

## 9 **"CROSSROADS 2: BRIDGES TO THE FUTURE": EXCHANGE AND DISSEMINATION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE IN A NEW COLD WAR ERA**

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### Introduction

The *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska* project marked a significant milestone in the U.S.-U.S.S.R. collaboration during the 1980s, culminating in a joint exhibit by the Smithsonian and the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The exhibit opened at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. in 1988 and toured North America through 1992. Although the collapse of the Soviet Union made the planned Russian tour impossible, Smithsonian Arctic scientists established close working relationships with Russian scholars that resulted in joint field research, publications, and conferences (cf. Fitzhugh 2003; Fitzhugh and Chaussonnet 1994; Fedorova et al. 1998) that continued until abruptly interrupted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Nowadays, even more than usual, the Russian Government, through powerful state propaganda, portrays the North Americans as Russia's key rivals, often lacking basic human qualities, as outlined in the "GEC Special Report: August 2020. Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem."<sup>1</sup> The people of the U.S. are often depicted as greedy, selfish, and foolish (as the late stand-up comedian Mikhail Zadornov loved to mention), while U.S.-based science is described as bureaucratic, driven by selfish aspirations, and riddled with incompetence (Bolonkin 2018). Obviously, these public images are deliberately crafted to instill fear and hostility toward Americans in Russia, solely to consolidate power and exert control by promising protection.

To counter such biased views, powerful tools of modern social media can be used to effectively disseminate knowledge. Providing American scholars and scientists with a platform to discuss their research interests and international collaboration can counteract propaganda, while creating high-quality, engaging content ensures broad audience reception. Therefore, in 2023 we initiated a new project called *Crossroads 2* to cultivate among a Russian-speaking audience a realistic image of American scholars and scientists as truth-seeking, highly educated, objective, and idealistic individuals, as we know them, while simultaneously disseminating knowledge.

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1 <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report> [accessed 10.18.2024]



Fig. 1 The project's banner, as it appeared in the initial programs, was inspired by the visual style of the *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska* book. However, this style was abandoned by the end of the project (see clarification in Discussion).

Utilizing the Internet and social media, *Crossroads 2: The Bridges to the Future* presents world-class anthropological research to a Russian audience via a series of interviews (Fig. 1). Hosted by the *Proshloe* ("Past") YouTube channel<sup>2</sup> the project fosters scholarly exchanges between American and Russian scholars in the form of interviewing scholars on both sides on similar topics, always related to their research specializations.

The programs target the general public in Russia who are interested in history and archaeology, as well as specialists in both Russia and the U.S. who seek to collaborate with international colleagues. The main benefit of the series is that Russian, American, Canadian, and other scholars, as well as the general public in Russia, explore proposed topics through a series of online interviews that bring the participants into direct contact with each other, fostering knowledge and cultural understanding that will help build bridges for the future. Our hope is that the interview series impacts a wider Russian audience by promoting scientific knowledge and creating a human experience of North American research values. The viewers then can connect Russian research, with which they are familiar, to American research, which may be less familiar, in a unified historic and research context. By doing so, we aim to demonstrate that both U.S.-based and Russian-based scientific communities are moving in the same direction, addressing the same scholarly issues, and that there is no distinct American science designed to "rewrite Russia's history."

### Philosophy behind the original "Crossroads of the Continents"

One of the questions facing the young Smithsonian when it was established in 1846 was the origin of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. When the field of anthropology was established in the late 19th century, one of its founding fathers, Franz Boas, newly appointed as assistant curator of ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, brought scholarly discipline to the search for the origins of "American Aborigines." There was general acceptance of the theory of Asian origin, but before Boas, the evidence was simply physical appearance. Boas brought scholarly rigor to the debate by focusing on the history, languages, cultures, mythology, archaeology, and physical metrics of the peoples surrounding the North

2 [www.youtube.com/@proshloejournal](http://www.youtube.com/@proshloejournal) [accessed 10.18.2024]

Pacific Rim, where Asia and North America were separated only by 56 miles at the Bering Strait. His research program – *The Jesup North Pacific Expedition* (named after the project's principal funder, president of the AMNH, Morris K. Jesup) was conducted between 1897-1903. The JNPE included researchers from Russia and North America who explored cultures from the Amur River in eastern Siberia around the North Pacific to Alaska, and south to the Columbia River Delta. JNPE demonstrated widespread connections across the Bering Strait. Similarities were noted in material culture (dwellings, harpoons, boats, baskets, ceramics, clothing), and in social structure (clans), warfare (armor, weapons), mythology (raven and celestial myths), language, art styles, and physical anthropology. However, absence of archaeological data, written history, and chronologies for linguistic and human biological change restricted the JNPE results to ethnological comparisons whose histories and modes or direction of transmission were unknown.

