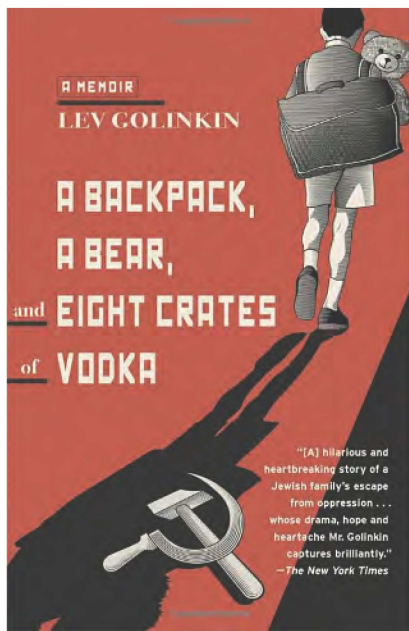




# 2017-2018 COMMON READ



*A Backpack, a Bear, and  
Eight Crates of Vodka:*  
A Memoir by Lev Golinkin

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
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*Our Journey to Russia and Austria*



# TAMIU AMBASSADORS



**#RUSSIA2018**



A select group of 14 Texas A&M International University students traveled over 6,100 miles to Moscow, and St. Petersburg, Russia between March 8-21, 2018.

Students participating in the program were Isabela Barrientos, Marcos Enriquez, Briana Escobar, Kimberly Flores, Mayra Hurtado, Sergio Martínez, José A. Medrano, Aranza Obscura, Alyla Robles, María Graciela Rodríguez, Aaron E. Salazar, Rebecca Vela, Alfredo Velasco and Alan Villarreal.

Their time in Russia was highly structured with academic classes, guest lectures, related guided tours and a service-learning opportunity. Among trip highlights are visits to the Lenin Mausoleum, the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, a guided tour of Cold War bunkers, an evening in Gorky Park, tour of St. Petersburg, the burial place of Russian Tsars, a roundtable discussion on the Bolshevik Revolution with students at St. Petersburg State University, a trip to the Winter Palace at the Hermitage, and Catherine's Palace.

Take a look at pictures and and blog entries from the RTG Ambassadors during their trip. Visit [www.instagram.com/tamiureadingtheglobe](http://www.instagram.com/tamiureadingtheglobe) for more blog entries.



After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia experimented a revival of religion. All faiths began to gain strength in this country. The Russian Orthodox church, which accounts for 80% of the nation's faithful, has seen the biggest increase. One of its biggest Cathedrals, St. Isaac, located in Saint Petersburg is definitely one of the most beautiful churches in the whole world. I had never been inside an Orthodox church (there are no pews or specific sermons; worshipers stand together and chant or sing) and I am glad I was able to be inside this one.

Although it is now commonly used as a museum, it retains the original Icons used hundreds of years ago for worship. I was surprised to find out that they had survived the Soviet period when priests and religious people were killed simply because of their faith. They survived but required much renovation, renovation that continues today. It is honestly a breathtaking view: the gold, the frescoes on the ceiling, the immense size of the interior. As a spiritual person myself, I have never felt closer to heaven.



**Sergio Martínez**  
RTG Ambassador

We visited many different historical sites in Russia, all of them with great significance to country's history. Nonetheless, the one that touched me the most was Red Square. Readings and images simply do not do justice to this place. I personally found it beautiful all around. The square is bounded by red stone walls and churches — at least four churches. We visited many different historical sites in Russia, all of them with great significance to country's history. Nonetheless, the one that touched me the most was Red Square.



Readings and images simply do not do justice to this place. I personally found it beautiful all around. The square is bounded by red stone walls and churches — at least four churches. This made it attractive to me as Red Square is typically associated with Communism and a dearth of religion.

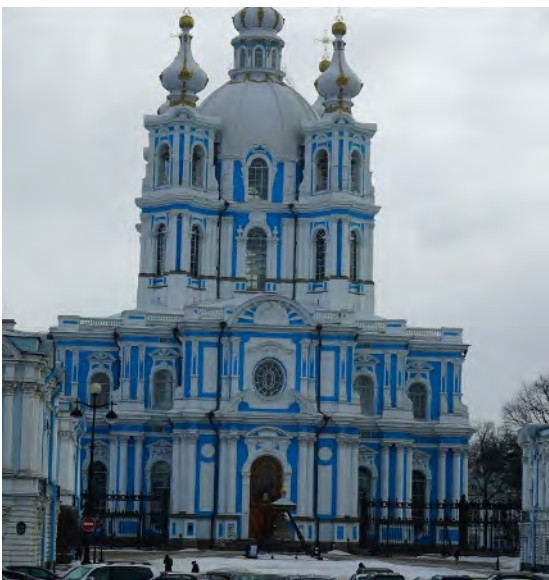
The Kremlin is definitely a sight to see — the onion domes, the bright colors, the original architecture, simply overpowers any preconception one could have about it. Though we could not go in (a familiar phrase- "No!") we did get to see Lenin's Mausoleum. St. Basil's Cathedral right next to the Kremlin is both majestic and a way to reaffirm this country's spirituality following the Soviet times.



