

THE APPLICATION OF A US-USSR TRADE SIMULATION
TO THE TEACHING OF BUSINESS RUSSIAN

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of how to teach Business Russian to Americans first interested me in simulations.

I could discern two broad groups who would be the targets of instruction--businessmen who knew some Russian, but who wanted to improve their knowledge of the business language; and students from any field who wanted to learn Business Russian as a possible qualification for employment after graduation. A sub-group of the second category would be teachers of Russian who wanted to learn Business Russian to expand the curriculum of their own institution.

All these people had one factor in common. In addition to the language, they needed basic information about doing business with the Soviet Union. This was true because trade between a centrally planned economy and a market economy has many complications with which most international commerce does not have to deal.

Not only are the economic systems quite different and the foreign trade practices of the U.S.S.R. something new for most people, there are the additional problems inherent to all foreign trade of understanding another culture and its customs. This factor is of course exacerbated in the case of the Soviet Union by our ideological differences and our competition on the political front. Because of these differences, both the Soviet and American participants in foreign trade invariably bring to the negotiating table many preconceptions and prejudices which impede trade. Not only do the primary actors have to deal with these problems within themselves, they also have to justify their positions either to a board of directors or to the administration of a Foreign Trade Organization (FTO) which may be made up of people suffering from a double dose of prejudice and misinformation.

I concluded that an effective course for teaching the Russian language of trade could not be divorced from teaching the substance of Soviet-American trade.

THE PROBLEM

I needed a device for bringing together the vocabulary of diverse fields such as economics, foreign trade, politics, finance and transportation, in addition to which I had to present the basic principles of all these areas as they relate to Soviet- American trade. At the same time I needed an environment which would lend itself to oral interaction. This would be necessary in order to provide an opportunity to practice vocabulary and to verbalize the newly presented concepts. A US-USSR trade simulation played in Russian provides most of these requirements.

The question then had to be asked whether one could prepare students adequately in a relatively short period of time to participate meaningfully in the simulation. This problem exists for any simulation or experiential learning, but doing it in a foreign language would add a substantial level of difficulty. Participants would have to be limited to those who knew basic Russian and now wanted to learn Business Russian.

A substantial part of the potential participants would have a limited background in basic business practices, so the preparatory materials would have to be on a level accessible to them. This condition would not be such a problem, however, since as already noted, most people regardless of their background would be unfamiliar with trade as it is practiced in the U.S.S.R.

Since no simulation existed specifically for US-USSR trade, it would be necessary to devise one and then translate it into Russian. This was the basis of my application for funding to the U.S. Office of Education, which agreed to fund the project. Although I had a background in economics and accounting, I had no experience with simulations, so I began looking for a collaborator.

As far as I knew at that time, basically two disciplines made extensive use of simulations--business and political science. Since I wanted a trade simulation, the logical choice would have seemed to be a business scholar. There were two factors which heavily influenced my decision. One was the fact that my primary focus would be upon inter-cultural communication, and the other was that business with the Soviet Union involves many non-business considerations, i.e. the dynamics of decision making in a centrally planned economy.

Ultimately I opted for a political scientist, Gary Bertsch of the University of Georgia, who had experience in designing simulations as self-contained learning packages dealing with the principles of decision making and political negotiations in East European countries. Even though he was unfamiliar with East-West trade and business in general, I thought that he would be able to produce the desired results, since I would be supplying most of the basic information and describing what I wanted to do with the simulation. In addition to that, I was at that time spending a sabbatical year at the Office of East-West Policy and Planning in the Bureau of East-West Trade. This gave me access to several experts in the field, and their advice regarding the content of the simulation was extremely helpful.

THE SIMULATION

The basic structure of the simulation is as follows:

Module I consists of the learning package orientation in which the participants are acquainted with the procedures to be followed and the overall goals of the simulation.

Module II gives an overview of the Soviet system. Section A gives the societal setting and its impact on the Soviet negotiator. It contains a discussion of the concept of the "Soviet Man" and its role in forming the Soviet world-view.

Section B discusses the bureaucratic structure of the Soviet government and the significance this has for foreign trade. Section C deals with Soviet interests in East-West trade. One of my primary objectives in this project is to make Americans aware of the Soviet perspective, and this includes the attitudes and motivations of Soviets who are opposed to expanded trade, as well as the thinking of those in favor of it.

Section D presents the structure of Soviet- American trade, and this includes a historical overview, current trade patterns, and forms of Soviet- American trade, i.e. forms of counter-trade. Section E deals with U.S. legal constraints on Soviet-American trade. There is an attempt to give the participant a glimpse of our system of export controls, our barriers to imports, and some of the attitudes which gave rise to this system.

Section F deals with the Soviet foreign trade apparatus. It includes a description of the system and an exercise to acquaint the participant with the various FTOs and the areas of trade which they control. There is also an attempt to trace the chain of command within the bureaucracy, but this is, of course, a poorly understood area.

Module III attempts to give a deeper understanding of the Soviet perspective as the Soviets themselves present it. Two Soviet institutions are participating on a consultative basis--the Pushkin Institute, which specializes in teaching Russian to foreigners, and the Academy of Foreign Trade, which trains personnel for the Ministry of Foreign Trade. I have English translations of several papers authored by Soviet officials. The content of this module, however, is not firmly fixed, since it depends upon whether my Soviet colleagues wish to supply the Russian originals of these papers, or to suggest appropriate alternatives. The topics covered by the papers which I have are suggested by their titles:

“Soviet Organizations Involved in Industrial Cooperation Projects.”

“The System Regulating Exports and Imports in the U.S.S.R.”

“The Legal Status of Soviet FTOs.”

“Credit and Finance in Soviet Foreign Trade.”

“Problem Questions in Soviet-American Foreign Trade Contracts.”

This module also includes an exercise which is designed to assist the participants to synthesize the material presented to this point, and to begin practicing the skills required for negotiation. The exercise is in the form of a debate on the pros and cons of Soviet-American trade. The debates take place between pairs of participants--one representing the Soviet side and one the American. After 10-15 minutes, they switch roles.

Module IV deals with the negotiating process. It includes a discussion of the typical setting, conditions, and as much as possible about the “typical” Soviet negotiator. There is also an example of the object of negotiation--a contract. One of the exercises

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here will be technical translation. In this section there is also a brief treatment of financing Soviet- American trade, and two case studies of actual contract negotiations. Module V deals with the language of trade negotiation. There is a short discussion of some of the problems of translation and a study of significant terms to be used in US-USSR trade. A future project to be derived from this modest beginning will be a dictionary of foreign trade terminology.

Module VI contains the actual simulation. It includes a description of the resources required, the basic rules of operation, a description of the roles to be played, and the composition of the various teams. There are two entirely different scenarios involving different types of negotiations. There are individual briefing notes for each team. For Soviet- American trade, this means that there is a team for the U.S. corporation, a team for the Soviet FTO, and one or more governmental advisory teams for each side. These advisory teams are necessary in order to acquaint the participants with the problems of dealing with both the Soviet and American bureaucracies, as well as with each other.

Module VII is the simulation debriefing.

CONCLUSION

In the spring of 1978, the translated simulation will be taken to Moscow for review by Soviet officials in the Ministry of Foreign Trade and by the faculty of the Academy of Foreign Trade. It will then be presented and played at an intensive two-week seminar at Bryn Mawr College during the summer. Following this, the material is to be adapted for a college level course that will last an entire semester, with the simulation being played at the end.