

Mike Berry (1966-)



I came to CREES in 1966 to work on the OECD project on “Science Policy in the USSR” with Ron Amann under the leadership of Bob Davies. In 1968 I was appointed Lecturer in Russian for Social Scientists in succession to Elizabeth Koutaissoff and continued in that position until my retirement in 2005 except for 1971-1972 when I was seconded to work on a Leverhulme funded project on “R & D and Innovation in the Soviet machine tool industry. Since my retirement I have had the status of honorary research fellow.

When I started the CREES community was in its early stages of development under the wise leadership of Bob Davies. John Grayson, a Welsh engineer, helped to keep our feet on the ground and when I started to work on the Soviet machine tool industry he arranged for me to spend a week at a machine tool factory in Selly Oak to see what the machines actually looked like. Here I learnt something about the reality of the industry and ended up making a bolt on a turret lathe.

I have been fortunate to be a member of CREES for all these years and have many memories. In the early years of travel to the Soviet Union we used to travel by train through the heart of Europe encountering the ‘cheerful’ (?) East German border guards more often than we would have liked. I remember lengthy stays in assorted Soviet hotels – mainly at the Universitetskaya in Moscow and at the Oktyabr’skaya and several others in Leningrad. Meetings with Soviet academics varied greatly in interest and cordiality but relations gradually improved over time.

One of the key features in the development of CREES was the presence of the Baykov Library in the same building as CREES, which made it easy to use any free moments to catch up on the latest newspapers and journals. This was particularly true in the perestroika period when every week seem to bring fascinating new materials on the Soviet Union’s past and present. It is sad that this link has now been broken and the Baykov is no longer even on the main university campus.

My research during my time at CREES was mainly linked to Soviet – later Russian - science and technology. CREES had a very strong international reputation for its work on Soviet science and technology from its beginning in the 1960s to the 1990s.

Following the collapse of the USSR I began to work on developments in Russian language and used the growing availability of electronic materials to build up corpora of Russian language materials. This included the preparation of a frequency dictionary based on issues of Nezavisimaya gazeta, which was one of the first newspapers to become easily available in electronic format. The results of this work were used in the revision of the 1972 Basic Course of the Birmingham University Reading Course in Russian for Social Scientists, prepared by Dave Adshead and his colleagues, and the preparation of other teaching materials for the CREES postgraduates. In the 1990s CREES acquired access to live Russian television initially at 52 Pritchatts Road and later in the European Research Institute which I looked after and was able to make hundreds of hours of recordings on videocassettes, which remain sadly underused.

I must also pay tribute to the students and postgraduates I have taught over the years from whom I learnt a great deal about a wide range of topics in economics, politics, society, history etc. Finally, I must pay tribute to the CREES secretaries and in particular Marea and Tricia who have kept CREES running smoothly over the years.

I hope the next fifty years of CREES will be as productive as the first fifty...