With Russia as my first international trip, I knew I was bound to experience something enlightening that would expose my hidden interests and give me a reason to become an even more inquisitive individual. I was also in search of an experience providing an immense amount of cultural knowledge That was exactly what the tour of St. Petersburg gave me.



As we cruised through the city of palaces, we stopped by the cabin of Peter the Great; it was the first residential building built in St. Petersburg, and it housed the tsar from 1703-1708. This city is now one of the only European cities that has been able to maintain its first building. The preservation of the city allows it to be a mecca for cultural and historical landmarks. Keeping land sites such as the St. Nicholas Naval Cathedral intact since the 18th century allows for society to get a feel and really comprehend the background of the city and the vast impact history has had on it. Moreover, St. Petersburg embodies the importance of rich history. I've been inspired. There is so much to learn. A city that embraces its history and preserves its antiquity only gives future generations a chance to truly understand the ways in which our world has evolved. My eyes (and camera lens) experienced surreal moments throughout this tour of beautiful, colorful, inspirational St. Petersburg.



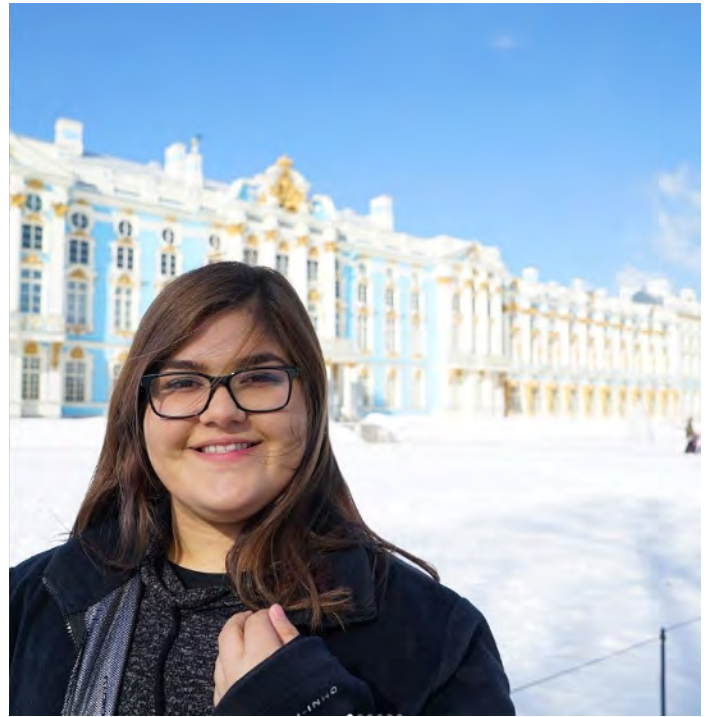
Our visit to the Moscow Choral Synagogue was a short yet highly rewarding experience. Being a person who greatly esteems the culture of Israel, my joy was full as we entered this authentic house of worship. The men in our group were handed complementary kippahs to wear on our heads as we entered the holy sanctuary, instantly increasing my enthusiasm.

When I've read about events taking place in a synagogue in the Bible, I had imagined them to be simple and quaint, placing more emphasis on the Scriptures rather than the setting. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised to view this synagogue's focus on elegant decor and intricate interior design. Even so, the contrasting Edenic paintings of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life; the walls interlaced with Hebrew Scriptures and prayers; and the pastel color schemes that characterized the room enhanced the atmosphere, making it appear heavenly.



We engaged in inquiry with one of the synagogue rabbis; he shared the synagogue's history, which had its founding in 1891. Interestingly, he explained how this was the only synagogue allowed to operate during the Soviet period in Moscow—an attempt by the government to appear more tolerant and less antisemitic. Although we were not privy hearing the men's acapella choir (from which the synagogue derives its name), the experience was personally enriching, helping me view the Jewish faith with greater regard.

