of a very prominent monument in Leningrad, St. Isaac's Cathedral. So someone, they don't want to let the information out if there's massive starvation in the city, I think that would ruin morale at the front if a man reads a postcard and his wife is starving to death, or children are starving to death. But anyone who's critically minded will say, why are they planting cabbages right in front of St. Isaac's? They know that there must be some problem there. So that's a project I've been working on recently.

Ruth Candler

That sounds fascinating. I'd like to change course now and talk about more current events, which I'm sure are stimulating some very lively discussions in your classroom. The war in Ukraine has absolutely horrified the world. How are you and other Russian studies professors at W&L responding to the war in your classes?

Rich Bidlack

Oh, that's a very good question. And today marks exactly three months since the start of this, what President Putin envisioned to be a two-or three-day special military operation. Here we're three months into this horrific and grotesque, disgusting war. There are five of us in this program. And we're

each in our classes devoting a lot of time to it, and giving talks really to whoever will listen to us. Our main language teacher is Professor Anna Brodsky. She has worked for a number of years as a journalist in Ukraine. So she has very good contacts. She organized a webinar a couple of weeks ago with a Ukrainian woman who's a documentary film maker, and who's making a film on the town of Bucha, located north of Kyiv where there were horrible war atrocities committed against the people there. There's a young couple, Yulia Rubina and Dmitry Zhukovskiy. They also teach Russian. Yulia teaches first to third year Russian and Dmitry, or Dima, is a theatre director. He has a small troupe, a Russian theatre troupe in Toronto, Canada. But he also instructs our students here in Russian and organizes a play each spring, which is kind of a capstone event for our program at the end of the year. Well, they've been telling their students as well about the war. In my Soviet history course, which I taught during the winter term, I changed the teaching method. I recorded my talks that I've given for many years on the YouTube platform, their PowerPoint presentations, and the students watch them outside of class. Then we use class time to discuss those presentations, to look at questions related to the content of the talk, and also incorporate our assigned readings. But it left me with a lot of flexibility in that class. And so we spent a good deal of time talking about the war in that class. We had a professor - oh, I'll mention one other very key member of the Russian studies program, Professor Krzysztof Jasiewicz. He and I both came here in '87. He's my closest colleague and friend on the faculty. He is one of the world's very top authorities on East European politics and society. And in fact, he co-edits a journal by that name here in Lexington. He and I did a webinar, mainly for alumni, back on March 9th. I think 675 people logged into that.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, we had over 1200 register for that.

Rich Bidlack

Is that right?

Ruth Candler

Yeah, and I will include the link to that in our show notes page.

Rich Bidlack

And we did a session for law students. I've given a couple of talks with a graduating senior Nick Mosher to the parents Leadership Council, the Alumni Association Board, really anybody who will listen, talk about this, this horrific war, the origins of it, how we think it's going and so forth.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, we are very fortunate to have such a great team help us understand, or try to understand what's going on. So let's talk for a moment about cyber warfare. It seems remarkable that Russia, which many

assume is home to the most pernicious hackers has itself suffered a recent increase in cyber-attacks from the west. Can you provide any details of the cyber war between Russia and the United States?

Rich Bidlack

Well, that's a tough question, because that's an aspect of this war that relatively little is known about. Our defense department admitted that the Ukrainian destruction of the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the *Minsk* class, which was destroyed several weeks ago, that in that destruction, the United States played a role, provided intelligence. Russia has lost something like eight generals in this, what was envisioned to be a three-day military operation. Generals remarkably, very close to the front. We'll see it's pretty clear that they're getting some assistance in terms of locating where these officers are. So I think there's a lot of assistance that the West United States is giving, somewhat from open sources from commercial satellites, but also from state assets that the United States and other NATO countries have.

