

Coexistence, Cosmopolitanism and the City: A study of Odessa

A Report by Caroline Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja

Summary

Caroline Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja presented a joint paper discussing the 'cosmopolitan' city and its fate after the demise of USSR. The presentation focused on two examples, Bukhara and Odessa, both famous for their diversity and tolerance. Both cities retain a 'self myth' of tolerance, although they now find themselves part of states (Uzbekistan and Ukraine respectively) which are overtly more overtly nationalistic than they were in Soviet times.

Caroline Humphrey explored changes in the quality of everyday interactions – the question of how co-existence works socially, at the micro-level, drawing some comparisons and contrasts between the two cities. While the *idea* of being cosmopolitan is integral to both cities, and both had very significant Jewish populations, a series of contrasts between the two groups highlights the differences in the relation between religion and the political imagination in the two cases. Humphrey discussed the way in which the project's preliminary findings indicate that the explanation lies both in history (of migration and settlement) and in the political imagination of how religion is accommodated in the polity. The two cities were "cosmopolitan" in very different ways. The open (in Odessa) or more closed (in Bukhara) character of the religious community (in this case, that of the Jews) was related to the structure of the city itself as a political entity.

Vera Skvirskaja outlined the urban sites and practices that were found particularly fruitful for research on co-existence in Odessa, focusing on new migrants and return migrants in the city. Many of the return migrants are Jews, now citizens of Israel and USA, who regularly come to Odessa for holidays, or spend longer periods of time taking care of their newly established Odessa-based businesses. The project's intention is not only to investigate how return migrants are received by old and new city dwellers, but also how their experiences while living abroad, e.g. in Israel, have affected the ways in which they engage with the current religious and ethnic diversity in the city. It was suggested that extensive travel and 'cosmopolitan' experiences of return migrants might in fact feed into new forms of discrimination or segregation in their former home.

The preliminary conclusion was that we are now witnessing the erosion of some earlier practices that we might deem cosmopolitan (and many urban dwellers themselves would, in Soviet parole, call 'international'). Yet, the memory and images of the cosmopolitan and/or international city are strongly present and perform the political function of undermining the rhetoric and policies (especially linguistic ones) of the nation-state.

Project progress to date.

Vera Skvirskaya and Caroline Humphrey carried out fieldwork in Odessa in summer 2005 (approximately three weeks). They made a preliminary survey of the city, living both in a communal apartment in the centre and in the district of sanatoria. Among places / people visited were: the port area, the two major markets, an Orthodox nunnery, a Muslim culture centre, the Jewish cemetery, and various organisations concerned with the Odessa diaspora. Vera Skvirskaya made a visit to Istanbul on the ferry that takes/brings migrants in both directions. She returned to Odessa for further fieldwork during spring 2006 (one month), and she will shortly make another visit (Sept-Oct 2006).

A large number of book, periodicals, maps, and graphic materials have been collected.

Contact has been made with other scholars working on Odessa and its history. We have been invited to contribute a paper in Russian on Odessa for the noted Moscow journal *Vestnik Yevrazii*. We have given seminars on the Odessa work in LSE and Oxford.

Further funding for the project was obtained from the AHRB under the 'innovation research' programme. This grant covers salary costs for Dr. Skvirskaya, but not the research costs (for which we continue to be grateful to the Centre of History & Economics). This is a one year grant (Sept 2006- August 2007).

A further grant has been obtained from the AHRB for a project which has developed out of the Odessa study. This is a three year collaborative grant (2007-10), with several participants, under the AHRB 'Migration and Diaspora' programme. Our project will be a comparative study of migration, its history and its effects in Odessa and Istanbul.