Through the biting cold we went, gingerly trying to control our skidding feet on the slippery ice, all for the glittering jewel that is Pushkin's Catherine's Summer Palace. This treasure was constructed for Catherine the Great as her summer house. Later her daughter, Elizabeth, lavishly added to the palace; theorists claim Elizabeth's excesses lead to Russia's bankruptcy. Inside we glimpsed a world full of opulence, luxuries and riches comprised of over fifty rooms, all of which have an individual and designated purpose (dining, dressing, waiting, dancing).



One of my personal favorites, the Great Room, housed the most ornamental decorative gold-leaf of all palaces in Saint Petersburg. It was renovated after the Great Patriotic War when Germans invaded and burnt part of the palace. The intricacy of such architecture left us in awe; we learned of the Baroque style meaning that each and every piece was unique as per Elizabeth's request. Due to time (not enough) and circumstance (on going renovations) we were only able to see a part of the palace — but that small taste left us hungry for more.

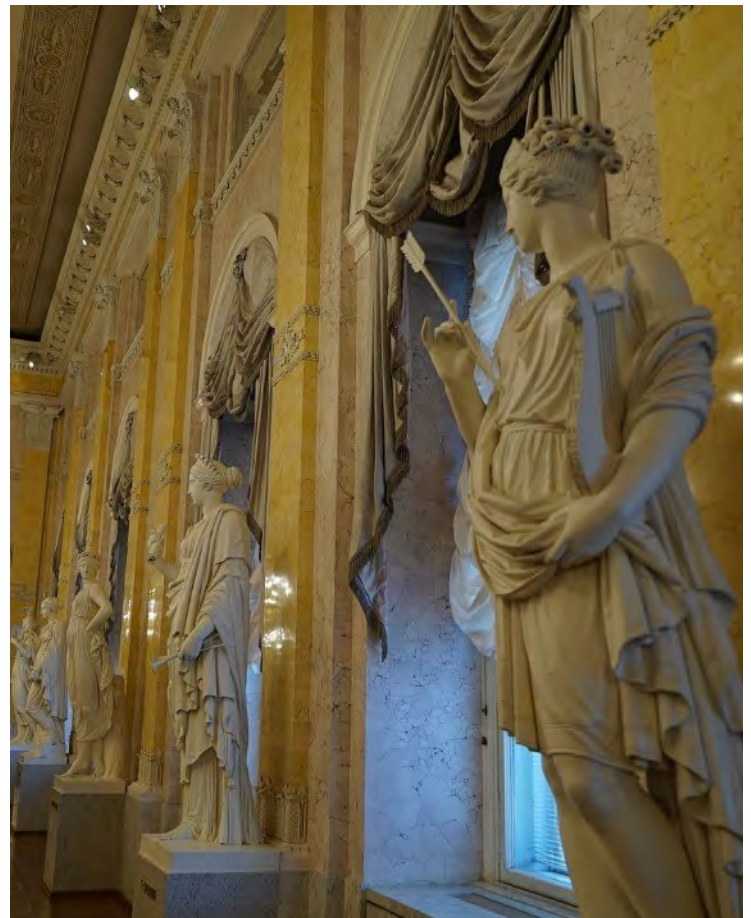




Today we visited the Albertina which houses many famous works of contemporary art. After this visit, I truly began to question what made art valid. The museum was decorated with paintings from the 20th century onwards. This artwork is particularly distinct from the artworks created in the previous centuries. While paintings of the past were highly detailed and focused on royalty or biblical stories, 20th century art was able to expand to a broad range of topics. Due to members of the clergy or royalty no longer offering patronage, artists were now able to paint what they truly desired. The most valuable lesson I gained from my visit to the Albertina is that art changes with the times.

A perfect example of this is the impressionist style. Originally, it was created to capture a moment in time; however, once photography became a reliable medium, the impressionist style shrunk in popularity. We witnessed art history right before our eyes as the paintings themselves became glimpses into history and innovation. Through the course of the museum tour we saw art evolve from impressionism, to exoticism, to protests of wars and various other abstract concepts.

When I first entered the Albertina, I believed that Renaissance paintings were undoubtedly the best form of art; however, this experience has allowed me to grow to appreciate many other art styles to which I was previously oblivious.



Learning of art, culture, and history of different eras is imperative to becoming a well-rounded human being. Another border, another boundary crossed.