The International hacking community has really turned its focus on Russia, given the atrocities that Russia has committed. Give you one example, a group of Estonian hackers, for some reason, they're very skilled hackers in the small country of Estonia, they got into the database for the 64th Motorized Rifle Brigade. This is a military unit that was stationed in Bucha where these horrible atrocities were committed, one place where terrible atrocities were committed. And they put online, now this information hasn't been verified, but what they put online were the passports of every member of that unit. And that can be a very powerful force, because Russia is doing very poorly in this war. If Russia loses this war, they're going to be war crime trials. Ukrainians have put one assault, one sergeant on trial already and convicted him of a war crime and given him a life sentence. This would show that, you know, the rest of the world knows who these people are. There was the expectation that Russia might launch cyber-attacks against the United States and other Western countries. That hasn't materialized. Why, we don't know. Maybe those attacks were thwarted. Maybe their capabilities weren't as great as many people feared. I suspect that that the United States and other countries have far greater resources in that area, that if Russia were to launch some sort of cyber-attack on our infrastructure that we could do that in a much more devastating fashion. So it acts as a deterrence. But that's just a guess on my part.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, it's gonna be interesting to see how this all pans out over the next months and what we discover. So we know that public statements that criticize the government or government policy are illegal in Russia. And I'm sure this political censorship in Russia has increased since the invasion of Ukraine. In this era of widespread social media, has government attempts to surpass or control news about the war been effective at all?

Rich Bidlack

The invasion started on February 24. And there were large scale demonstrations in Russia, against the war right away in St. Petersburg, which is kind of a liberal outpost in some ways in Russia, in Moscow. But then on March 16, somewhat three weeks or so into the war, President Putin went on nationwide television and he said that those who have a Western mentality are quote, “scum and traders. And like, when you get a fly in your mouth, we will spit them out.” And he said that Russia needs quote, “self-cleansing, or self-purging.” And this is language right from the 1930s and Stalin. And it dampened immediately expressions against the war. And in Russia, you can't call it a war. It's a special military operation. The state also introduced a law that anyone disseminating fake information about the Russian military to get 15 years in prison. And so this acted to squelch dissent, but it still pops out here and there. Give a couple of examples. Just a few days ago, there was a concert in St. Petersburg, I don't know the concert venue, but I saw it on Twitter, hundreds, maybe thousands there, and all of a sudden they start spontaneously chanting. Here, I'll choose my language carefully “F, the war.”

Ruth Candler

So they're calling it a war.

Rich Bidlack

Calling it a war, and saying what should we do about this war? I guess the other side of the coin is the extraordinary extent to which Russia has become a police state since March 16. A woman was standing outside a prominent church in Moscow, Church of Christ the Savior, big landmark and mosque, I believe it's the world's largest Orthodox Church in fact. A lone woman holding a sign that says, “the sixth commandment: thou shalt not kill.” So a woman holding a sign with scripture in front of a church, she's hauled away. Then in a provincial city, this has happened more than once, a person standing up holding a blank piece of paper, nothing written on it, they haul that person off.

Ruth Candler

Blank piece of paper?

Rich Bidlack

Blank piece of paper. But this is the one that I think shows thought control going to the nth degree. A couple of weeks ago, maybe around three weeks ago now, several people were standing outside the Kremlin, and they were holding their hands up in front of them like fists as if they were holding something but they were holding nothing. They were taken away and the charge was holding invisible signs of antigovernment slogans

Ruth Candler

Gives new meaning to the to the phrase “reading between the lines,” doesn't it?

Rich Bidlack

But what there is, you know, you do see poking through some protests. Now, if you're going to squelch dissent to such an extent how can people express their outrage? Well they do it in violent ways. There have been a number of induction centers, recruiting centers, military recruiting centers, have been firebombed in Russia in recent days. Some regional governors have resigned. A mid-level diplomat, Russian diplomat, wrote a scathing letter against the war. He's outside of Russia. That happened a couple of days ago.

Ruth Candler

So how are you, a professor in Lexington, Virginia, able to gain daily access to Russian news media? You're seeing what the Russian Government is saying. But you're also seeing evidence that Russian people are able to find independent news media.

Rich Bidlack

Right. On social, through social media, the telegram channel, I spend probably too much time on Twitter, following video clips that Russians submit, that Ukrainians submit from the front lines and with regard to the score, we're watching this war unfold in front of our eyes. Those fighters who are holed up in the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol, they're making videos and uploading them so the whole world can see it. It's really remarkable how much we can see about what is going on. Twitter is blocked in Russia, but there's a workaround. VPN, I'm not sure, I don't understand the technology, but you can work around it and upload videos. So that's mainly how I follow what's going on in Russia.

Ruth Candler

Well, so then, is there any way of knowing whether the majority of Russians genuinely support Putin?