In the 1970s an opportunity arose to revisit the anthropology of the North Pacific and assess cultural relationships between Northeastern Asia and northwestern North America. The vehicle was a joint U.S.-U.S.S.R. exhibition launched in 1979 by the Smithsonian and the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R., and sponsored by the International Research and Exchanges Board, a branch of the U.S. State Department promoting cultural and scientific exchanges with Soviet bloc countries. The project, called *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*, was designed to explore cultural connections across Bering Strait by researching and comparing museum collections from 18-19th century Russian America, housed in Russian museums (primarily the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in then-Leningrad), with those gathered in Northeast Siberia by Smithsonian and Jesup North Pacific Expedition anthropologists ca. 1900, housed in Washington, D.C. and New York City. None of these collections had ever been seen by the scholars, publics, or Indigenous peoples of their home countries. And due to the Cold War and East-West rivalries, American and Soviet scholars most knowledgeable about the cultures and collections could not study the earliest collections from their own countries or visit the communities from which the collections in their institutions originated. The need for re-connection was great, and in the 1970s and early 1980s the political climate was warming.

*Crossroads* began with Russian curatorial exchanges to visit and study collections at the Smithsonian and the American Museum of Natural History, and American scholars traveling to Moscow and Leningrad in the 1980s. These visits were exciting. The American and Soviet teams included leading scholars in their fields, and the museums and their curators and conservation staff made their most treasured artifacts and collections available for research, translated documentation, and jointly decided on which objects to place on the exhibit list. By 1987 the list was firmed up, and Staples and Charles, an American design team, was contracted to plan and build the exhibit, which opened in Washington, D.C. in 1988 (Charles 2023). The opening was a grand affair and included a three-day long symposium attended by scores of Russian and Amer-

ican scholars and dignitaries (see Fitzhugh and Chaussonnet 1994). Following its closing in Washington, *Crossroads* traveled to New York, Seattle, Chicago, San Francisco, Anchorage, and Ottawa. A comparable multi-city tour that had been planned for the USSR had to be canceled because of the turmoil following the fall of the Soviet regime.

Accompanying the exhibition was a massive illustrated catalog describing the North Pacific region and its peoples and cultures (Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988). By 1988 much had been learned about the anthropology of the North Pacific since the JNPE. The exhibit and book featured a fully dressed mannikin representing each of the nine major cultures of the region, presented regional histories, ethnographic profiles, and compared major cultural categories (technology, subsistence, clothing and ornaments, language, religion, ceremony, and arts) across all nine cultures. The result was a comparative visual history of the trans-Beringian region that vastly updated the scattered and incomplete treatment provided by JNPE monographs and Boas' cursory attempt at a JNPE synthesis (Boas 1903, 1905, 1910 [2001]). It also provided readers with the first comprehensive overview of a part of the world and its peoples and cultures that had been isolated from each other for a century – not by geography, but by politics. *Crossroads* affirmed the actual history of the only continental intersection which has been traversed both ways by the globe's peoples and cultures for more than 20,000 years.

In the years following the exhibition, conferences and symposia explored research that could not be included in the original exhibition program, further extending its results and opening new avenues for further study (Krupnik and Fitzhugh 2001; Kendall and Krupnik 2003). While the large exhibit could not travel to Russia, in the decade following 1988, several “mini-Crossroads” exhibits were created and circulated in Alaska, Siberia, and the Canadian Arctic acquainting descendent culture-bearers with catalogs, artifacts, and photographs from the times of their ancestors (Chaussonnet 1995; 1996; Fitzhugh 2003). One of the most important and long-lasting outcomes were the personal contacts and associations created between curators, conservators, and museums, leading to a legacy of research collaborations that continue to this day.

### “Crossroads 2” project's partners and flow

Today, when the media has significantly evolved in comparison to the 1980s, one crucial factor of successful publicity is the reliance on the online community united by common interests. For that reason, *The Proshloe*, *The History Magazine* YouTube channel was chosen as a key partner. The channel was founded by a Russian historian and journalist Mikhail Rodin, who continued his activity in the Internet after the original radio program, called “Rodina Slonov,” was discontinued by the “Moscow Speaks” radio station. Nowadays, the platform specializes in promoting scientific knowledge of history and archaeology through interviews with researchers. With 141,000 subscribers on YouTube (@proshloejournal) and a VK.ru community of

45,900 members,<sup>3</sup> primarily from Russia, *Proshloe* provides a substantial audience for hosting and promoting the interviews. In August 2023, the majority of the YouTube subscribers were from Russia (60.6%), but viewers from other countries were also present: Ukraine (7.8%), Kazakhstan (3.4%), Belarus (2.6%), and Germany (2.2%).

