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Reinterpreting the Past: Lawrence University's Courtney Doucette Heading to Russia as Fulbright Scholar

Posted on: May 26th, 2004 by Rick Peterson

Courtney Doucette got bit by the history bug as a fourth grader and has never been able to shake the infection. Twelve years later, the Lawrence University senior is still more interested in nurturing her long-term curiosity than she is in finding a cure.

To that end, Doucette soon will embark on a 10-month study of Russian history at the European University in St. Petersburg, Russia, courtesy of a \$23,000 grant from the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board. Doucette was recently selected as a 2004-05 Fulbright Scholar from among more than 5,000 applicants. This is the second straight year and the third time in the past four years that a Lawrence student has been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship.

Beginning in late August, Doucette will undertake research at European University on the impact of political regimes on the way we understand the past. She also will work outside of academia to explore the way ordinary citizens regard history after the "official" view of the past is significantly changed.

"Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russians have had to question what really happened in their country while the Communist regime was in power," said Doucette, a history and Russian double major from Racine. "There is now strong evidence suggesting events of the Soviet era played out differently than the Party claimed. The new political regime's power is partly based on its ability to disprove the Communist Party's view of history, so there is a need to radically reinterpret and rewrite history in Russia."

During a semi-nomadic childhood — Doucette’s family moved 13 times while she was growing up and she lived with a Japanese family for a year in Okinawa as a participant in the Rotary Youth Exchange Program — she constantly tried to make sense of her ever-changing world the way a historian would.

“I learned to ask questions about the history of my surroundings,” said Doucette, a founding member and former president of Lawrence’s Russian and East European Club.

While in Russia, Doucette intends to explore the impact the Soviet regime had on the content of Russian history books and the ways the post-Soviet regime has rewritten these texts. In addition, and outside the formality of the European University, Doucette will examine ways personal experiences and oral histories challenge the officially sanctioned interpretations of the past.

In addressing the second question, Doucette plans to observe what today’s youngest generation of Russians are learning about their history through observation sessions at primary and secondary schools. She also plans to become involved with Memorial, a non-profit organization in St. Petersburg that chronicles the experiences of victims of Stalinism.

“Part of my interest in Russian history and culture stems from my interest in the process of writing history,” said Doucette, who previously spent time in Russia while on an off-campus study program in Krasnodar in 2001. “Contemporary Russia provides an ideal context for me to investigate this process. As a Fulbright Scholar, I’ll be able to improve my Russian skills, gain valuable experience with Russian archival sources and form connections with professional Russian scholars.

“Living in Russia is going to provide great opportunities to explore fundamental questions about how academics and non-academics

make sense of the past,” Doucette added.

Following her year abroad, Doucette plans to return to the States to pursue graduate studies in Russian history with the hope of eventually teaching Russian history at the collegiate level.

“My future goals are clearly a product of my past and of the way my past has shaped my method of making sense of the world,” said Doucette.

The Fulbright Program was created by Congress in 1946 to foster mutual understanding among nations through educational and cultural exchanges. Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, who sponsored the legislation, saw it as a step toward building an alternative to armed conflict.

Since its inception, the Fulbright Program has become the U.S. government’s premier scholarship program. It has supported more than 260,000 American students, artists, and other professionals, opportunities for study, research and international competence in more than 150 countries.