Rich Bidlack

Yeah, that's an excellent question. And many people are trying to answer that. There is a very reputable polling agency that still functions in Russia called Levada. And they've done public polling for years. And the most recent poll I've seen according to Levada, something like 75%, maybe 80%, in Russia support the war. But the real question is, given the extent of thought control in Russia, if someone were to put a microphone in my face, and I'm a Russian, they say, “What do you think of the war? What do you think of President Putin?” Now, I'm gonna be very reluctant to criticize. I think there are a lot of people who are sitting on the fence, who may have their own private thoughts and aren't going to share them. Because if you call it a war, you might get 15 years in jail. So it's really, really hard to know what Russian people are thinking. If Russians want to find news, they can do it. I mean, the

internet is still open, they can log on to CNN if they want. Many don't, many are just trying to block it out of their mind. I think some are somewhat oblivious to it. You know, the state media ever since Russia seized Crimea in 2014 has been just a source of disinformation. And many buy into the Kremlin's line that you've got a nest of Nazis that have to be thoroughly purged in Ukraine. So the short answer to your question is I don't think there's really any way to know what Russians are thinking.

Ruth Candler

I'd like to go back to our earlier conversation, when you mentioned that you were inspired to pursue teaching by favorite faculty members at Wake Forest. What do you enjoy most about teaching and what are some of your students doing today, your previous students doing today?

Rich Bidlack

I got into this business when I was in my early 30s. I think I was 32 when I came to Washington and Lee. Now, in my mid to late 60s, I'm 67. I never realized when I was a younger man how much fun it would be to work with 18 to 22 year-olds who are smart, who are energetic, who have very flexible minds willing to learn and want to make their world a better place in which to live. I mean, it's just, it's a blast. I love working with these young people and work with some of them very closely.

What do they do? A wide range of things. Actually, a few summers ago, actually, this goes back about seven or eight years. I was curious what history majors do. I had been in the department for a long time, we're one of the larger departments on campus. And no one knew what our majors did. We all knew those that we kept in touch with what they did. We had kind of anecdotal evidence. But I worked with our alumni office, and came up with kind of a profile of what they did. Many go to law schools, we expected. About a quarter or so more went into teaching than I thought. A number go into business. So there's really a wide range. We have on our website, the history department, you know, what can you do with a history major? And I kind of turned the question around, say, what can you not do? They pursue many different fields. In our Russian area studies program, students have gone into a number of different areas.

Jim Weiss is a history professor out on the West Coast in Oregon. Randy Lewis was a guy who studied for a year in Russia, and he's been working for many years in the Far East in mineral extraction in Russia. And he's testified before the Russian Duma. I haven't been in touch with him recently. I'm not sure what he's doing over the last couple of years, but he made a career in Russia for going back to the late 1990s. Tom Grove, a fellow who studied Russian and German here, he got a Watson fellowship after he graduated. And he traveled the world studying the history of the stringed instrument. Tom was a wonderful classical guitarist. He fell in love with Turkey, and he got a graduate degree at Columbia University, went to Turkey to work as a journalist, first for a local publication, but then Reuters picked him up. But then he went to where he really wanted to go, that was Moscow, and he

worked for Reuters. Then Wall Street Journal noticed his talent and picked him up and he was there for seven or eight years. He's perfectly fluent in Russian, doesn't use a translator. He's fluent in Turkish, Russian, and German. He's now in Israel, though he's been reporting on the war given his vast wealth of knowledge about Russia during the seven or eight years, which he was there. Kelly Kopcial, she's with the State Department in Prague now. We had a student graduate last year, Wes Culp, wrote a wonderful thesis, I had the privilege to direct it, on Russia's development of the Arctic region. He was picked up by US intelligence agency, and he's waiting for his security clearance.

We've got a good crop of our majors this year. I've already mentioned one guy, Nick Mosher. A bundle of happy energy Nick is, and he wrote an honors thesis that I directed, on Russian and Chinese involvement in the country of Kazakhstan, which is a huge country territorially between Russia and China. Nick secured a Fulbright grant to teach English somewhere in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is almost five times the size of France, but with a population of only 19 million or so, very sparsely populated. He doesn't know where he's going to be yet, but he's going to teach English somewhere in Kazakhstan. Another student, Elaine Johansen, Elaine wrote a superb honors thesis that Professor Jasiewicz directed, and I was a second reader, on the development of national identity among Ukrainians a very, very current hot topic, which she didn't want. She started back in the fall, didn't know how important that would become, but how Ukrainians have come to develop a sense of Ukrainian identity, not based on ethnicity, really, but based on civic nationalism. She won a Fulbright to Ukraine, but with the war, isn't going there, but she's going to work with Ukrainian refugees in Poland, primarily, I believe, but perhaps also in Romania, and Hungary. And other students, Samantha Carly has a Fulbright to go to the former Soviet republic of Georgia. She's going to be teaching English in that country, in the Caucasus. So yeah, some really wonderful students.