The Association of Experimental Archaeology *Archaeos* is a secondary partner of the project. Founded and led by Ivan Semyan, *Archaeos* unites about 6,200 ancient history enthusiasts. The *Archaeos* audience comprises archaeologists, experimenters, masters of ancient technologies, and historical reenactors from Russia.<sup>4</sup> Most of the English-speaking guests are dubbed in Russian with Ivan's voice.

Regarding the project's flow, the *Crossroads 2* series consists of 22 monthly interviews conducted over the Internet. Each interview was devoted to a specific topic in arctic and subarctic archaeology, anthropology, environmental science, and museum studies to discuss human-environment relationships in the past, present, and future. Each topic was presented by a speaker, followed by a discussant, with questions from the audience provided in the end of the series, channeling the conversation.

The series was conducted as follows: an hour-long interview with a U.S.-based scholar was pre-recorded, and then the talk was translated into Russian, voice dubbed, and finalized with illustrations and subtitles. Next, the video is sent to a discussant – usually a Russian-speaking anthropologist or archaeologist – who also pre-recorded comments and responded to the moderator's questions related to the content of the first interview. Then the videos are hosted on the *Proshloe* channel on YouTube, allowing the audience to ask questions online. The questions are answered by the speakers via email and published in the chat room or in the comments section.

## Results of the project

As of October 2024, at the time of submitting this paper, we have produced 22 videos which have collectively garnered 464,225 views; this figure continues to grow<sup>5</sup>. This number of course does not represent the actual number of individual viewers, as some people may have watched multiple videos or the same video multiple times using devices with different IP-addresses. To estimate the maximum outreach, we can consider the video with the highest view count, currently at 81,824 unique views on all platforms and still increasing. It is worth noting that the maximum reach aligns with expectations, as the *Proshloe* YouTube channel had 87,000 subscribers in 2023 and grew to 142,000 during the project's implementation. The summaries of the 22 produced videos are provided below.

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3 [https://vk.com/proshloe\\_com](https://vk.com/proshloe_com) [accessed 10.18.2024]

4 [https://vk.com/archaeos\\_center](https://vk.com/archaeos_center) [accessed 10.18.2024]

5 Here and below all numbers are as of 21 October 2024. The views are as total across all platforms, the comments are as on YouTube.

### 1) *Crossroads 2. The Project Presentation.*

In this video, the project's lead authors, Mikhail Rodin, Igor Chechushkov, and William Fitzhugh discussed the history of the original *Crossroads of Continents* project and outline the goals of the current initiative. The video has garnered 10,646 views. Among the 29 comments were:

*@DenisDobrov-bj8j: The project is certainly cool! International cooperation is extremely good! However, I doubt the wide popularity of the topic of the Far North and Arctic archeology. After all, few people live in the polar and transpolar regions, and people are more interested in the history of their native places.*

*@tuouro: Hello! Ivan Semyan has left for Armenia, frankly speaking, a depressing decision. Are there really more interesting scientific tasks there, or is it the "white coat" factor, etc.? We are waiting for him to return, as well as the editorial staff of the "Proshloe" Journal.*

*@user-en4jk5sw8x: HOW MUCH DID YOU SELL YOUR MOTHERLAND FOR?  
B A S T A R D S [the author's punctuation preserved – Authors].*

These recurring topics in the comments highlight a discussion that is highly relevant to the Russian information space but is impossible to hold there due to censorship. In this way, we also offer people a platform where they can openly debate whether Americans are truly as frightening as propaganda portrays them and how objective U.S. scientists really are.

### 2) *Experiments on History and on Oneself. Bill Schindler and Ivan Semyan.*

In the first episode, Dr. Bill Schindler, an archaeologist and specialist in ancient technologies, as well as the host of the National Geographic series "The Great Human Race," discussed his journey in experimental archaeology. We compared Bill's experience with that of Ivan Semyan, exploring questions such as: "What does it mean to be human?" "What should the descendants of hunters and gatherers eat in a world of unlimited access to sandwiches and soda?" and "How does immersing modern people in Paleolithic life help archaeologists understand the complex processes of the past?" (16,504 views, 81 comments).

### 3) *Q&A Livestream.*

Following the video with Dr. Schindler, we hosted a *livestream* where we addressed some of the audience's questions about the project and the first interview (9,627 views, 28 comments.)

**4) *The Peopling of America: A View from Both Continents.***

This video features Dr. James Dixon, Professor at the University of New Mexico, and Dr. Sergei Vasiliev, head of the Paleolithic Department at the Institute of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who discussed what the first inhabitants of America ate, the technologies they used, and their possible relatives. The conversation also dealt with the current scientific understanding of the peopling of the New World, the data that challenges this view, and the ongoing difficulty in tracing a clear continuity between the Paleolithic cultures of Eurasia and America. (58,958 views; 200 comments.)

