

Leighton, Lauren G. *Modern Russian Culture: A Course of Ideas and Images*. Lexicon Bridge: Ithaca, NY, 2004. Library Edition \$250 (includes Reference Disc on DVD-ROM and five Video DVDs). Student Edition \$50 (includes Reference Disc on two CD-ROMs). Bookstore Edition \$10 (includes Reference Disc on one CD-ROM).

Those of us who have been teaching courses on Russian culture know how invaluable visual ancillaries can be as a way to provide visual representation of objects in a lecture and to maintain the focus and interest of the students on the subject. The technology for using images in classroom instruction has progressed quite far from the time when we would simply pass photographs and photo albums around the classroom, to the current technology-based classrooms, where students have access to thousands of pages and images at their fingertips that are accessible at their own convenience. The two main approaches in technology-based instruction are the instructor-centered and the student-centered approach. In the first instance, the instructor is responsible for selecting the images to be viewed, for providing commentaries, and for selecting the time and place for viewing the images. In a typical classroom situation, in a course that relies heavily on visual ancillaries, an image that is projected on a screen typically gets between fifteen and thirty seconds of class time. Soon after the image is off of the screen, it leaves the students' long-term memory as well. In a student-centered approach, the instructor is responsible for structuring the learning experience, but the student has control of the viewing time, length and place of the learning task. The aim of the author and designers of the package under review here is to produce a set of visual images and commentaries that can be used as resources for both of these approaches.

The package is based on a course taught by the author at the University of Illinois at Chicago. A set of five DVDs contain around 1,000 images organized into 38 lectures that are

grouped into five major topics: *Moscow*, *Petersburg*, *Soviet Russia*, *Russian art*, and *Russia in Transition*. Each narrated lecture consists of approximately 30 images that cover both “high” and “low” culture. Lectures are presented in the form of a self-running slid show, and each lecture lasts between twelve and fifteen minutes. Although the format is in video DVD, there are no video excerpts in the set. The designers use panning of static images quite effectively to simulate video. The DVDs are region free, and they can be run on any computer, or on any standard DVD player. The author’s running commentaries are often based on the slide-by-slide notes available on the *Reference Disc*, but do not include the factual details presented in the notes. Each disc also contains music by Russian composers both as background to the narration and as separate audio files.

The *Reference Edition* DVD contains the same 1,000 images, which are thematically organized in the same way as the lectures in the other five DVDs. There are three versions of the *Reference Disc*. The version that is packaged with the *Library Edition* is in DVD format. The *Student Edition* of the *Reference Disk* consists of a package of two CD-ROM discs that are identical in content, except that one has large size images, and the other one has smaller images to accommodate computers with high and low resolution monitors. A *Bookstore Edition* includes one *Reference Disk* on CD-ROM that contains only the images for a lower resolution monitor.

The organization of the major topics in the *Reference Disc* is the same as that in the DVDs. The user selects a topic from a menu, a slide is displayed on the left side of the screen, and a window with notes on the right side. A menu at the top of the screen lists the number of slides in the lecture and the title of each slide of the chosen lecture. Slide captions are in Russian and in English. The quality of each image varies, and it depends largely on the quality of the original image. Although it’s obvious that the designers went to great length to digitize the

images at the highest quality possible, many of the digital images are probably second, or third generation images that originate from slides and photographs. The images that are of the highest quality are those that originate as digital images. The quality is acceptable for viewing on a computer, but many of them lack sharpness for viewing in a classroom on a large projection screen.

The notes for each slide are located in the right frame. These are short (3-4 sentences) and concise descriptions of the content of each slide. Almost all slide notes also include links to more notes on related topics. The user has an option to save any of the images (they are in JPEG format) and all textual notes onto a local computer. This is a welcome feature for students since it eliminates the need to take notes at the time of viewing. The size of the text font in the notes can be increased for better viewing in a classroom on a larger projection screen.

All texts in the *Reference Edition* disc can be accessed, browsed by subject, and searched for any name, term, word, or phrase independently of the slide shows. The button “Show supporting texts” opens a new screen with several windows. The list of supporting texts includes slide captions, slide notes, list of architects, list of artists, notes on historical and cultural background, index of buildings, monuments and paintings, periods of artistic movements, recommended readings by title and author, recommended readings by subject, rulers of Rus and Russia, and Russia in transition. Search results include the number of times the search term was found and the number of texts it was found in. Unfortunately, search results are not listed in the typical search engine results style, so there is no way for a user to select a specific link from the results. Another minor shortcoming in the search utility is that there is no documented way that one can limit a search to a whole word. For example, a search for ‘Rus’ results in 1373 instances,

and they include results for the words Rus, Russia, Russian, etc. The content of the supporting texts is concise, and is not meant to be exhaustive.

The supporting texts for artists provide a short biography of the artist with links to the movements that the artists was associated with. What is lacking in these notes are links to works by individual artists, so that, for example, clicking on a link for Kiprensky should produce a list of works by the artist with further links to individual works. The user can still access individual works of art through an alphabetical index that also includes an index of buildings and monuments. The supporting texts are in English with Russian equivalents for the names of monuments, titles of paintings and names of artists.

The design of the interface is clean and intuitive. Button and menu titles are self-explanatory; they are placed on the screen in a way that they don't distract from the viewing experience.

This package of DVDs is not intended to be used as the primary source for a course on Russian Culture, but careful selection of appropriate lectures for classroom presentations, accompanied by student access to the enormous number of images and texts will enhance the teaching and learning experience in any course on this subject. This package is really the only available source on the market that provides such a rich and extensive collection of images on Russian culture. Teachers and students will find the DVDs a welcome addition to text based lectures. The lectures are also very well suited for use in introductory level language courses to enhance student appreciation of Russian culture. Sample *Reference Disc* screens, and a sample narrated lecture are available for preview from the publisher's web page at

<http://lexiconbridge.com/MRC/default.htm>.

George Mitrevski

Auburn University