Ruth Candler

So, how rewarding is it to have had such an influence over so many young lives?

Rich Bidlack

Well, a number of us, you know, teach them. They take my Russian history courses, they study. They've studied Russian here with Professor Brodsky and our instructors, Yulia Rubina and Dmitry Zhukovskiy. And they've worked with Professor Jasiewicz. It's really rewarding. And one of the best things I think for teachers is to have a student come back, to contact them years later, you know, most I calculate, I think I've taught around 2500 students or so, you know, most you don't hear from again, but a number you do. And it's always interesting to see how they develop. You pour as much of yourself into them for four years. And it's wonderful to see, you know, what they want to do with their lives, both professionally and personally.

Ruth Candler

So Rich, I think that was an invitation to any alum that's listening to reach out and say hello.

Rich Bidlack

Okay, sure, absolutely.

Ruth Candler

I know that not all colleges and universities have a Russian area studies program. So W&L is very fortunate to have one. Did the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 diminish interest in Russian studies at W&L across the country? And are you seeing any signs that the Russian invasion of Ukraine and related events will affect student interest in the future?

Rich Bidlack

Let me just say a word or two about the program itself. I did my graduate work at Indiana University and they had this certificate program, it's now actually a master's degree there. And it was based on the study of Russian language, or they had other Slavic languages they taught too, and what we call the area study. So history, politics, sociology, culture, religion. And when I came here, I wanted to create something similar, and we created a program, started working on it 1990. It came about right after the Soviet Union collapsed in '92. That was based on three years of studied Russian language, required course in Russian literature, required course in Russian history. And we also have Professor Jasiewicz's courses dealing with Eastern Europe. And it was called the Russian Studies program. Somewhere along the line, we added the word area to make it Russian Area Studies, an area had kind of a double meaning. It emphasized not just language, but the area studies, the other disciplines, history, politics, sociology. But just recently, in fact, this past week, we've changed the name of the program, we now call it the East European and Russian Studies. And that's really for political sensitivity. A Russian Area Studies could give the wrong impression that somehow we're tying into Putin's idea of the Russian world and that we're kind of promoting a Russian imperialism, which we certainly are not. So we decided to change the name of the program. And we put East Europe first because if you call it Russian and East European Studies, East Europe seems to be some sort of appendage to Russia. So we decided to flip it. And actually, the faculty has set a meeting this afternoon to, to ratify that that name change. So a little bit about that, the content hasn't changed at all. But we changed how we brand it.

Ruth Candler

So is the branding change a direct result of the war?

Rich Bidlack

Yes.

Ruth Candler

Yes, okay.

Rich Bidlack

Yep.

Ruth Candler

So I hope I'm not letting the cat out of the bag here. But you've mentioned that you're easing toward retirement by teaching a reduced course load for the next three years. Will you continue your research after you retire?

Rich Bidlack

Oh, yeah, I hope so. And the phase retirement program here is really wonderful. You teach a fraction of your courses and get a fraction of your pay. I won't be teaching in the fall. I teach all of my courses in either a 12 week term or a 12 and four week term. I've kind of circled back to something I was interested in as an undergraduate student. I mentioned a wonderful teacher, Lowell Tillett at Wake Forest. I wrote an independent study with him on Russian dissidents in the 1970s. I did it in 1976. I've become interested in that topic again. And when you look at the phenomenon of organized dissent in the Soviet Union after the Second World War, the group that really made the biggest impact early on, were religious dissidents, Christians, who reacted against Nikita Khrushchev, or as we say, in America, Khrushchev, his restrictions on religion. He was a dyed in the wool atheist. He was apparently very fearful of the force of religion. And he ruled among other things that children could not be baptized. This created a great problem for particularly Protestants and Evangelicals, Baptists. There's been a Baptist community in Russia going back to the 19th century. Some of them kind of swallow it hard and said, "Well, if we want to have legal existence, we don't want to be arrested. We have to follow these new restrictions." Others said "no, we'll just practice our faith the way we want to and we'll just evade the authorities." But they also organize dissent. And there was this massive demonstration of several hundred people that converged on the Central Committee in 1966, primarily Baptists, but also some other evangelicals. The leaders were arrested. One became really quite famous—Georgi Vins. President Carter took up his case and actually organized a swap of Vins for some Soviet spies we have. There's another guy who continued, he spent three years in prison. But then he just decided to work underground. And he published a journal, maintained correspondence. The Soviets are trying to find them. They just couldn't find them for 19 years. And I found out that he holds up in Latvia and the Latvian coast. And so the security archives, the KGB archives are open in Latvia now, so I'd like to pursue his story. How did he manage to evade the authorities? Who helped him? Obviously, he had a support network. And so some kind of cycling or circling back to a topic of descent that I began to pursue way back in the early 1970s, in the mid-1970s.