**5) *Three Humanities. Part One.***

Dr. Fernando Villanea, Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder and a specialist in paleo-DNA studies and population genetics, talked about how modern scientists uncover the history of Neanderthals and Denisovans using tools as accessible as an ordinary laptop. He also spoke about key questions in human population history, such as how modern humans, Neanderthals, and Denisovans coexisted. Additionally, Dr. Villanea explained how understanding the DNA of Neanderthals and Denisovans can aid in treating diseases in modern populations. (24,371 views; 80 comments).

**6) *Three Humanities. Part Two.***

In this video, Dr. Arina Khatsenovich, archaeologist and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk, provided commentary on Dr. Villanea's talk. She examined the archaeological research of Denisova Cave and offered a general archaeological context for the DNA studies highlighted by Dr. Villanea. (40,886 views; 97 comments.)

**7) *Chronicle of the Ancient Peopling of the Arctic. Part One.***

One of the project's leaders, Dr. William Fitzhugh, discussed the history of research and his own work in the American Arctic. In his talk, Dr. Fitzhugh covered topics such as the long period during which humans learned to hunt whales and invented sealskin floats, as well as the societal organization of the Arctic's first inhabitants – polar bear hunters. (24,000 views; 59 comments.)

**8) *Chronicle of the Ancient Peopling of the Arctic. Part Two.***

Dr. Igor Krupnik, another Smithsonian Arctic anthropologist who joined the project, reviewed the migrations of traditional peoples and how these movements follow ani-

mal herds. He also addressed the interactions between the inhabitants of the Siberian Arctic and Europeans, and how these encounters influenced the cultural adaptation of traditional Arctic peoples. (13,843 views; 32 comments.)

**9) *Archaeology of Social Processes. Part One.***

In this video, Dr. Robert Drennan, Professor Emeritus of the University of Pittsburgh, turns his attention to the methodological principles of modern archaeological research, discussing how precise mapping of ancient debris can help to understand various sources of power and the evolution of political institutions in pre-state societies (14,575 views; 58 comments).

**10) *Archaeology of Social Processes. Part Two.***

Dr. Denis Sharapov from Tyumen State University picks up the topic of full-coverage surveys as a method to study past societies and compares his experience of working in Northern Eurasia with similar work in South America. He describes how ten people, walking across the landscape, can understand Bronze Age settlement patterns (9,086 views; 38 comments).

**11) *Horse Domestication from an Archaeozoological Perspective. Part One.***

This video featured Dr. William Taylor, Assistant professor of archaeozoology and Curator of Archaeology at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Dr. Igor Chechushkov. The speakers considered the early evidence for horse domestication and the methods used to identify domestic animals in archaeological assemblages. They discussed whether the Indo-Europeans truly conquered Europe on horseback and examined the identity of the Botai culture in Kazakhstan – whether they were horsemen or horse hunters. This video has become the most popular in the series. The commentary feed saw a heated debate primarily centered around the question of whether the Indo-Europeans or Turkic people domesticated the horse, with the latter theory lacking scientific support but remaining popular in many Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia. (81,824 views; 910 comments.)

**12) *Horse Domestication from an Archaeozoological Perspective. Part Two.***

Continuing the topic of horse domestication, Dr. Pavel Kosintsev from the Institute of Ecology of Plants and Animals of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Ekaterinburg addressed the timeline for transitioning from hunting horses to domesticating them. He focused on the challenges in identifying Botai horses as domesticates and considered the region from which the ancestors of all domestic horses originated. (20,083 views; 332 comments.)



**13) *The Mystery of the Clovis, Pre-Clovis Cultures, and the Peopling of the Americas.***

Dr. Michael Waters, Professor at Texas A&M University, recounted his experience studying Clovis sites in North America. He covered key characteristics that define an archaeological site, including: a clear geological and stratigraphic record to establish the site's chronology; the presence of artifacts in dated geological layers; and reliable radiocarbon or other absolute dating methods. (27,824 views; 114 comments.)

**14) *Archaeology of Russian Colonization of America. Part One.***

Another member of the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Center, Dr. Aron Crowell, Director of the Alaska Office and co-curator of the original *Crossroads* exhibit and book, talked about the differences between the written reports of the Russian conquerors submitted to Catherine the Great and the archaeological evidence of their activities in Alaska. He explained how and why the strategies of the colonists differed between the Western and Eastern parts of the American continent. Drawing on his own research in Alaska, Dr. Crowell shed light on what we know about the lives of ordinary Russian colonists, including the fact that their wives were from the local population and why we have more information about their lifestyles than about those of the Russian colonial elite. (18,103 views; 166 comments.)

**15) *The Khirigsurs: Graves in Ancient Mongolia?***

Dr. Francis Allard, a professor at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, presented his research on Mongolia, explaining how a small nomadic people from the 12th to 10th centuries BCE constructed large 400-meter stone mounds. The discussion addressed the question of who was buried under these mounds: chieftains, religious leaders, or ritual victims. Dr. Allard also considered why modern Mongols continue to retain elements of ancient rituals. Some viewers were particularly annoyed by the lengthy biography of the guest, but the editorial team chose to include it to illustrate the diverse paths a professional career in archaeology can take in the Western world. (30,083 views; 282 comments.)

**16) *Archaeology of Russian Colonization of America and Siberia. Part Two.***

Dr. Gayaz Samigulov, a Senior Research Fellow at the Scientific and Educational Center for Eurasian Studies at South Ural State University in Chelyabinsk, developed the topic of the politics of Russian imperial colonization, previously initiated by Dr. Crowell. He examined whether the Russian state committed acts of genocide against Siberian and American peoples during colonization. He also talked about conflicts between the Russian government, merchants, and industrialists in Siberia and explained why these groups should be considered distinct actors in the colonization process. (17,052 views; 175 comments.)

**17) *The Connection Between the Dyuktai Culture of Siberia and the Clovis Culture in North America.***

Dr. Nikolai Kiryanov, Director of the Fedoseyeva Museum of Arctic Archaeology in Yakutsk, added to the analysis of Stone Age cultures, tracing the migration process from Asia to North America, a topic previously explored by Dr. Waters. Viewers learned about the similarities between tools used during the Upper Paleolithic in Alaska and Yakutia, as well as why we have yet to locate the settlements of Siberian hunters from the last Ice Age. (16,580 views; 91 comments.)

**18) *To Save and Protect. Part One. Preservation of Archaeological Heritage in the United States.***

Britt Davis, a Research Fellow at the University of Missouri, explained how U.S. law protects archaeological heritage and why archaeological sites in the U.S. are referred to as “resources.” He addressed the issue of private property, detailing what landowners are legally permitted to do with burial mounds or ancient settlements on their land. Finally, he covered the topic of the financial aspects of Cultural Resource Management in the U.S. (10,133 views; 39 comments.)

**19) *The Khirigsurs: Sanctuaries in Ancient Mongolia?***

This video is a continuation of the conversation on the Khirigsur sites in Mongolia, started by Dr. Francis Allard. In the interview, Dr. Marina Kilunovskaya, Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Archaeology of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Institute of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg, talks about who built sanctuaries in the steppes of Central Asia and what the ancient Scythians have to do with it (14,609 views; 448 comments).

**20) *To Save and Protect. Part Two.***

Daria Skorikova, a professional lawyer, Deputy Director for Organizational and Legal Issues of the MANUL Archaeological Laboratory, and Head of the educational project “ArcheoPravo” discusses why in Russia archaeologists are alarmed in anticipation of possible changes in the archaeology protection laws. She suggests that legislative innovations may lead to the widespread of historical heritage destruction for the sake of economic profit (5,438 views; 29 comments).

**21) *The Climate Change and Resistance in the Republic of Sakha-Yakutia.***

In this interview, Dr. Vera Solovyeva, Research Fellow at the American Museum of Natural History in New York and a specialist in environmental science and policy making, talks about the effects of climate change on the indigenous populations of

the Russian Arctic in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). She advocates a bottom-up approach in policy making regarding the subsistence practices of the Sakha and Even people in the Arctic and provides insights into how these peoples perceive climate change, its causes, and its effects on their lives.

## 22) “Crossroads 2: Bridges to the Future.” An Epilogue.

Wrapping up the *Crossroads 2* project, Dr. Igor Krupnik reviews the history of relationships between Russian and North American anthropologists and reflects on the current situation, in which many connections have been lost. He looks to the future with cautious optimism, suggesting that similar projects in the future will help maintain mutual understanding between people.

## Discussion

These interviews were recorded and produced over the course of a full year, from October 2023 to November 2024. Despite fulfilling our obligations, we encountered several challenges in producing *Crossroads 2* content, which necessitated modifications to the original project plan. These challenges are related to three major factors.

First, contrary to the initial plan, it became impossible to host live online sessions between American speakers and the Russian audience due to significant time differences and the busy schedules of the speakers, who often could not find suitable times for online participation. Instead, we collected questions via email and either recorded responses ourselves or published them as text in the chat room. This method proved to be most effective.