Ruth Candler

So will this be a book, possibly?

Rich Bidlack

I don't know. We'll see. We're still in the early stages.

Ruth Candler

Hopefully we can read what you've discovered. So at this point in our podcast, we'd like to lighten it up a little bit, and we call it our lightning round. Russian spies are a popular subject of novels, television and movies from The Hunt for Red October to The Americans. Do you have any favorites in the genre?

Rich Bidlack

Well, I'm a really bad person to ask about American pop culture and in our home almost 20 years ago now, the fall 2002, we turned off the television. Our boys were young. And we said, mostly we thought that what was really important on TV you could find on the internet somewhere, so we will just spend the evenings reading, reading books and other things. So I don't know much about American TV over the last 20 years. But going back a little bit further, one series that I like, it was a British mini-series called Smiley's People, was based on a John le Carré novel. And Alec Guinness played the role of George Smiley, and it's just wonderfully done. I've always, I like Alec Guinness, thought he had a great acting career. I remember as a youngster watching what was it-- Lawrence of Arabia--where he played Prince Faisal, back in the early 60s, and probably, maybe he's most well-known for his role in the Star Wars films as Obi-Ben Kenobi. But I thought that series, Smiley's People, and le Carré's novels are generally really well done.

Ruth Candler

What do you do when you're not teaching or conducting research?

Rich Bidlack

Well, my wife and I live right here in Lexington, have a number of activities. I love the beautiful regional country in which we live between the two national forest and the Blue Ridge Mountains on the one side and the Allegheny on the other. I like canoeing and kayaking, got a couple of canoes, two canoes and two kayaks, stored away in the crawlspaces in the rafters of the garage. Like going out on the Maury, the James River, particularly like Lake Moomaw, four square mile lake on the border with West Virginia. Terribly underutilized, you go out there and you'd maybe meet one or two other boats, no cell phone service, no one can contact you. It's just a great place to immerse yourself in nature and getaway. So I like that. Do some gardening around the house. Both my wife and I are active in Lexington Presbyterian Church. So a number of activities, really like Lexington a lot.

Ruth Candler

So this week is an important one for Washington and Lee, our seniors graduate on Wednesday. As you phase into retirement, what advice would you like to share with them as they begin their careers?

Rich Bidlack

From the person to whom much is given, much is expected. A W&L education is an extraordinary gift. I would wager that there's not one student at W&L who pays her or his own way here personally. I mean, its what? Total fees are about \$80,000 a year now, we're an expensive school. And that \$80,000 doesn't cover all the costs. I don't know what total costs are, probably add up to around \$100,000 per year to educate a student. Somebody's paying for it-- their parents, university scholarships, maybe Pell Grants. But it's an extraordinary gift and use that for your own fulfillment, but to make the world a better place in which to give back to your community. That's what I'd tell them. And that's basically my experience in listening to a lot of commencement addresses and baccalaureate interests over the years. That's the fundamental theme that appears over and over again, is you have been given this incredible gift. Use it for the good of your community.

Ruth Candler

It's a wonderful message. Rich, thank you so much for joining us today.

Rich Bidlack

No, thank you, enjoy chatting with you.

Ruth Candler

And thank you W&L Lifelong Learners for tuning in today. To learn more about today's episode and also watch our Lifelong Learning webinar presentation on Ukraine, Russia, EU, and Vladimir Putin featuring Dr. Rich Bidlack and Dr. Krzysztof Jasiewicz, please visit our website wlu.edu/lifelong. Take a look and until next time, let's remain together, not unmindful of the future.