Second, we encountered difficulties finding speakers on both sides due to issues related to the war. On the one hand, at least one American scholar declined to participate because of their family ties to Ukraine, and another person and one organization declined because they did not wish to be associated with anything related to Russia, even if it involved promoting American scholarship. On the other hand, it was consistently challenging to find Russian speakers for the interviews. In five cases, our Russian colleagues simply ignored our requests or declined to participate despite existing personal connections. Through private discussions, we became aware of some individuals' reluctance to participate in a project with Americans for various reasons, one of which was the fear of repression: concurrent with *Crossroads 2*, Russia experienced a wave of treason cases initiated by the Federal Security Service (the FSB), targeting scientists, a phenomenon previously seen at such magnitude only in the 1930s. In some cases, Russian scholars declined to participate due to the official position of their host organizations, which limited such activities.

Third, in August 2024, our audience began to complain about poor YouTube performance and low video quality. This coincided with multiple press reports discussing whether the Russian government was attempting to slow down YouTube in Russia to reduce the influence of political opposition. In response, we started publishing our videos on the VK.ru video service, where the number of subscribers is much lower (45,916 members in the VK.ru group vs. 141,000 subscribers on YouTube). As a result, we witnessed a significant decrease in the number of views and changes in geography of views. In September 2024, only 47.1% of viewers were from Russia, as opposed to 60.6% a year earlier. Next, 9.2% viewers were from Ukraine, 3.8% from Germany, 3.3% from Kazakhstan, and the rest from other countries around the world. We do not see an anomaly growth of views from the European countries or the U.S., that would sum up to 13.5%, so we cannot assume that people in Russia kept watching the channel using a VPN-service. Evidently, both developments negatively affected the project’s performance and impact in Russia (Fig. 2).

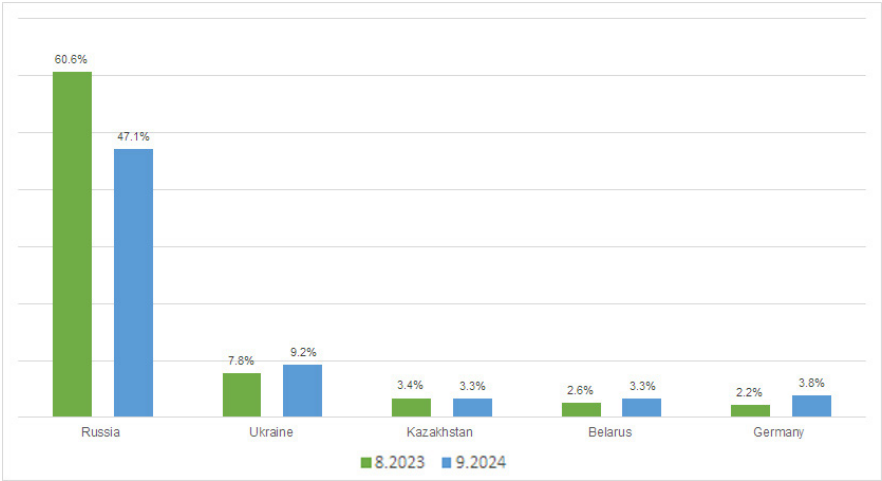


Fig. 2 Changes in audience distribution from August 2023 to October 2024, reflecting the impact of YouTube’s slowdown in Russia.

To evaluate the overall project’s reception, we can compare the number of views with views of other videos published by the channel during the same period. It is important to note that these videos were not published separately, but in the same feed as the *Crossroads 2* videos. The videos were produced in the similar manner, had similar graphic design, and both series were hosted by Mikhail Rodin who opened and closed each program. The statistics are summarized in Table 1 and Fig. 3.

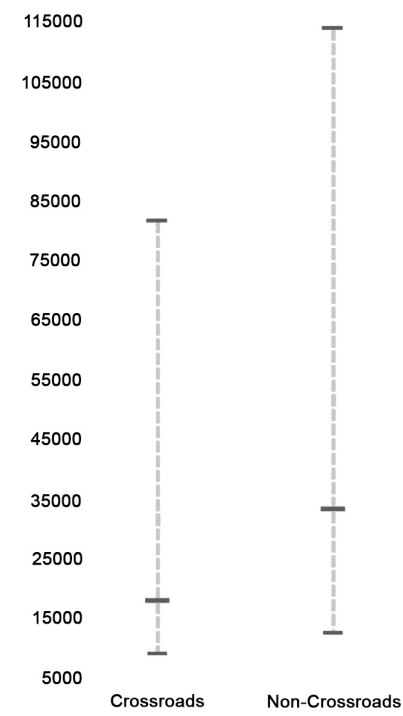


Fig. 3 Comparison of minimum, median, and maximum viewership between Crossroads 2 and non-Crossroads videos, highlighting the differences in audience engagement across both categories.

	Crossroads 2, October 2023 – October 2024	Other Proshloe videos, October 2023 – October 2024
Number of videos	22	24
Minimum views	9,086	12,500
Maximum views	81,824	114,100
Mean	25,532	43,971
Median	18,103	33,400

Table 1 Comparison of the Crossroads 2 videos views (across all platforms) with other Proshloe videos published in the same period.

As evident from the graph, the median number is almost twice larger for the non-Crossroads videos that exclusively featured Russian-speaking researchers, who were mostly also located in Russia. The one possible explanation of the observed phenomenon is anti-American sentiments that prevail in the Russian public today, as it can hardly be explained by a simple fact of translated videos: a half of Crossroads 2 guests are Russian-speaking. To mitigate this effect, we decided to drop the original

program banner (Fig. 1) and align the appearance with the rest of the channel's programs, but the impact was minimal. Regardless of the explanation, this fact contradicts our previous expectations given that the *Proshloe* community mainly consists of an educated segment of Russian society.

Surprisingly, the community of historical reenactors united under the "Archaeos" umbrella has shown virtually no interest in the project, with very few views. On one hand, this may be partly explained by their subscription to the *Proshloe* channel, where the content was viewed directly, though the audiences of these two sources are not entirely the same. On the other hand, it is possible that reenactors are primarily focused on artifact recreation and festivals, and the more theoretical, academic presentation of the series does not align with their usual interests. Additionally, a significant portion of reenactors in Russia are involved in paid "patriotic projects," such as promoting military drones while dressed in medieval costumes. In this context, any mention of the USA or international projects tends to provoke rejection and fear.

Before analyzing the comments, it is important to note that only a small fraction of the audience contributes to them. For example, while the median number of views is 17,313, the median number of comments is just 91, or 0.53%. This statistic remains consistent when comparing other metrics: 0.5% of viewers commented on the least-watched video, and 1.1% on the most-watched, with an average of 0.65%. This suggests that the sample is not truly randomized and may be biased in unknown ways. Therefore, analyzing recurring topics should be done with the understanding that they may not accurately reflect the broader audience's reception. In the comments, we can identify four main threads: 1) positive and supportive feedback, 2) criticism of the project itself, 3) biases of the American scholarship based on gender and race agenda, and personal commercial interests, and 4) the repetition of various historical myths, which, in the view of those who hold them, challenge "official" or "mainstream" science.

The positive thread is straightforward to summarize. It consists of expressions of gratitude for inviting foreign scholars and acknowledges that international collaboration in the current conditions is both necessary and highly welcomed. As examples of these comments, we can cite the following:

@LLIpaM1: "Proshloe" I just want to say: "Bravo!", for the series of programs about horse domestication. If I were to represent the Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Education, I would even give a scientific and financial award to the team of this YouTube channel for such an interesting explanation of many issues, popularizing for the average person the scientific topic of taming and domesticating the horse. Well done, just well done team "Proshloe"!

@newchannel5382: An excellent, necessary initiative! Success to the "Crossroads" project. The chosen era and location are very interesting, but also difficult to study. Very little material culture has survived, facts are collected bit by bit, so with discoveries, sensations and unambiguous answers that we are all waiting for, it is not so easy. But,

*judging by Arina's positive attitude and charming smile, discoveries are yet to come!*

*@user-te5bc5bh6q: Written sources carry the narrative of the colony chiefs and senior officers..." – I shuddered, forgive me. I need to switch away from the present day more carefully.*

Criticism of the project was rarely rational and often consisted of insults and cursing, with accusations of betraying the homeland mentioned several times, and there is no need to cite them here. The rational criticism focused on minor translation errors, the excessive use of sound effects in early episodes, the lack of graphics, and requests to publish the original English versions without voiceover.

However, more concerning were the repeated negative or openly hostile comments directed towards American scholars, often suggesting biased views or non-scientific motivation of our guests, and even espionage accusation, for instance:

*@Vladimir-uz3ij: Hint to your US colleagues: their agenda, outside their country, is of no interest to anyone at all! I am not interested in the consumption problems of ordinary Americans, or rather, I am interested in them, but in a different context and on other platforms, where I express myself less politely and much more aggressively. Let's talk about history and archeology instead.*

*@stkoryak915: ...The delights of Anglo-Saxon scientists have always been opportunistic, and especially concerning the American continent...*

*@user-zs5xg5pf2t: He was obviously spying in our Arctic!*

*@olegvoropayev1355: You can't understand Russia with your mind! A typical Anglo-Saxon view of events. He tries everything according to the habits of people in the USA.*

*@user-hw4ng1hk4y: The goal of those Germans and your Canadian is to incite ethnic hatred among the peoples of Russia in order to fragment the country. We see what such a distortion of history leads to in the examples of the collapse of the USSR, as well as the transformation of our brotherly Ukrainian people into crazed Nazis ready to kill Russians, including their own. Suffering defeat in a direct military conflict with the Russian Federation, the collective West, through its agents of influence, is trying to promote a new narrative "Russians are evil colonizers who enslaved the peoples of Russia", with the same goal: to sow discord and then fragment the country into [many] "little bears" who can later be used for skins one by one. I'm sorry you don't understand this.*

*@user-lt9fw9bb8t: The idea of redistributing resources is somehow alarming. And I remember the talks that Siberia should be shared.*

*@EvgeniiOrlinskii: What a great way to siphon off money with the help of archaeologists) Well done, Americans.*

These comments reveal the profound impact of propaganda, showing that some individuals in Russia do perceive Americans as selfish and foolish, and view U.S.-based science as driven by self-interest and marred by incompetence. Of course, comments from individual viewers do not necessarily reflect the views of a significant portion of the audience; however, the repetition of certain ideas suggests that these sentiments are not isolated. This underscores the critical and urgent need to continue efforts similar to ours to address the impact of negative stereotypes.

Finally, anti-scientific myths and even racist ideas were raised in the comments. These comments convey two principal ideas: first, that “official” scientists are deceiving the public and concealing the truth about human history by using fake methods and forging facts; and second, that the “great history” of certain peoples (like the Russians, Kazakhs, etc.) is being deliberately distorted. Examples include:

*@Gigagamer74: Ancient people had magnetic navigation, as a result of which they considered the ocean a more convenient space for traveling over extremely long distances than land. For this reason, it was much easier for these people to get to America not from the north, through Beringia, but from the south, through the Pacific Ocean, using the wind, current and islands along the way.*

*@user-fx5jg4lu3h: Valery Chudinov read in ancient inscriptions that North America is the Rus of Rod. Until recently, he received inscriptions in Russian [found] on mountains and other places.*

*@user-tc9fm9tk1u: In fact, all over America there are remnants of the solar culture of Rus'. For example, the solar planning of cities, even Washington.*

*@user-tp5yp3zs6e: Africans are the descendants of Neanderthals. Mongoloids are Denisovans. And Aryans are Sapiens.*

*@user-rh3lt9dc1b: All your research leads to a dead end. Of course, if all your efforts are research. When was the Kremlin built? Why are the doors in the Kremlin 8 meters? So your whole history can be thrown in the trash. The civilization was destroyed and the conquerors created a new man—a hothouse man, for their own purposes—a slave or a serf, as you like. He did not undergo any evolution, he received everything at birth. Tools, grains, fruits and domestic animals. And you don't need to be a scientist here. ... But the main nail in the coffin in Darwin's THEORY is that a child must be raised for at least 14 years. But a FOAL gets up on its feet on the second day.*

*@channel\_archistoriac: Radiocarbon dating is very inaccurate. The same sealskin given to different laboratories there are discrepancies of 10000 years. You need to order an analysis from 10 different laboratories and calculate the average. It will be fairer, more scientific.*

The presence of these ideas in the public sphere underscores the importance of continuing to promote science and foster critical thinking. In this regard, *Crossroads 2* can



be considered a success, as its legacy will endure as long as the videos remain available to the public via the Internet.

Classifying the comments also helps assess the project's reception. We categorized all comments (excluding replies) into three groups: "positive," "negative," and "neutral," with the latter including questions, jokes, unrelated thoughts, and minor technical critiques. Out of a total of 774 comments, 35% were positive, 23% negative, and 42% neutral. By combining positive comments with the neutral ones, which largely reflect interest of the viewers, we find that 77% of the comments show no negative attitude or hostility. Overall, it suggests a rather positive reception of the project by part of the *Proshloe* community that watched our programs.

Finally, the most common tool to gauge audience reception on YouTube is the "like vs. dislike" ratio, which is visible to the creator but not to the audience. In our case, the average ratio across all videos is 97%, indicating a highly positive reception, even though only 6% of viewers, on average, hit one of the buttons.

## Conclusion

The *Crossroads 2* project concluded with somewhat limited optimism, gaining a total of 464,225 views by the end of the year, with a maximum of 81,824 for a single video, exceeding our original expectations. We successfully achieved our goal by producing a compelling series of informative interviews with North American anthropologists, covering a broad range of topics related to Arctic anthropology. In addition, we provided our audience a platform to discuss the issues of international science that are usually not discussed in Russia. Yet, while the measured reception was generally positive, overall interest remained low in comparison to other *Proshloe* programs. We encountered unexpected hostility and negative reactions from parts of our audience in Russia and beyond, which we had not anticipated at the outset of the project. The current phase of the project was funded by public money, and we hope that our findings on the impact of propaganda and anti-American sentiment in Russia will encourage policymakers to further promote the agenda of international collaboration and scientific cooperation. Staying connected in the era of virulent anti-Western propaganda and hostility requires special – and hopefully continuing – efforts. It is not enough just "to stay connected."

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